

**FEMALE OFFICERS BEHIND THE BADGE:
UNCOVERING THE PATHWAYS TOWARDS TOP LEADERSHIP POSITIONS:
A STUDY ON THE MALTA POLICE FORCE**

Lydon Paul Spiteri

Master of Arts Public Policy Leadership

Department of Policy, Politics and Governance
Faculty of Economics, Management and Accountancy
University of Malta

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Abstract

This study examines barriers and enablers influencing progression of female officers into leadership positions within a traditionally male-oriented Malta Police Force. Using a qualitative approach, six female officers from varying ranks were interviewed to gather primary data. Interview questions explored career journeys, institutional and cultural challenges, leadership experiences, support systems, work-life balance and gender reforms. The study was guided by three research questions: opportunities and hurdles females face when seeking leadership positions, leadership qualities females exhibit and strategies females can utilise to rise through the ranks. Thematic analysis drew on multiple theoretical frameworks: Role Congruity, Tokenism, Organisational Socialisation, Queen Bee, Glass Ceiling and Glass Cliff, with Role Congruity most pronounced. Secondary data, including published and unpublished sources, offered theoretical context and statistical insight, deepening gender leadership disparities in law enforcement.

Findings were categorised into six overarching themes: structural barriers, exclusion from informal networks, gendered expectations, limited mentorship, work-life balance and symbolic versus substantive reforms. Despite gender-neutral titles and inclusive recruitment reforms, participants viewed them as largely symbolic without having systemic change. Females exhibited transformational traits like empathy, collaboration and emotional intelligence, yet endured pressures to adopt masculine behaviours. Adaptive strategies encompassed resilience and informal mentorship, but sustainable change depended on systemic reform. Recommendations include independent promotion oversight, structured mentorship and sponsorship and targeted gender-sensitivity training. Despite its small sample size, this research offers comprehensions into

gendered leadership dynamics in small-state policing, filling a Maltese literature gap and contributing to universal gender equity and leadership discourse in policing.

Keywords: gender equality, policing leadership, Malta Police Force, female officers, organisational culture.

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List of Abbreviations

EU	European Union
GC	Glass Ceiling
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
GCI	Glass Cliff
MPF	Malta Police Force
OST	Organisational Socialisation Theory
QBP	Queen Bee Phenomenon
RCT	Role Congruity Theory
RQ	Research Question
TA	Thematic Analysis
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
WLB	Work-Life Balance

1. Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1. Research Context

The pursuit of gender equity in leadership within traditionally male-dominated fields has consistently been a significant challenge. This phenomenon is notably persistent in law enforcement, where cultural, institutional and societal barriers hinder women from ascending to top leadership positions. In this scenario, the Malta Police Force (MPF) serves as a microcosm of these broader issues, exemplified by the underrepresentation of women in its higher echelons. Despite progress, such as the appointment of the first female Deputy Commissioner in 2021 (Azzopardi, 2021), the MPF remains male-prevalent. In 2024, women held 23% of middle-management and executive ranks and 25% of operation roles (Malta Police Force Statistics, 2024). Such gender imbalance is apparent from the lowest strata of the organisation, where fewer women are recruited or promoted, creating a pipeline issue that extends the disparity in higher roles.

Gender disparities persist in policing, with women facing systemic barriers to leadership despite comparable qualifications (Hoyt, 2017, pp. 85-89). The glass ceiling (GC) limits upward mobility, while the Glass Cliff (GCI) often places women in unstable leadership roles during crises, heightening their risk of failure (Ryan and Haslam, 2005, p. 81). Tokenism further complicates advancement, as appointments made for diversity can undermine perceived legitimacy and increase scrutiny (Kanter, 1977, pp. 206-214). Additionally, harassment remains widespread, negatively impacting job satisfaction and career progression for many female officers (Morash and Haarr, 2012, pp. 482-510). These challenges reinforce stereotypes questioning women's competence in high-pressure roles and contribute to their underrepresentation in leadership. For example, women make up 29% of the United Kingdom (UK) police workforce but only 12% of

senior roles (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2024), while in the United States (US), just 13.8% of officers are women, with fewer in leadership (Statista, 2024).

Cultural and societal norms also hinder progress. Policing has long been shaped by hyper-masculine values such as dominance and aggression, often devaluing traits like collaboration and emotional intelligence typically associated with women (Workman-Stark, 2021, pp. 298-324). Female leaders face double binds: assertiveness may be seen as abrasive, while empathy can undermine authority (Ridgeway, 2009, pp. 145-160; Eagly and Karau, 2002, pp. 573-598). Expectations to balance professional and caregiving responsibilities add further strain, reinforcing traditional gender roles (Heilman, 2001, pp. 657-674; Kaufman, 2015, pp. 791-811). Collectively, these factors continue to perpetuate gender inequality in policing.

The historical context of the MPF poses additional comprehension into these challenges. Women were recruited as constables in 1956, more than a century after the force's establishment in 1814 (Mangion, 2006). Primarily, their roles were confined to administrative duties and auxiliary support, reflecting societal norms that impeded women's participation in public life. Throughout the years, incremental steps were made, with women progressively assuming more operational roles and in some cases, scaling towards leadership positions. Nevertheless, till today, women's representation in leadership positions within the MPF remains disproportionately low.

Endeavours to overcome these gaps incorporated initiatives outlined in the MPF's Transformation Strategy 2020-2025, which aims to establish core values such as diversity and empathy (Malta

Police Force, 2020, p. 32) and foster an inclusive workplace through diversity networks and policies (Malta Police Force, p. 35). The strategy also addresses gender imbalance through transparent recruitment, succession planning and revamped training programs (Malta Police Force, 2020, pp. 35-37). Additionally, key measures comprise of enhancing family-friendly policies that promote work-life balance (WLB) and equality (Malta Police Force p. 39), implementing flexible shift patterns (Malta Police Force p. 39), and bolstering mental health and wellbeing support services (Malta Police Force p. 40). Whilst these initiatives yielded initial progress, translating theoretical aspects into practical outcomes remains challenging. Therefore, a more comprehensive and pragmatic approach is vital to eradicating systemic barriers.

1.2. Research Objectives

This research is structured around the following three key research objectives, which aligns with and inform the research questions (RQ).

1. Examine the structural, cultural and organisational barriers that preclude female officers in the MPF from attaining leadership roles.
2. Explore female officers' perspectives and views on career progression, leadership opportunities and workplace dynamics within the MPF.
3. Propose practical recommendations to foster an inclusive and equitable leadership organisational landscape within the MPF.

1.3. Research Questions

This research is centred around the following three main primary questions:

1. Which are the opportunities and hurdles that female officers face when seeking to achieve top leadership positions in the MPF?
2. What leadership qualities do female officers exhibit in the MPF?
3. Which strategies can female officers utilise to successfully rise through the ranks in the MPF?

1.4. Practical Relevance

This research supports Malta's ongoing commitment to gender equality, aligning with national strategies and European Union (EU) directives. The National Gender Equality Strategy (2021–2030) aims to eradicate leadership disparities by enhancing labour market participation and promoting WLB (Government of Malta, 2021). Legal frameworks such as the Equality Act (2004) and the Gender Equality Act (2020) reinforce these efforts by advocating for increased female representation in decision-making (Government of Malta, 2004; 2020).

At the EU level, Directive 2006/54/EC promotes gender equality in employment and leadership, while Directive 2019/1158/EU supports WLB to facilitate equal opportunities (European Union,

2006; 2019). Despite these frameworks, translating policy into practical outcomes remains a challenge, particularly in sectors like law enforcement.

While research on gender and policing exists, there is a clear gap concerning the systemic barriers affecting women's career progression within MPF. Local studies have addressed isolated issues such as sexual harassment (Caruana, 2001), stress (Arnaud, 2008), institutional sexism (Mangion, 2011), and police culture (Grech, 2020; Azzopardi Cauchi, 2024), but few study leadership and gender in depth. Although 80% of female officers once expressed optimism about a future female Police Commissioner (Azzopardi Cauchi, 2004), this vision remains unrealised two decades later.

Promoting gender equity in leadership is both an ethical and strategic priority, with diverse teams shown to improve decision-making and institutional performance (Eagly and Carli, 2007). International examples highlight the benefits of such approaches. Norway's police has achieved gender parity in leadership through mentorship initiatives (Bjørkelo et al., 2021), while the UK's appointment of Cressida Dick as the first female Commissioner in 2017 marked a milestone for women in policing (BBC News, 2017). Similarly, New Zealand's police force has reached 40% female representation, and Australia's Victoria Police has implemented gender-sensitive policies that promote WLB and career advancement (New Zealand Police, 2021; Victoria Police, 2020).

By identifying best practices and proposing targeted reforms, this study aims to help dismantle structural barriers and contribute to a more inclusive policing culture. This aligns with broader

international frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which prioritise gender equality across all sectors (UN Women, 2018).

1.5. Thesis Outline

This thesis is structured into five chapters, each contributing to a thorough analysis of the research topic and its broader implications.

The introductory chapter sets up the foundation for the study, presenting the research context, objectives and questions. It highlights the importance of addressing gender disparities in policing, underscoring the practical relevance of the study for the MPF and the wider law enforcement community. Lastly, it accounts for an overview of the thesis structure, guiding readers through the ensuing chapters.

The second chapter, the literature review critically examines existing scholarship on gender equity in policing and leadership, drawing insights from the international and local scene. It explores key themes, their impact on career progression and strategies for promoting inclusivity. By identifying gaps in the current literature, this chapter demonstrates the need for a focused study on the experiences of female officers in the MPF. Additionally, it situates the research within a broader theoretical framework, drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from sociology, organisational behaviour and gender studies.

The third chapter, the research methodology outlines the qualitative research design utilised in the study. It features primary and secondary data sources, such as face-to-face semi-structured interviews with female officers across different ranks and explains the sampling and recruitment strategies adopted to ensure diverse perspectives. The chapter discusses analytical techniques used, including thematic analysis (TA) and data triangulation, to ensure the credibility and validity of the findings. Finally, the write up digs into the methodological limitations, ethical considerations and data protection measures.

The fourth chapter, the findings and discussion displays the results obtained from primary data collection, organised manually and thematically to address the RQs and literature. Through TA, it highlights various overarching themes, providing a nuanced understanding of the factors that influence female officers' career trajectories in the MPF. The chapter also includes illustrative quotes from participants, offering a rich and authentic portrayal of their experiences.

The closing chapter synthesises the findings, situating them within the broader context of the questions, literature and themes. It discusses its contributions towards existing and practical knowledge, offering actionable recommendations for promoting gender equity and leadership in the MPF. The chapter concludes with potential avenues for future research.

2. Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

The underrepresentation of women in leadership within law enforcement is a worldwide phenomenon, shaped by long-standing institutional, cultural and societal barriers. Despite strides in gender equality elsewhere, police forces remain predominantly male-oriented, especially at upper echelons. Numerous studies indicate that this disparity is not merely a reflection of recruitment and promotion imbalances but results from systemic biases embedded within policing structures and cultures (Brown and Heidensohn, 2000, pp. 102-105). Against this global backdrop of structural gender inequality, the MPF offers a case study that exemplifies such phenomenon, highlighting how international dynamics intersect with Malta's unique socio-political environment.

This underrepresentation raises various concerns about institutional legitimacy, fairness and the efficacy of law enforcement organisations in responding to the needs of diverse communities. Research increasingly highlights that leadership diversity contributes to improved decision-making, higher organisational trust and improved conflict resolution (Natarajan, 2008, pp. 220-246). The absence of female representation in leadership positions can undermine the perceived impartiality and inclusivity of policing, particularly in societies striving for democratic accountability and gender equity. In the US, while gender equality is legally mandated, women continue to represent less than 3% of police chiefs nationwide (Statista, 2024). These patterns show that police reform needs more than statutory reforms; it requires cultural, procedural and perceptual change.

Following an established academic approach, chapter two reviews the academic literature related to gender and leadership in policing, offering key theories, international empirical findings and context-specific considerations applicable to the MPF. Following an inverted pyramid structure, the review starts with general theoretical frameworks, narrows down into empirical findings from various international police organisations and concludes with comprehensions into the Maltese context. The aim is to present a conceptual and evidence-based footing for understanding the barriers and opportunities endured by female police officers in attaining leadership roles, in tandem with the research objectives and questions of this dissertation.

By adopting this structure, the review does not solely contextualise the challenges faced by women within the local setting, but also situates them within broader global dynamics, enabling a multi-scalar analysis. This lens is relevant when observing how global gender discourses, like the United Nations' SDG 5 (UNDP, 2024), stream into national police reforms. Malta's obligations under EU directives on gender mainstreaming and equality also impose indirect commitments on the MPF to align its procedures with international expectations. These external influences serve as both a catalyst for reform and a benchmark against which local practices are increasingly scrutinised. The comparative framing allows this review to assess not only where Malta stands but how it might leverage international frameworks to close its gender leadership gap.

This is important in small jurisdictions like Malta, where policies are shaped by transnational discourses. The combination of global and local perspectives allows for a nuanced understanding of both universal and unique barriers to gender equality in police leadership. This review not only

sets existing knowledge but also caters for a critical lens through which structural disparities in policing can be analysed and addressed. This sequence from global to local allows the reader to immerse into not only the theoretical underpinnings and international challenges but also the Maltese background, where these universal patterns unfold in various modes.

2.2. Theoretical Frameworks

The search for gender disparities in police leadership is anchored in multiple theoretical models that elucidate how gender roles, stereotypes and organisational norms intersect to inhibit female progression. This section outlines four key theories that underpin the study: Role Congruity (RCT), Tokenism, Organisational Socialisation (OST) and the Queen Bee (QBP).

2.2.1. Role Congruity Theory

RCT posits that bias unfolds when there is an apparent incongruity between the female gender role and leadership roles (Eagly and Karau, 2002, pp. 573-598). Leadership is frequently correlated with qualities such as assertiveness, decisiveness and dominance, which are conventionally regarded as masculine. Conversely, women are labelled as nurturing, cooperative, and communal. This mismatch leads to biased evaluations when women occupy leadership roles, often resulting in lower assessments of their competence and likeability. This has a cascading effect in performance assessments, where female leaders often endure ambiguous or personality-focused feedback such as being extremely emotional or for not being assertive, rather than role-specific critiques. Research by (Biernat and Fuegen, 2002, pp. 707-724) demonstrates that identical

leadership behaviours are construed differently depending on the leader's gender, thereby entrenching unequal evaluations standards that disincentivise female drive within male-subjugated sectors like law enforcement. RCT can cause female officers to be perceived as less legitimate than their male peers during misconduct cases (Brown and Reisig, 2020, pp. 696-710).

In policing, which values command, control and physical prowess, female leaders are often deemed as breaching gender norms when they demonstrate agentic behaviours. Studies in US police forces have discovered that assertive female officers are more likely to be labelled as abrasive or unfeminine, impacting their career trajectories (Heilman, 2001, pp. 657-674). Likewise, in the US, whilst female officers who embraced collaborative leadership styles were considered more effective, they still faced resistance when making command decisions (Savoie, 2015).

Similarly, in Kenya, (Onyango, 2021, pp. 147-161) observed that women in senior police roles had to continually assert their authority to be accepted by their male subordinates, leading to heightened stress and burnout. These examples reflect tension between gendered expectations and leadership perceptions in policing.

Furthermore, the theory has been expanded to include the notion of backlash effects, whereby women who behave in traditionally masculine ways may not only be judged as less likeable but may also face active resistance or sabotage from subordinates and peers (Phelan and Rudman,

2010, pp. 807-820). These dynamics are particularly evident in hierarchical institutions like police forces, where leadership is often linked to physical dominance and unquestioned authority. Consequently, women in leadership are frequently caught in a double bind, expected to display assertiveness while being penalised for not adhering to feminine norms.

2.2.2. Tokenism

While RCT addresses perceived incongruity in leadership traits, it sets the tone for understanding the intensified visibility and representational burden that tokenism further explicates. Tokenism revolves around the numerical imbalance and its own consequences for females in male-dominated settings (Kanter, 1997). In male-oriented environments such as policing, female officers often serve as tokens, which leads to excessive scrutiny and stereotyping. Such scrutiny and stereotyping is heightened when female officers' errors are perceived as representative of their whole gender, generating a burden of performance that their male equivalents do not carry (Harper, 2016, p. 34). (Stroshine and Brandl, 2011) discovered that token officers, including women, reported higher levels of pressure, role entrapment and isolation matched to their colleagues, reinforcing Kanter's original assertions. Moreover, tokenism in policing is frequently reinforced through symbolic appointments, by putting a few women in top leadership positions without accompanying institutional change, thereby fulfilling superficial diversity goals while maintaining the status quo (Caldwell, 2024).

Empirical research in Canadian police departments found that token women were assigned soft duties, excluded from decision-making and often needed to overperform to gain recognition (Huey

and Ricciardelli, 2015, pp. 194-203). Similarly, research in India's policing services shows that female officers, though increasingly visible, are often kept in public-facing roles like public relations or community outreach, reinforcing tokenistic deployment (Hairiya and Singh, 2025, pp. 66-68).

Tokenism results in a performance paradox: women represent all women but are barred from informal leadership networks (Zimmer, 1988, pp. 64-77). This dynamic was evident in (Archbold and Schulz, 2008, pp. 50-73) study of a Midwestern US police department, where female officers reported being both encouraged to seek promotion and simultaneously doubting the sincerity of that support, illustrating the conflicting pressures that suppress promotion aspirations. Such resulting isolation can have substantial psychological harm, including burnout, decreased job satisfaction and self-doubt, which in turn reduce retention and promotion rates.

In Australia, recent research by (Miles-Johnson and Fay, 2023, pp. 1-12) highlights an evident vacuum in gender-focused affirmative action within policing. While efforts to recruit more female officers have increased, the study reveals that without vigorous cultural transformations, such initiatives often result in superficial inclusion. The study stresses upon the need for systemic change, beyond numerical representation, to guarantee that female officers are truly integrated and supported throughout their jobs.

2.2.3. Organisational Socialisation Theory

Moving beyond visibility and stereotyping, another essential dimension unfolds, that is how institutional norms are not only experienced but also internalised over time. OST (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979) helps explain how new employees internalise the norms and values of their workplace. In patriarchal occupations like police forces, this socialisation process often reinforces traditional gender roles. The police occupational culture reinforces male bonding and excludes those who do not conform (Brown, 2007, pp. 205-226).

Studies from European countries including Austria, Netherlands, Spain and Sweden who made significant strides along the years in gender mainstreaming, illustrate that female officers still adapt to masculine behaviours to gain acceptance (Van der Lippe et al., 2004, pp. 391-405). In Malta, anecdotal evidence from (Camilleri, 2021) unveils that female recruits are subtly encouraged to soften femininity and over comply with conventional police norms, suggesting that this adaptation reinforces exclusion and limits the implementation of alternative leadership styles.

In the US, (Rabe-Hemp, 2008, pp 251-270) observed that female recruits often adapt to a blue brotherhood culture to be accepted, thereby suppressing leadership qualities that vary from the prevailing masculine archetype. Likewise, in the US, (Dukes, 2025) observed that women who opposed conforming to dominant masculine standards within the police culture were frequently sidelined or overlooked from promotion opportunities.

This theory shows how gender norms persist across police generations. Senior officers frequently mentor junior ones through informal, male-dominated networks, creating a gatekeeping mechanism that privileges those who adopt the prevailing culture (Martin, 1990, pp. 32-36). Female officers who resist assimilation are often labelled insubordinate or lacking leadership qualities.

Additionally, OST elucidate why diversity training often fails to produce sustained change. Without challenging the foundational cultural norms that influence behaviour and expectations, such training becomes performative rather than transformative (Chan, 1996, pp. 109-134) For this reason, long-term socialisation processes must be probed further and restructured if gender parity in leadership is to be attained.

Moreover, the early stages of recruitment and academy training play a critical role in embedding gender norms. (Tossoukpe, 2018, pp. 26-30) determined that various European police forces often encourage recruitment and selection processes that implicitly favour traditionally masculine traits, limiting women's ability to progress into leadership roles from the outset.

2.2.4. Queen Bee Phenomenon

While many theories shed light on structural and social influences, a comprehensive standpoint considers the inside dynamics among women themselves within such settings. Intra-gender crescendos in policing further obscure leadership advancement. The QBP presents an internalised

response to exclusionary practices that paradoxically disseminate those same barriers, which refer to senior women distancing themselves from other women in male-dominated organisations to protect their own status (Staines et al., 1973, pp. 55-60). Rather than mentoring other women, they may adopt masculine behaviour and align with male peers.

A study by (Derks et al., 2016, pp. 456-469) explored that female leaders in policing were more likely to downplay gender issues and deny the existence of discrimination. In the UK's Metropolitan police, some female police officers were unwilling to nurture gender-based advocacy, fearing it would undermine the unit's cohesion and their professional legitimacy in a patriarchal setting (Silvestri, 2018, pp. 309-328). This is often compounded by minimal leadership spots available to females, nurturing a highly-competitive environment in which they feel bound to safeguard their high-earned status. Similarly, drawing on a cross European study, (Silvestri and Tong, 2020, pp. 871-890) observed that some female police leaders conformed to prevailing macho standards, demonstrating traits associated with the QBP as a means to secure credibility and upward mobility in a male-centric workplace.

The QBP can be assumed as both a means of self-preservation and as an outcome of misogyny. Women who ascend in hyper-masculine surroundings often internalise the norms that initially marginalised them and in doing so, reproduce the same norms to maintain their hard-earned position (Faniko et al., 2020, pp. 383-399). Such dynamic has detrimental impacts for organisational cohesion, as it fractures harmony among female personnel and discourages younger

ones from seeking mentorship. In these occurrences, mentorship is deemed not as a moral obligation, but as a probable risk to one's own stability.

Comparable trends exist in the military, implying a systemic outcome of underrepresentation and resistance to diversity (Ellemers et al., 2012, pp. 163-187). Addressing the QBP necessitates deliberate actions to create encouraging peer communities, acknowledge and incentivise mentorship and dismantle zero-sum beliefs of progression. While women are often associated with authentic leadership styles that enhance performance and satisfaction (Eagly et al., 2003, pp. 569-587), these strengths may be devalued in QBP environments. (Williams et al., 2016, pp. 515-539).

2.3. Barriers to Female Leadership in Policing

The ensuing section transitions from theoretical models to empirical findings, displaying how intangible concepts such as RCT, tokenism and the QBP manifest in recruitment, promotion and leadership practices across various policing systems. Realising the barriers to female leadership in policing requires a multifaceted approach that integrates organisational, cultural, psychological and structural perspectives. While gender integration in policing has improved across the globe, these upgrades often plateau at leadership levels due to persistent invisible barriers. This section delves into three primary barriers identified in the literature: the GC, the GCI and the challenge of balancing work-life responsibilities against the backdrop of gendered societal expectations.

These barriers are intertwined and mutually reinforcing, generating a complex situation where women must not only steer through explicit institutional biases but also subtler cultural norms that model promotion procedures and leadership evaluations. Moreover, many of these hurdles operate below the surface of official policy, embedded in organisational culture, informal relationships and subjective performance metrics. As such, tackling them necessitates systemic reform that extends beyond diversity quotas or inclusive terminology.

2.3.1. The Glass Ceiling

Expanding upon the former theoretical concepts such as RCT and Tokenism, the GC corresponds to an institutional indicator of these dynamics at leadership levels. The GC refers to invisible, yet deeply rooted barrier that systemically precludes women from reaching top positions, regardless of qualifications or experience (Cotter et al., 2001, pp. 655-682). In policing, this is manifested in lower promotion rates, fewer leadership opportunities and limited access to elite units.

In the US, women comprise of only 13.8% of full-time law enforcement officers, while men account for 86.2%. Additionally, women hold fewer than 3% of police executive positions, showing up a noteworthy gender disparity in both representation and leadership within the field (Statista, 2024). UK also statistics mirror this disparity, with females representing just 12% of senior officers, despite accounting for 29% of the overall workforce (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2024). These patterns are not exclusive due to the outcome of recruitment practices, but stem from biased promotion systems and opaque benchmarks.

(Todak, 2023, pp. 967-983) examines the GC in US policing, revealing how entrenched gender biases and organisational cultures hamper the progression of female officers by backing men as more competent leaders despite possessing less qualifications. Data from the Maltese police in 2024 reveals that while women make up 23% of mid-to senior-rank officers, their representation falls sharply beyond the Superintendent rank, suggesting a clear GC effect.

These findings resonate throughout universal contexts, with comparative research offering further insight into the persistence of this leadership barrier. (Rubio et al., 2021, pp. 1-16) exposed that GC in policing is reinforced by varying views of gender equality among male and female leaders. While male officers often perceive equal opportunities, female officers report considerable hurdles to progression. This mirage of equality cloaks persistent structural and cultural obstacles, allowing gender inequality in promotion and evaluation processes to persist within law enforcement organisations. Similarly, in US territory, (Padilla et al., 2024, pp. 1-8) observed that in spite of comparable qualifications and tenure, female police officers often encounter overdue promotional opportunities compared to their male colleagues, illustrating the obstinate and structural nature of the GC in policing.

In several police forces, leadership is tightly bound to involvement in specialised units such as SWAT, Counter-Terrorism or Criminal Intelligence, reflecting a wider paramilitary shift in policing, as operational expertise from these elite divisions increasingly influences promotions to top leadership positions. (Kraska and Cubellis, 1997, pp. 607-629), highlight this tendency, remarking how paramilitary methods reshape criteria for leadership selection, resulting in

preferences for officers with experience in such fields for higher-ranking positions. Nonetheless, women are often underrepresented in these areas due to a blend of gendered assumptions about physical capability and systemic gatekeeping by male-dominated leadership teams (Prenzler and Sinclair, 2013, pp. 115-131), resulting in a vicious cycle where women are perceived as lacking the appropriate capability and further justifying their exclusion from career progression.

This barrier is further aggravated by the informal nature of many police career opportunities. Invitations to join task forces, attend elite training or networking opportunities with senior officers often arise through unofficial channels such as social gatherings, informal recommendations or direct nominations, areas where women are numerically underrepresented due to both cultural exclusion and domestic responsibilities. Consequently, they miss out on critical developmental experiences that are later used as justifications for promotions (Martin and Jurik, 2007, pp. 80-100). Additionally, promotion interviews and assessments regularly prioritise traits like authoritative presence and operational aggression, lining up with traditional masculinity ideals rather than diverse leadership capabilities (Silvestri, 2017, pp. 289-300) enabling unconscious prejudice to shape leadership pipelines. This institutional pattern reflects the tenets of RCT, where perceived incompatibility between femininity and leadership contributes to biased evaluations.

2.3.2. The Glass Cliff

Differing from the GC which inhibits women from climbing the leadership ladder, the GCI counterintuitively enables it, though only under unstable and often symbolic conditions. The GCI explains circumstances where women are promoted to leadership roles during crises, setting them

up for failure (Ryan and Haslam, 2005, pp. 81-90). These precarious positions lack support, resources or clear mandates, and failures are often attributed to individual incompetence rather than structural concerns. Research from (Yu, 2024, pp. 511-524) shows that female police officers in US law enforcement are often appointed during times of civil instability, scandals, budgets constraints or public criticism.

This phenomenon has practical implications beyond academic theory and has been frequently observed in key executive policing appointments worldwide. For instance, Cressida Dick became Commissioner of London's Metropolitan Police amid criticism over racial profiling and misconduct but was later pressured to resign when systemic issues remained unresolved (BBC, 2022). In Australia, after corruption revelations during the Fitzgerald Inquiry, female officers confronted symbolic promotions but endured limited authority, hindering genuine reform efforts and leading to their subsequent marginalisation (Fleming and Lafferty, 2003, pp. 37-49). In Malta, while the 2021 appointment of a female Deputy Commissioner signified a historic milestone, it coincided with public pressure for reform and internal audits, a classic GCI scenario (Azzopardi, 2021), indicating that without robust institutional support, such appointments risk reinforcing stereotypes rather than dismantling them.

In such scenarios, female officers often faced restricted resources, authority and subsequent blame when promised reforms failed, further demonstrating the GCI phenomenon. This further exacerbates the effect of the RCT prejudice, as failure in these positions is often framed as a reflection of female inadequacy, rather than institutional vulnerability. (Ryan et al., 2011, pp. 470-

484). Whilst these positions are highly visible, they lack structural backing, leaving the leader susceptible to fail. Scholars also note that women in these roles face dual burdens: leading during times of instability while simultaneously being scrutinised as representatives of their gender. Failure is often weaponised to question broader gender equality initiatives, creating an adverse effect for future female aspirants (Ryan et al., 2010, pp. 56-64). This phenomenon has been increasingly critiqued by legal scholars, who contend that these placements allow organisations to supposedly enact reform while shielding existing power structures from deeper scrutiny (Krook and Mackay, 2011, pp. 1-20).

To counteract the GCI, scholars endorse not only monitoring the context of leadership appointments but also guaranteeing that women are provided access to leadership roles in stable environments, accompanied by mentoring, policy-making influence and decision-making autonomy (Sabharwal, 2015, pp. 399-426), where structural safeguards are imperative to converting representation into genuine authority.

2.3.3. Work-Life Balance and Gendered Expectations

Whereas structural and symbolic barriers such as the GC and GCI restrict entry to leadership, balancing work-life responsibilities poses a practical, ongoing challenge that disproportionately affects women officers across all ranks. Law enforcement careers are characterised by irregular hours, emotional stress and physical demands, factors that clash with societal expectations of

caregiving often assigned to women. The lack of flexible work policies intensifies attrition among female officers (Acker, 2006, pp. 441-464).

In US territory, (Matus, 2020) highlights that female officers are judged more harshly if they avail themselves of leave for family responsibilities, contributing to slower career progression. These expectations often echo traditional social norms, reinforcing the organisational culture discussed in OST. Setting the local scene, a study in the MPF explored that numerous female officers feel enormous pressures to prioritise family responsibilities and leadership ambitions, further limiting their opportunities for higher movement (Camilleri, 2021).

Several police forces worldwide have executed family-friendly policies, leading to increased retention of female officers. In the UK, the NPCC introduced guidance emphasising flexible working arrangements to help officers with childcare responsibilities, significantly benefiting women's retention (NPCC, 2022). Additionally, the UK government's Return to Investigative Practice Project specifically targets parents and carers, primarily women, aiming to facilitate their return to policing (Gov.uk, 2022). In Australia, the NSW Police Force implemented flexible working patterns, including part-time roles and job-sharing, essentially accommodating family commitments and helping preserve female officers (Daily Telegraph Australia, 2023). Research further confirms that workplace flexibility is crucial for improving female retention in law enforcement (University of Portsmouth, 2024).

In Iceland, despite progressive gender policies, (Jónasdóttir, 2021) found that policewomen continued to self-select out of promotion due to projected conflicts with family life. Studies from numerous law enforcement agencies uncovered that even in elite policing units, women were anticipated to step down from leadership roles when familial commitments intensified, with minimal institutional backing for dual responsibilities (Todak and Brown, 2025, pp. 1-16). These findings reveal that challenges to WLB cut across ideological and policy divides, implying a more pervasive and culturally embedded concern.

The concept of the ideal worker ties directly back to the RCT, where leadership and commitment are coded through a masculine lens, implicitly disadvantaging females with caregiving responsibilities (Williams et al., 2013, pp. 209-234) Women, specifically mothers, are often deemed as unsuitable to meet this ideal, leading towards informal consequences such as stalled promotions or reassignments to less prestigious sections. This expectation is markedly elusive in cultures where traditional gender roles are still dominant. For instance, in southern European and Mediterranean contexts, caregiving is often regarded as a woman's primary duty, further inhibiting institutional flexibility or accommodation (Karamessini and Rubery, 2014, pp. 165-185). Addressing WLB is not just about flexibility but about redefining institutional expectations of leadership and commitment to create a more inclusive organisational culture, embracing a philosophy where WLB is neither feminised nor penalised, but championed as an indicator of institutional development (Borchorst and Siim, 2002, pp. 90-98).

To enhance conceptual clarity, Table 1 below distils the theoretical frameworks discussed and maps their specific applications to barriers faced by women in policing and leadership access. This visual summary acts as a bridge to the abstract dimensions of each theory with tangible manifestations.

Theory	Core Concept	Application to Policing	Barriers It Explains	Examples from Literature / Practice
Role Congruity Theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002)	Gender stereotypes conflict with expectations of leadership, making female leaders seem less legitimate.	Women perceived as either “too soft” or “too aggressive,” depending on how closely they align with gender norms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Glass ceiling - Glass cliff - Biased performance evaluations - Work-life stigma (women seen as less committed due to caregiving roles) 	<p>US: Female leaders labelled abrasive (Heilman, 2001)</p> <p>Malta: Assertive women seen as “overreaching” (Camilleri, 2021)</p> <p>(Williams et al., (2013) 'Ideal worker' norms penalise women with family responsibilities.</p>
Tokenism (Kanter, 1977)	Underrepresentation increases pressure, visibility, and stereotyping.	Token women held to higher standards, errors generalised to gender, pressure to 'prove' worth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Performance burden - Symbolic promotions - Role strain - Isolation - Avoidance of work-life accommodations to avoid 	<p>Canada: Soft duties and exclusion (Huey & Ricciardelli, 2015)</p> <p>India: Women used in PR roles (Hairiya & Singh, 2025)</p> <p>MPF: Deputy Commissioner appointment lacks</p>

			reinforcing stereotypes	institutional backing (Azzopardi, 2021)
Organisational Socialisation Theory (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979)	Workplace norms are internalised, often reflecting male-dominated traditions.	Women adapt to masculine culture for acceptance; diverse leadership styles discouraged.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cultural conformity - Informal gatekeeping - Suppressed work-life needs (maternity leave, flexible work seen as weakness) - Leadership pipeline attrition 	<p>US: 'Blue brotherhood' culture (Rabe-Hemp, 2008)</p> <p>Europe: Women adopt masculine traits (Van der Lippe et al., 2004)</p> <p>Malta: Women 'soften' femininity to blend in (Camilleri, 2021)</p>
Queen Bee Phenomenon (Staines et al., 1973; Derks et al., 2016)	Senior women distance themselves from junior women to protect status in male-dominated settings.	Women who succeed may deny gender bias or avoid mentoring others to maintain legitimacy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of mentorship - Intra-gender tension - Reinforcement of masculine ideals - Downplaying of work-life issues as taboo or personal weakness 	<p>UK: Female leaders deny bias exists (Silvestri, 2018)</p> <p>Europe: 'Macho' adaptation to leadership (Silvestri & Tong, 2020)</p> <p>(Faniko et al., 2020): Mentorship avoidance leads to fragmentation</p>

Table 1: Theoretical Frameworks and Barriers to Female Leadership in Policing

2.4. The Maltese Context: Gender Disparities in the MPF

In Malta, females were first recruited into MPF in 1956, however, their initial roles were restricted to administrative duties and juvenile-related tasks (Galea, 2023). A modest shift took place in the late 1960s with the appointment of the first female sergeant, though broader gender integration progressed slowly. Significant improvements were noticeable between 1991 and 2003, when a number of female officers attained mid-level and senior ranks, such as Inspectors and Superintendents (Mangion, 2006). Despite such development, gender inclusion within the MPF remained gradual, with the first female Assistant Commissioner appointed only in 2017, followed by her subsequent promotion to Deputy Commissioner in 2021 (Pace, 2021).

As of 2025, only one out of eleven Assistant Commissioners is female. There are also no women at the ranks of Commissioner or Deputy Commissioner (MPF Statistics, 2024) aligning closely with the GC theory outlined earlier.

A fundamental yet often overlooked policy that historically curtailed women's progression in the MPF is the compulsory resignation policy for married women, which remained in force until the 1980 (Azzopardi Cauchi, 2004). Under this rule, female police officers were forced to resign from service upon getting married, in parallel with restrictions applied across the Maltese public service at the time (Debattista, 1989). This policy not solely prematurely interrupted the careers of many capable women but also prohibited them from accruing the seniority and capability needed for progression to leadership roles. Consequently, a generational leadership pipeline was broken,

restricting today's pool of senior female leaders and contributing to the underrepresentation observed in higher ranks.

The enduring consequences of this policy are still visible today. Although such discriminatory practices have been formally eradicated, their legacy persists through lower female representation at the top and the repeated perception that women's careers are more likely to be shaped by domestic roles. This institutional history aligns with barriers explored through RCT, which shows how structural and cultural norms mutually weaken women's legitimacy as leaders. Without acknowledging such historical forces, contemporary gender discrepancies in policing risk being mistakenly illuminated as personal or cultural shortcomings, rather than the product of institutional exclusion.

Disaggregated data shows higher female representation in support units, such as Gender-Based Violence and Victim Support, while operational units such as Rapid Intervention or Counter-Terrorism remain overwhelmingly male. This occupational segregation reflects global trends but is also intensified by cultural barriers specific to Malta.

(Camilleri, 2021) notes that while policy frameworks promoting diversity are in place, informal cultural norms, encompassing mistrust of assertive female leadership, continue to constrain actual female progression. Despite progressive reforms, a lack of female representation in tactical units perpetuated the notion that women are unprepared for frontline command and such counterparts

imply that Malta's leadership challenges are part of a broader worldwide pattern shaped by social conservatism and institutional inertia.

Although the 2021 appointment of the first female Deputy Commissioner was heralded as a groundbreaking achievement, it was regrettably not accompanied by robust, institutionalised efforts to entrench gender inclusivity at the highest levels. Despite the existence of a transformation strategy, the chasm between policy and practice remains stark and no subsequent female appointments to that rank have materialised, underscoring the persistent gap between symbolic milestones and sustained structural change. This scenario also represents Tokenism whereby a high-profile female appointment serves tokenistic objectives rather than altering the organisational culture or addressing barriers to leadership. This also exemplifies the issue of policy-practice decoupling, where public institutions develop gender-neutral policies to align with supranational benchmarks but fail to merge them into operational procedures. Such stagnation is compounded by an aversion to external audits or performance oversight, mechanisms which are paramount in driving institutional reforms (Verloo, 2006, pp. 11-34).

These informal norms echo the procedures of OST, where male-dominated behaviours are both expected and rewarded, pushing women to adapt or be marginalised. Other evidence corroborates that female officers who exhibit assertiveness or ambition are more likely to be labelled as overreaching or not a team player, reflecting the influence of RCT and OST pressures within the MPF (Camilleri, 2021).

Recruitment strategies have also failed to adequately address gender imbalance. While female intake in academy groups has increased, the retention and promotions rates remain significantly lower for women than for men. Likewise, leadership development programs within the MPF remain generic, lacking a gender-responsive plan. There are no targeted mentoring schemes, leadership shadowing opportunities or career audits disaggregated by gender. This omission stands in contrast to best practices in jurisdictions such as Finland (Lumiala and Colin, 2023, pp. 332-350) and Canada (Carrier et al., 2021, pp. 1585-1602) where internal career tracking and inclusive training have been used to dismantle unofficial gatekeeping.

The intersection of structural unwillingness and cultural traditionalism further obscures reform endeavours. Malta's small population and tight-knit political landscape imply that policing is often tangled with broader societal power dynamics. As (Caruana, 2001) and (Mangion, 2011) have shown, harassment issues, informal patronage and gendered hierarchies are embedded in institutional practices and transformation efforts are often thwarted by a lack of political will and internal resistance.

Yet, there are emerging indicators of possible advancement. Civil society organisations and EU mandated equality bodies have increasingly called for greater accountability and transparency in public leadership, including within the police force. The ratification of international conventions such as The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Malta's National Strategy for Gender Equality (2020-2030) provide normative frameworks that could support deeper reform if meaningfully applied to policing.

2.5. Research Gaps

Despite numerous literature on gender and policing, research concentrating specifically on the Maltese context remains scarce. Most local studies focus on workplace stress (Arnaud, 2008), harassment (Caruana, 2001) and institutional sexism (Mangion, 2011) rather than on career progression and leadership. Moreover, the most recent study was conducted in 2021, further showing the necessity for updated and contemporary research that mirror current realities and evolving dynamics of leadership in Maltese policing.

As the preceding sections show, linking global theory with local practice is fundamental to revealing context-specific barriers and identifying adaptable solutions. This gap presents a unique opportunity for this dissertation to contribute profound insights by blending theoretical models, global lessons and in-depth analysis of the MPF.

Furthermore, no existing studies trace the long-term career trajectories of female officers in Malta, highlighting a critical research gap. A significant constraint of current Maltese research is its tendency to consider gender inequality in policing as a static occurrence, rather than a dynamic process shaped by evolving policy, organisational culture and social change. There is also minimal investigation of how reforms have been implemented through time, nor how female officers themselves experience and negotiate institutional barriers. This study seeks to fill that void by capturing officers' views and perceptions and aligning them with larger structural patterns.

Additionally, while several international studies highlight effective strategies for promoting female leadership, these understandings have yet to be profoundly tested or adapted within the MPF. This dissertation aims to bridge this detachment by utilising global contexts to a local setting, evaluating both their pertinency and their limitations.

Another important research oversight concerns the lack of data-driven policy evaluation in the Maltese policing context. Contemporary initiatives are seldomly exposed to impact assessments or outcome tracking, making it problematic to establish whether diversity objectives translate into measurable change. By proposing evidence-based interventions grounded in international models, this dissertation contributes to the development of an evaluative approach to gender reform within the MPF.

Finally, this research addresses the discrepancy between formal policy and perceived experiences. While gender equality is embedded in several national and EU-level legal frameworks, enforcement and practice often lag behind rhetoric. By capturing the disconnect between official discourse and institutional culture within the MPF, this study provides a grounded, evidence-rich foundation for future policy development.

2.6. Conclusion

This chapter adopted a funnel approach, starting from global theoretical models, progressing through international empirical research and concluding with a contextualised scrutiny of Malta.

These insights are foundational for developing intersectional, evidence-led and culturally anchored recommendations gender reform in the MPF and beyond. The connection between frameworks and theories enlightens how institutional cultures and stereotypes perpetuate gender inequalities.

Empirical universal studies demonstrate both persistent barriers and successful reform strategies, posing beneficial understandings for the MPF. Local data indicates clear underrepresentation of women in leadership, confirming the relevance of this research.

As this chapter attested, bridging theory, practice and local experience with international insight is crucial to understanding female leadership in policing. By merging conceptual frameworks with cross-cultural evidence, this review underlines the complex, multi-layered nature of gender disparities in policing. It is not merely a numerical problem but it is surrounded in routines, perceptions and structures that define police work. This necessitates multi-dimensional involvements that concurrently address representation, institutional culture, leadership development and work-life policy.

The review also underscores the magnitude of comparative analysis, providing both cautionary experiences and blueprints for development. The Maltese scenario cannot be fully understood in isolation but must be situated within worldwide trends of resistance and reform.

At national level, literature has underlined the necessity to revisit both internal MPF documents and entrenched cultural assumptions. While the MPF's transformation strategy outlines a forward-oriented approach targeted at making it as a modern and inclusive organisation (Malta Police Force, 2020, p.15), its practical execution in relation to the development and advancement of female officers remains inconsistent. Strategic objectives such as developing leadership and management capabilities at all levels (Malta Police Force, 2020, p. 19) and making the MPF an employer of choice (Malta Police Force, 2020, pp. 18-20) address concerns of human capital development, succession planning and gender inclusivity. However, these strategic commitments have yet to translate into substantive, measurable outcomes on the ground. Maltese policing continues to be characterised by minimal female leadership representation, occupational segregation and inactive structural transformation. Without a comprehensible implementation roadmap, transparent accountability mechanisms and a continuous focus on gender mainstreaming in leadership pathways, the aspirational goals of the MPF risk remaining largely rhetorical. To this regard, a strategic, evidence-based and gender-conscious reform agenda, firmly anchored in practice, not just policy, remains indispensable to closing the gap between intention and institutional reality.

These foundations inform the forthcoming research methodology chapter, which elaborates on the study's research design, data collection methods and analytical approach, ensuring a methodical examination of gender dynamics within the MPF and how these align with or deviate from patterns emphasised in the literature.

3. Chapter 3 – Research Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter accounts for the research methodology adopted to examine hurdles and pathways for female officers who have attained or are actively pursuing to secure leadership roles in the MPF. Anchored in a realist inquiry framework, the study integrated empirical and theoretical perspectives.

A qualitative design was used to explore the views and perceptions of female officers in the MPF, complemented by secondary data to contextualise findings within institutional and sociocultural frameworks. The research design covered primary and secondary data collection methods, participant selection and analysis strategies, ensuring both academic rigor and practical relevance. A critical analysis of methodological limitations, mitigation strategies, ethical considerations and data protection measures was also included.

By establishing a systematic yet flexible framework, this chapter laid the groundwork for an empirical investigation, contributing to scholarship on gender and leadership in law enforcement, particularly in the Maltese corps.

3.2. Research Philosophy

The study espoused a realist inquiry approach, combining both views and perceptions with systemic institutional frameworks. Realist inquiry recognises the interaction between personal agency and structural barriers in male-dominated fields (Archer, 1995, pp. 31-32). This philosophical foundation recognised that while females have the capacity to make decisions that form their careers, they function within a broader system of cultural norms, workplace policies and organisational hierarchies that impact both opportunities and boundaries.

Existing research adopting the realist inquiry in policing examines the views and perceptions of female officers in medium-sized police forces, delving into crucial factors shaping career trajectories such as organisational culture, WLB and perceived discrimination (Poleski, 2016). Such research emphasises the importance of applying a realist paradigm in understanding both subjective views and perceptions combined with structural barriers in law enforcement. Realist inquiry is also used in other male-dominated professions to investigate gender disparity. This approach was used to investigate how organisational norms and cultural biases perpetuate gender inequalities in leadership positions. This research underpinned the notion that institutional structures play a vital function in shaping career lines for women in traditionally male-dominated fields, further justifying the adoption of a realist inquiry (O'Brien et al., 2023).

Realist inquiry was selected over interpretivist and constructionist approaches due to its facility to reconcile subjective views and perceptions with the objective realities of institutional structures. Interpretivism, which focuses on the subjective construction of meaning (Pervin and Mokhtar,

2022, pp. 419-428), was deemed insufficient for this study as it fails to suitably address the structural limitations impacting female officers' career progression. Similarly, constructivism, which posits that social reality is mutually constructed by individuals (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, pp. 105-117) does not fully capture the extent to which entrenched institutional norms and policies shape gender disparities in leadership. A realist philosophical approach provided a balanced viewpoint, acknowledging both the personal agency of female officers and the systemic barriers they encounter, rendering it the most ideal approach for this study.

3.3. Rationale

This study applied a qualitative research design, suitable for examining nuanced social issues like gender disparities and leadership dynamics. Qualitative methods enabled exploration of participants' experiences, motivations and perceptions (Hammerberg et al., 2016, pp. 498-500). This approach was particularly effective for addressing how and why questions related to gendered barriers and leadership pathways, moving beyond surface-level statistics (Ghanad, 2023 pp. 3794-3803).

3.4. Primary Data Sources

Semi-structured interviews were selected over alternative qualitative research methods such as structured interviews and focus groups for their balance of consistency and flexibility (Adams, 2015, pp. 492-504). Structured interviews, while useful for ensuring uniformity, may lack the adaptability necessary to explore intricate and evolving themes (Bryman, 2012, pp. 468-471) that

crop up during discussions on gender barriers. Focus groups were unutilised, as they could hinder open discussions on sensitive topics like gender bias due to the presence of other participants (Farquhar and Das, 1999, pp. 47-63). Semi-structured interviews maintain an equilibrium between guided questioning and open-ended exploration, allowing participants to articulate their views and perceptions in their own ways while enabling the researcher to probe relevant issues further.

Furthermore, quantitative methods like surveys and questionnaires were deemed less suitable, as they may oversimplify multifaceted phenomena and nuance of responses, providing statistical data rather than capturing rich and meaningful insights that semi-structured interviews facilitate (Lim, 2024, pp. 1-20).

3.5. Secondary Data Sources

Complementing primary data, the study incorporated secondary data from both published and unpublished sources. Published sources, available within the public domain include books, book chapters, research papers, journals, policy documents and websites examining gender barriers in law enforcement. Unpublished data included official MPF records on gender representation, which were not publicly accessible. Access was granted following formal requests, where approval from the same organisation was subsequently obtained. Secondary data provided background for the development of interview questions and interpreting qualitative findings.

Whilst this study primarily adopted a qualitative approach, unpublished sources offered a quantitative outlook on gender representation trends across various ranks and sections. Published sources, on the other hand, provided theoretical frameworks essential for understanding gender disparities. By integrating both published and unpublished secondary data with primary data, the study enriched its analytical depth, offering a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by female officers. Unpublished sources, for instance, showed that when numerical data reveal a significant decline in female representation at various leadership levels, interview responses can offer valuable insights into the views and perceptions that contribute to this statistical trend. Contrarily, published sources, helped contextualize these findings by offering broader discussions, comparative analysis and evidence-based findings on gender disparities in policing.

3.6. Procedure

The research methodology process followed a structured yet flexible series of steps:

3.6.1. Participant Selection

The study roped in a diverse selection of female officers across different ranks. This criterion targeted one participant per rank and a maximum of eight participants, securing the inclusion of various views and perceptions within the organisational structure. Regardless of rank, participants were afforded equal opportunities to express their viewpoints, ensuring that every perception is valued and thoroughly examined. This approach ensured different insights from junior officers facing early challenges and seniors who successfully advanced despite systemic barriers.

3.6.2. Sampling Procedure

A non-probability sampling technique, specifically a purposive sampling strategy was employed to deliberately choose participants who could provide the most pertinent insights (Palinkas et al., 2013, pp. 533-544). This method allowed for the intentional enclosure of individuals based on specific characteristics, in this case, female officers across different ranks who have faced leadership challenges or aspire to achieve leadership roles. By utilising purposive sampling, this approach allowed for a deeper and well-rounded understanding of gender-related barriers in policing. In contrast, while convenience sampling is also a non-probability sampling technique, it was dismissed as it may not have fully comprehended the nuances of these issues (Etikan et al., 2015, pp. 1-4).

3.6.3. Recruitment Process

Participants were recruited through official communication channels, namely the Government email system and the MPF official Facebook group. Using email correspondence entailed a professional tone and expedited greater access to potential participants, ensuring clear and efficient outreach. In parallel, leveraging the official Facebook group as an additional recruitment tool, extended the reach of the initiative, offering access to a wider variety of participants, potentially reaching officers who are more responsive to social media communication.

3.6.4. Interview Protocol

The interviews were held at a time and location chosen by each participant to maximise comfort and openness. Each interview was conducted in a private setting and lasted between 45-60 minutes. The length of the interview was flexible, allowing participants to answer at their own pace. In-person interviews allowed for organic interaction and detection of non-verbal cues, enriching understanding into participants' views.

Each interview consisted of ten questions which covered key themes such as facets of females' professional journeys, including challenges they face in career progression, systemic obstacles embedded within the organisational structure and elements that either facilitate or hinder their progression into leadership positions. Its open-ended format enabled thorough answers and follow-up questions further boosted the clarity of discussion, minimising the prevalence for short and close-ended responses. All interviews with various ranks were conducted within a similar time frame, which warranted consistency and allowed for a more balanced and comparative analysis. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically, enabling systematic coding and interpretation of the data.

3.7. Data Analysis

TA was used as a rigorous qualitative research method, allowing researchers to detect, evaluate and report patterns within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp. 77-101). Given that gender dynamics in leadership often involve complex sociocultural and institutional influences, TA provided a

structured framework for capturing different themes within the data (Kiger and Varpio, 2020, pp. 846-854).

Manual coding, a widely accepted method in qualitative research, was used during thematic analysis for its capacity to foster deeper engagement with data. While time-intensive, susceptible to bias and prone to human error, it enhanced interpretive depth (Nowell et al., 2017, pp. 1-13), making it suitable for this study's small scale size, which nonetheless needed sensitivity to both personal accounts and structural factors.

One of the key advantages of TA was its flexibility across different theoretical frameworks, applying it within a realist paradigm to focus on views and perceptions as direct reflections of reality and to examine how these are shaped by social contexts (King, 2004, pp. 256-270). Such adaptability ensured that the method was well-suited for analysing the intricate challenges and opportunities that female officers grappled with during their career journeys.

The process was based on a series of sequential stages which catered for a systematic and thorough exploration of leadership views and perceptions. These encompassed familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017, p. 5).

3.7.1. Data Familiarisation

Transcripts were read and re-read to gain deeper acquaintance with the data. Notes and preliminary ideas were recorded and sketched during this phase.

3.7.2. Generating Initial Codes

Relevant data were systematically coded using a manual coding process. Codes were applied to segments of text that mirrored recurring concepts or experiences.

3.7.3. Searching for Themes

Codes were clustered into broader potential themes that echoed significant patterns related to the RQs.

3.7.4. Reviewing Themes

Themes were revised and polished by rechecking them against the coded extracts and the full data set, ensuring coherence and relevance.

3.7.5. Defining and Naming Themes

Clear definitions were built for all themes. Each theme was named to reflect its scope and focus.

3.7.6. Producing the Report

Themes were woven into a coherent narrative and supported with direct quotes from participants in the next chapter, allowing participants' voices to be central in the findings.

3.7.7. Overall Thematic Approach

This structured approach allowed the researcher to maintain analytical rigor while remaining grounded in the participants' perspectives. By employing this organised approach, this ensured analytical rigour while remaining grounded in participants' views and perspectives (Terry et al., 2017, pp. 17-36), ultimately providing profound insights into gendered pathways in leadership.

3.8. Legitimation

To confirm the trustworthiness of the research, several techniques were adopted:

3.8.1. Triangulation

Though limited, a form of data triangulation was applied by collecting insights from different ranks, ensuring a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the systemic and individual factors influencing female officers' career trajectories. This approach helped mitigate bias and strengthen the credibility of findings by cross-checking perspectives from different levels within the organisation (Patton, 1999, pp. 1189-1207).

3.8.2. Reflexivity

The researcher kept a personal reflective log to monitor personal biases, especially considering his dual role as both an insider and researcher. Reflections comprised of the researcher's emotional responses during interviews, perceived power dynamics and the influence of organisational culture. By accounting for these reflections, the researcher was better equipped to distinguish between participant meaning and personal assumptions, thereby enriching the integrity and transparency of data analysis.

3.8.3. Anonymity and Confidentiality

Participants were guaranteed full anonymity and confidentiality, which helped foster openness during interviews. This assurance was crucial in eliciting truthful answers, as participants were more willing to share personal workplace experiences when reassured that their identity would remain protected, thereby improving the richness and legitimacy of research findings.

3.8.4. Thick Description

Deep contextual data and direct quotations from interviews were used to provide transparency and allow readers to determine the applicability of findings. By including participants' voices directly, the research permitted readers to see how interpretations were formed and assess the validity of the findings. This approach also empowered the researcher to evaluate the relevance and transferability of the results to other situations or backgrounds.

3.9. Methodological Limitations

Despite the study's rigorous design, certain limitations were encountered and should be acknowledged:

3.9.1. Researcher Positionality

As a MPF sworn officer, the researcher's insider status may influence participant responses. The researcher holds the rank of police sergeant, which means that some interviewees may be subordinates, while others may be superiors. This dual conflict may have the tendency to impact the openness of responses, as subordinates may feel hesitant to share critical perspectives, while superiors may unconsciously frame their responses in alignment with organisational norms – Refer to appendix 9 for an overview of the MPF's rank structure.

3.9.2. Researcher Gender

Considering that the researcher is male and interviewing female officers, gender dynamics may impact how participants answer questions. Some female officers may possibly feel anxious discussing certain topics such as gender discrimination and workplace bias.

3.9.3. Gaps in Female Representation

While the study aimed to include a varied ensemble of female officers across various ranks, this selection criterion could not be fully abided by. At the time of data collection, there were no female officers at the ranks of Deputy Commissioner and Commissioner. As a result, the perspectives of female officers in these high-ranking leadership positions were not incorporated during this study. Such limitation may conceivably impact the scale of insights faced by women at the top brass of the organisation. This gap reflects the current organisational configuration rather than the intentional exclusion by the researcher.

3.9.4. Limited Generalisability

Due to the qualitative nature of the study and the small sample size, findings derived from six female officers cannot be generalised to the entire MPF. With a total of four hundred and ninety-nine female officers in the force, it was unfeasible to interview every member and therefore the results cannot be generalised to reflect the attitudes or perspectives of every female officer. This constraint highlights the difficulty of generalising qualitative research outcomes, which often prioritise depth rather than breadth. Aligned with the research's questions and objectives, the researcher still opted for a qualitative approach over a quantitative one. A qualitative approach provided richer analysis that would have been difficult to apprehend solely through numerical data. While quantitative methods may yield broader generalisability, it would not have facilitated the same level of depth as it concentrates on statistical trends rather than grasping the extensive complexities of female officers.

3.10. Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to strict ethical standards to uphold participants' rights, with no anticipated risks or harm. The ethical framework was meticulously designed to ensure transparency, uphold respect and prioritise the safety of participants throughout the research process.

3.10.1. Institutional Approvals

Before the commencement of this research, formal clearance was sought and eventually granted from the researcher's employer, the MPF, as well as through the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) procedures at the University of Malta.

3.10.2. Informed Consent and Voluntary Participation

All participants were given consent forms and information letters to ensure they had a clear comprehension of the study's overriding objectives, methodologies and their rights as participants. Voluntary participation, free from any form of coercion was a fundamental principle applied throughout the whole research process. Participants were also explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time, without bearing penalty or prejudice. They were also assured that they could opt out of answering any question with which they felt uncomfortable.

3.10.3. Respect for Participants

Interviews were conducted in participant-centred manner. Cultural and professional sensitivities were respected throughout and the time and place of interviews were selected by participants for comfort and convenience. To enhance ease and accessibility, all research material including consent forms, information sheets and interview questions were disseminated in both English and Maltese format. Participants were also given the option to complete all forms and undertake the interview in their preferred language.

3.10.4. Research Conduct

The research was carried out during the researcher's approved off-duty hours and through the utilisation of study leave entitlements, thereby ensuring that professional responsibilities remained uninterrupted.

3.11. Data Protection Measures

Data protection was a fundamental aspect of the research process, in line with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and pertinent national legislation. Multiple aspects were factored in to uphold the diligence and integrity of the research findings.

3.11.1. Anonymisation Strategy

To diminish the risk of indirect identification and reduce granularity while still confirming to a structured analysis of the organisational hierarchy, ranks were grouped into two main categories.

- **Lower Ranks:** Constables, Sergeants and Sergeant Majors.
- **Higher Ranks:** Inspectors, Superintendents and Assistant Commissioners.

This clustering was essential from a data protection perspective. While lower-ranking female officers incorporate a larger workforce, reducing the likelihood of unintended identification, higher-ranking female officers are fewer in number, exacerbating the exposure of indirect detection based on contextual details. To mitigate this, names, surnames and service numbers were omitted from the data. By consolidating ranks into expansive categories, the study ascertained that individual identities remain protected while still allowing for insightful evaluation within the force's chain of command.

3.11.2. Data Storage and Handling

Data collected was handled privately and securely stored. Raw identifiable data was encrypted and stored offline in a password-secured format. Any physical material, such as signed consent forms, information letters or interview transcripts, were also kept in a locked cabinet. Participants were informed of other rights, including data access, rectification and where applicable, erasure. Data

access was limited to the researcher, supervisor and in exceptional cases, such as during the examination process, examiners, who may also be granted access.

3.11.3. Disposal and Erasure

All unpublished data will be securely destroyed after the completion of the research. No personally identifiable information will be included in publications, reports or presentations derived from this study.

3.12. Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodological blueprint underpinning the study's exploration of gender and leadership. A qualitative approach backed up by a realist philosophical lens allowed for the integration of subjective experiences with structural analysis, thereby aligning methodologically with the study's questions and objectives.

The integration of semi-structured interviews, purposive sampling and TA supported a rich and contextualised exploration of participants' views and perceptions, thereby consolidating the legitimacy of findings. While certain limitations were endured and had to be acknowledged, these were clearly mitigated through clear methodological design, ethical safeguards and data protection protocols.

Collectively, these methodological approaches fostered a robust, ethical and context-sensitive inquiry. These choices laid the foundation for the in-depth TA presented in the subsequent chapter, the research findings and discussion which present the study's key results offering empirical insights into the systemic and personal factors shaping leadership experiences among female officers in the MPF.

4. Chapter 4 – Findings and Discussion

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents and analyses research findings obtained from semi-structured interviews carried out with female officers serving within the MPF. A total of six female officers participated, spanning ranks from Constable to Assistant Commissioner, thereby capturing in-depth views and perspectives from lower ranks to higher ones. For anonymity purposes, quotations directly extracted from interviews are categorised into two main groupings – lower and higher ranks. The lower rank comprises participants holding the ranks of Constable, Sergeant and Sergeant Major, while the higher rank category encompasses those at Inspector, Superintendent and Assistant Commissioner level. Each grouping contained three participants, guaranteeing fair representation across hierarchical tiers.

Using (Braun and Clarke, 2006) model of TA, data was coded manually to ensure close engagement with responses, grounded in a realist inquiry framework. The analysis was informed by theoretical frameworks discussed extensively in the literature review, including RCT (Eagly and Karau, 2002), Tokenism (Kanter, 1997), OST (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979), QBP (Derks et al., 2016), GC (Cotter et al., 2001), GCI (Ryan and Haslam, 2005) and WLB issues. These theoretical underpinnings helped probe why certain patterns persist in the MPF.

This chapter presents participant-supported themes and critically interprets them through existing literature whilst also addressing the study's primary RQs:

1. **Which are the opportunities and hurdles that female officers face when seeking to achieve top leadership positions in the MPF?**
2. **What leadership qualities do female officers exhibit in the MPF?**
3. **Which strategies can female officers utilise to successfully rise through the ranks in the MPF?**

TA yielded six overarching themes which are: Career Progression and Structural Barriers, Organisational Culture and Informal Norms, Leadership Perceptions and Gender Bias, Support Systems and Mentorship, WLB and Flexibility and Symbolism Versus Substantive Reform, clearly reflecting both participants' voices derived from interviews and insights drawn from the existing literature. These themes emerged through a systematic and rigorous process of manual coding. Conceptually related codes were consolidated into sub-themes, which were then grouped under broader analytical categories, forming the six overarching themes. This structure enabled detailed representation of participants' views. Each overarching theme is composed of a mixture of sub-themes that indicate specific areas of focus identified within the data. These sub-themes provide further granularity and intensity, capturing the nuanced experiences that female officers within the MPF steer through during their career journeys.

This chapter presents additional analytical sections that provide a deeper interpretation of data. These include: the hurdles and enablers to female leadership within the MPF, recommendations

provided by interviewees for improving pathways to female leadership and a cross-rank comparison that highlights convergences and divergences in responses across ranks, helping to strengthen the credibility and depth of research findings.

This analysis also catered for the difference between recurring and emergent themes. Recurring themes were those that constantly resonated across multiple participants and closely equated with existing literature and theoretical frameworks discussed in preceding chapters. By contrast, emergent themes were context-specific outcomes that surfaced more unexpectedly and uniquely within the Maltese policing environment, providing additional insights to established understandings.

Figure 1 below recapitulates the six overarching themes and their respective sub-themes:

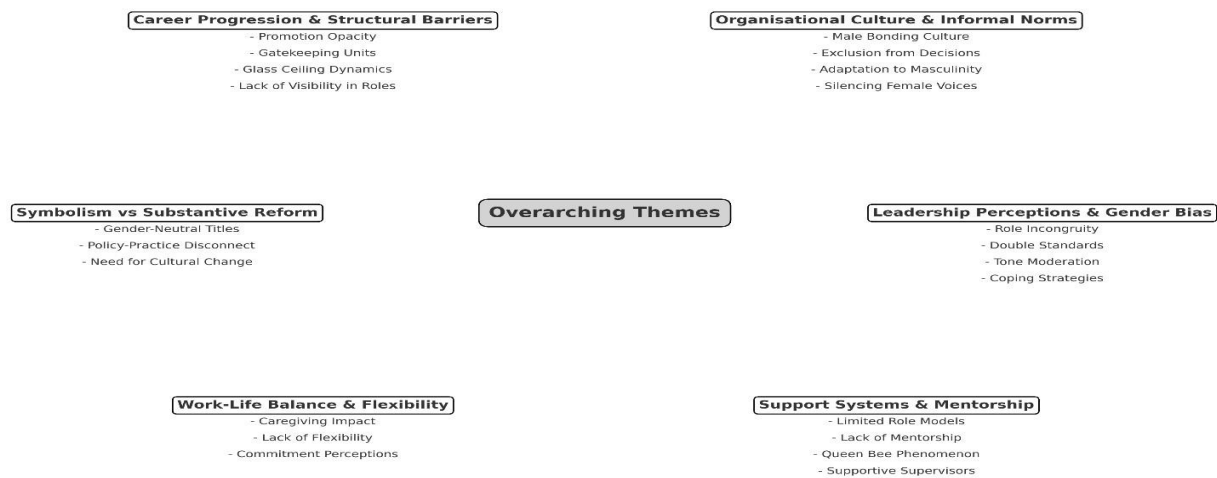


Figure 1: Overarching Themes and Sub-Themes Derived from Thematic Analysis

4.2. Thematic Theme Development

Table 2 sets out the thematic coding framework that guided the analytical process from the outset. Developed through a manual coding process, it outlines how selected participant extracts were coded, aggregated into sub-themes and refined into six overarching themes aligned with the study’s RQs, objectives and theoretical models. The examples shown under ‘Data Extracts’ are solely illustrative, included to display how particular pieces of raw data corresponded with identified codes.

Data Extracts	Codes	Sub-Themes	Overarching Themes
‘Promotion procedures are often unclear and inconsistent.’	Overlooked for promotion despite eligibility	Promotion Opacity	Career Progression and Structural Barriers – Theme 1
‘Access to key units feels reserved for a selected few.’	Leadership roles limited to inner circle	Gatekeeping Units	Career Progression and Structural Barriers – Theme 1
‘Women hit a glass ceiling after a certain rank.’	Difficulty progressing beyond mid-level ranks	Glass Ceiling Dynamics	Career Progression and Structural Barriers – Theme 1
‘Females rarely gain visibility in operational roles.’	Women excluded from operational visibility	Lack of Visibility in Roles	Career Progression and Structural Barriers – Theme 1
‘Decisions are often taken in male-dominated spaces.’	Decisions taken in male bonding spaces	Male Bonding Culture	Organisational Culture and Informal Norms – Theme 2

‘Informal networks exclude female voices.’	Women excluded from informal discussions	Exclusion from Decisions	Organisational Culture and Informal Norms – Theme 2
‘Women have to adapt to fit in with male norms.’	Pressures to adapt to masculine traits	Adaptation to Masculinity	Organisational Culture and Informal Norms – Theme 2
‘Female perspectives are often silenced or ignored.’	Female voices ignored during meetings	Silencing Female Voices	Organisational Culture and Informal Norms – Theme 2
‘Being assertive as a woman can backfire.’	Women penalised for assertiveness	Role Incongruity	Leadership Perceptions and Gender Bias – Theme 3
‘We face double standards in behaviour expectations.’	Behaviour judged by double standards	Double Standards	Leadership Perceptions and Gender Bias – Theme 3
‘Tone moderation is necessary to avoid criticism.’	Tone moderation critical to avoid criticism	Tone Moderation	Leadership Perceptions and Gender Bias – Theme 3
‘We develop coping mechanisms to survive the culture.’	Adopting coping strategies to survive culture	Coping Strategies	Leadership Perceptions and Gender Bias – Theme 3
‘There are few female leaders to look up to.’	Few female leaders in top positions	Limited Role Models	Support Systems and Mentorship – Theme 4
‘Formal mentorship beyond entry-level is rare.’	Lack of structured mentorship programmes	Lack of Mentorship	Support Systems and Mentorship – Theme 4

‘Some senior women distance themselves from juniors.’	Senior women keep distance from junior ones	Queen Bee Phenomenon	Support Systems and Mentorship – Theme 4
‘Supportive supervisors made a big difference.’	Supportive supervisors facilitate career development	Supportive Supervisors	Support Systems and Mentorship – Theme 4
‘Childcare duties affect my availability for shifts.’	Childcare duties limit availability	Caregiving Impact	Work-Life Balance and Flexibility – Theme 5
‘Flexible working is limited in practice.’	Flexible working options restricted	Lack of Flexibility	Work-Life Balance and Flexibility – Theme 5
‘Women are seen as less committed due to family roles.’	Perceived as less committed due to family obligations	Commitment Perceptions	Work-Life Balance and Flexibility – Theme 5
‘Gender-neutral titles help but aren't enough.’	Gender-neutral titles introduced	Gender-Neutral Titles	Symbolism vs Substantive Reform – Theme 6
‘Policies sound good on paper but are not always applied.’	Policies not always executed in practice	Policy-Practice Disconnect	Symbolism vs Substantive Reform – Theme 6
‘Cultural change is needed beyond symbols.’	Need for deeper cultural reforms	Need for Cultural Change	Symbolism vs Substantive Reform – Theme 6

Table 2: Initial Thematic Coding Framework – Illustrative Data Extracts, Codes, Sub-Themes and Numbered Overarching Themes

4.3. Presentation of Themes

4.3.1. Theme 1: Career Progression and Structural Barriers

Participants described promotional pathways in the MPF as lacking in equitability. Although formal processes have been implemented in recent years, there remains a strong perception that structural biases persist, particularly in relation to access to high-visibility, career-enhancing roles that serve as stepping stones to leadership. Participants characterised this stagnation as hitting an invisible GC, where beyond certain ranks, female representation thins out dramatically, mirroring global patterns of females being underrepresented in top police leadership positions (Hoyt, 2017, pp. 85-89).

‘While formal criteria show that I meet the eligibility requirements for promotion, there always seems to be hidden subjective benchmarks that are used to justify non-progression to the highest ranks, such as lack of experience or visibility in certain operational contexts.’ — Lower Rank.

Participants commonly conveyed frustration over the reliance on informal networks to access prestigious units, which are widely perceived as precursors to leadership opportunities. These networks were described as exclusionary, disadvantaging women through unwritten access rules. Participants suggested that selected desired assignments often circulate amongst a small segment of favourites, usually males, making it difficult for women to penetrate into these roles.

‘There are unspoken rules that grant access to key positions. It’s not always about your expertise and credentials, frequently it’s about being part of the right networks or having the right connections. Unfortunately, certain assignments are already reserved for those already within these unofficial circles and if you’re not part of them, notably as a female, it can feel like you’re permanently on the outside looking in.’ — Lower Rank.

Accompanying informal networks, several participants highlighted the subtle but substantial influence of interpersonal relationships, including intimate connections, in shaping promotional pathways.

‘Sometimes it’s not what you know but who you know. Some people form personal connections that seem to bolster their careers. These dynamics reflect a deeper organisational culture in which proximity to prominent figures, whether through social circles or intimate relations, can enhance visibility and access to advancement. This can preclude women who remain outside these networks from progressing further, raising concerns about fairness and meritocracy in leadership progression.’ — Lower Rank.

Participants in the higher echelons recognised incremental formal policy improvements, intended at improving internal equity, but stressed that these endeavours are still destabilised by entrenched practices, often disadvantaging those who do not conform with traditional, male-dominated power dynamics.

‘We’ve introduced a transparent horizontal movement policy to guide internal transfers and promotions. Nonetheless, eradicating long-standing practices takes patience and time. In Malta, outside influences, such as political ones can dictate transfers and promotions, often reinforcing inequalities, including those related to gender.’ — Higher Rank.

Higher ranks noted that the MPF’s upper strata remain predominantly male, with visible obstacles to female progression.

‘Even in a leadership role, I have observed challenges in progressing beyond a certain level within the force. The uppermost ranks remain highly male-dominated and difficult for women to penetrate. This is reflected in the number of females holding higher positions in the force, which is very low compared to male counterparts. You rarely find women in the ranks of Superintendents, Assistant Commissioners and Deputy Commissioners.’ — Higher Rank.

This aligns with Kanter’s (1977) assertion that opportunities within organisations are structurally embedded and not simply earned through individual merit, a perspective that is particularly detected in policing structures where informal networks and cultural expectations shape officers’ career trajectories. (Loftus, 2009, pp. 55-81). There was a shared consensus amongst respondents that the MPF’s reforms, while commendable, appear to be hindered by old patterns and informal hierarchies that replicate a male-oriented leadership pipeline.

Moreover, participants described an overlooked yet critical structural barrier concerning the structure of MPF promotion boards. Panels responsible for assessing candidates remain chiefly male-dominated due to the overall underrepresentation of women in higher ranks. This disparity may inadvertently perpetuate unconscious gender prejudices and reinforce masculine norms in leadership selection, notably when leadership potential is assessed through subjective or interpersonal criteria.

‘When boards are mostly male, they may not fully grasp or value the leadership qualities women bring. The absence of gender diversity on such panels not only risks reinforcing traditional hierarchies and privilege male-coded competencies but also undercuts the legitimacy and inclusiveness of the promotional process.’ — Lower Rank.

Participants proposed targeted measures to counter structural barriers. They suggested executing transparent tracking systems to monitor the equitable distribution of career-enhancing assignments. Participants strongly advocated for the introduction of independent oversight on promotion panels and internal movements, as well as the involvement of external observers or auditors to ensure accountability and diminish the possibility for favouritism. Participants emphasised the need for a performance-based system offering women equal opportunity for leadership roles. In principle, this theme focuses upon a key hurdle identified in RQ1, demonstrating how structural barriers and opaque practices delay female officers’ career progression despite official internal policies aimed to warrant fairness.

The challenges pointed out by respondents regarding non-transparent promotion processes, reliance on informal networks and constrained access to career-enhancing positions are coherent with international practices observed within policing. Research in the US (Todak, 2023, pp. 967-983) and UK (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2024) correspondingly discovers ambiguous benchmarks and male-centric informal networks as primary impediments to female development.

The Maltese context offers a nuanced level of complexity, as several participants explicitly observed political interference as a factor shaping decisions surrounding internal transfers and promotions within the MPF. Political interference in law enforcement, particularly in smaller states, is regularly facilitated by tightly woven socio-political networks where institutional autonomy is weakened by patronage and personal affiliations (Bayley, 2006, pp. 1-14). Participants also perceived that such interference not only disrupts the objectivity of merit-based advancement but disproportionately disadvantages women, who already face structural barriers. This aligns with research from comparable small-state settings, such as Cyprus, where the interlinking of political and organisational power reinforced gendered patterns of exclusion (Kamenou, 2020, pp. 359-381), in contrast to jurisdictions such as Norway, where promotions are strictly regulated with independent oversight mechanisms to uphold objectivity (Bjørkelo et al., 2021, pp. 74-103). International literature underscores that the deficiency of independent oversight in promotional processes tends to allow both political and gender bias (Reiner, 2011, pp. 111-113), fortifying the necessity for transparent mechanisms and external audits to uphold meritocracy. Such instances do not solely undermine organisational integrity but also exacerbates gender-based disparities, a theme that emerged prominently in relation to RQ1 on the barriers that female officers encounter in progressing through the MPF's hierarchy.

Cross-ranking triangulation revealed broad dissatisfaction with opaque promotion procedures. Lower-ranking officers recounted exclusionary feelings due to their limited access to informal patronage structures and high-visibility roles repeatedly monopolised by male counterparts. In contrast, higher-ranking participants showed a more strategic outlook of such inhibitors, pointing to political interference and enduring practices that circumvent meritocratic successes. Despite some recognition of improvements like horizontal movement policies, both ranks agreed that these are inadequate without independent oversight.

As a recurring theme, this concern powerfully explains how rooted institutional dynamics, such as opaque evaluations and discriminatory networks continue to obscure female development in leadership. Such findings resonate strongly with GC frameworks and confirm that gender neutral policies, while praiseworthy, are not solely adequate without tackling underlying cultural and political influences that shape organisational progression.

4.3.2. Theme 2: Organisational Culture and Informal Norms

Organisational culture was described as a hidden but potent force shaping access, credibility and inclusion within the corps. Participants recounted how unwritten, gendered social norms substantially impact daily working environments, despite not being formally documented. These informal structures maintain disparities, privileging those who align with dominant expectations.

(Acker, 1990, pp. 139-158) posits that organisational structures are intrinsically gendered, embedding assumptions that promote masculine norms and behaviours. Such frameworks can marginalise individuals who do not conform to these implicit standards. (Martin, 2001, pp. 587-618) further investigates how masculinities are mobilised within organisations, often to the disadvantage of those who do not embody these traits. In policing, (Brown, 2007, pp. 199-220) demonstrates how the masculine cult within police cultures nurtures an atmosphere where female officers may feel compelled to conform to male-centric norms to gain acceptance and eventually progress, which further elaborates how gender dynamics impact the experiences and roles of policewomen (Westmarland, 2001).

‘It’s not written anywhere that you need be in the higher ranks’ good books to remain in the loop and have chance to flourish. But in reality, if you’re not known or liked by the right people, you can easily be overlooked, no matter how hard you work.’ — Lower Rank.

This type of informal exclusion was often subtle, exhibited in body language, offhand remarks and whose voices overshadowed discussions during meetings. A participant recounted scenarios of ideas or contributions being downplayed until these were put forward by their male peers.

‘I’ve pitched suggestions and had them dismissed with vague excuses, only for a male colleague to eventually present similar ideas and receive praise for them.’ — Lower Rank.

These experiences echo a wider communication prejudice, where female officers frequently had to assert themselves repetitively to have their recommendations considered. Such dynamic, is in tandem with research on workplace interactions that finds women's contributions as repeatedly devalued or unnoticed during male-oriented discourse (Ridgeway, 2009, pp. 145-160). Through time, OST reinforce these norms, favouring behaviours usually connected to masculinity such as confidence, decisiveness and dominance, at the expense of other fruitful traits like collaboration and empathy. Newly appointed recruits quickly learn that in order to fit in, they may have to adapt to this culture. One participant admitted to embracing a tougher character during the early stages of her career.

'When I joined the force, I was placed in a shift where I was in female minority. I learned to laugh off certain jokes and also embraced a tougher outlook, just so males accept me as one of the team, as otherwise I would have found it difficult to fit in.' — *Lower Rank.*

This also goes in line with the OST (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979, pp. 209-264), which points out that newcomers internalise norms to gain acceptance. Moreover, the entrenched blue brotherhood ethos in law enforcement also inclines to reward those who adhere and marginalises those who do not (Brown, 2007, pp. 205-226). Such finding is also corresponded in local research as well, where female recruits in the Maltese corps are encouraged to drop womanly attributes and over-comply with established police norms, strengthening the same exclusionary culture (Camilleri, 2021).

There was a common recommendation for progressive measures to promote inclusivity and equality. Traditional gender-specific titles, such as Woman Police Constable (WPC), have been discontinued and superseded with the universal designation of Police Constable (PC), applicable to all officers irrespective of gender. In addition, a standardised, gender-neutral uniform has been introduced across all ranks and operational units, ensuring consistency in presentation, practicality and professional identity. Furthermore, all recruitment communications, including calls for applications, are now composed using inclusive, non-gendered language, with selection criteria carefully structured to facilitate equitable access and encourage applications from a diverse range of candidates. However, various participants argued that whilst these were deemed as signs of progression, they remain largely cosmetic without accompanying cultural transformation.

'I'm pleased that under this administration women are no longer labelled WPC or WPS. It's a step in the right direction and shows progress on paper. The new titles, uniforms and inclusive terminology look good from the outside. But beyond the badge, what has really changed in practice? Certain attitudes and behaviours within the force sometimes still feel the same. Real equality isn't just about appearances, but it's about how we're valued every day.'— Lower Rank.

Essentially, eliminating overt symbols of prejudice has yet to uproot the ingrained attitudes and informal behaviours that shape gender disparities. One officer metaphorically indicated that in spite of official commitments to safeguard equality, female officers are sometimes stereotypically labelled as better suited to handle tasks considered softer or emotionally driven than their male peers.

‘Formal policies can mandate inclusion, but embedded and hidden aspects of police culture have the power to undermine these written guidelines if they are not fully internalised by all sworn members of the corps.’ — Higher Rank.

Respondents widely advocated in favour of targeted cultural transformation proposals to tackle these problems. Many recommended organising holistic gender-sensitive training and courses, tailor-made precisely for higher ranking officials who set the tone within different sections, as an initial point to challenge and change deeply rooted biases. In fact, a senior officer argued that embracing change must begin at the top, accentuating the importance of leadership commitment.

‘It is us, the higher officials that must lead by example and inspire officers falling under our responsibility to ascend further within the promotion ladder. Otherwise, it is useless if those at the top don’t buy in, as ultimately if we demonstrate inappropriate guidance, it will eventually trickle down to the lower ranks, creating a vicious cycle.’ — Higher Rank.

Simultaneously, all participants agreed that although certain biases remain and informal discrimination persist and cannot be fully eradicated, they perceived internal cultural improvements within the force. All participants acknowledge that the present MPF administration implemented a zero-tolerance approach to harassment and sexism, which they distinguished with the perceived inactions of previous MPF administrations.

In particular, an officer pinpointed that *‘the force has implemented a break the silence mechanism, providing members with a secure and anonymous platform to report various forms of misconduct. This mechanism also operates in parallel with an anti-discrimination and harassment policy aimed to guide the organisation's response to these reports in a structured manner.’ — Higher Rank.*

This theme supports RQ1 by showing that informal norms still suppress aspiring female leaders. Results on gendered informal norms, male-bonding practices and the marginalisation of female voices within the MPF, reflect wider universal trends in policing. Studies across Australia, Canada and US establish that police organisational cultures often privilege male-coded manners such as assertiveness, dominance and physicality (Brown, 2007; Rabe-Hemp, 2008, pp. 251-270). However, the MPF’s contemporary transformations, including the elimination of gendered titles, the establishment of inclusive uniform policies and gender-neutral terminology, place it on par with modernisation attempts in other European police forces. Nonetheless, such reforms are inadequate without deeper cultural change (Miles-Johnson and Fay, 2023, pp. 1-12).

The persistence of informal exclusionary practices within the MPF echoes wider patterns observed in hierarchical organisations, where formal policies frequently fail to yield meaningful change without addressing basic cultural norms (Chan, 1997, pp. 65-93) This underlines the need to complement these initiatives with targeted cultural competency training, particularly for higher ranks, as leadership plays a vital part in setting inclusive organisational tone and practice (Tyler and Huo, 2002, pp. 225-238).

A cross-rank comparison unveiled that lower-ranking officers frequently embraced masculine norms to become accepted in the workplace, shifting their behaviours to align with dominant masculine cultural codes. These comprised of laughing off certain remarks, altering communication styles and downplaying their feminine traits. Higher-ranking participants recognised the presence of symbolic improvements such as gender-neutral uniforms and titles, but emphasised that a deeper, cultural mindset remained lacking. They also emphasised upon the role that senior leadership plays in transforming entrenched attitudes and nurturing inclusivity.

Categorised as a recurring theme, this pattern confirms the theoretical assumption that OST acts as a crucial instrument in gender dynamics. The MPF's internal culture, modelled by unwritten rules and informal behaviours, regularly serves as a gatekeeper to leadership, marginalising those who deviate from prevailing masculine behaviours. These outcomes affirm that changes must widen beyond written policy into daily practice, leadership behaviour and institutional ethos.

4.3.3. Theme 3: Leadership Perceptions and Gender Bias

Respondents frequently described being judged against gendered double standards in how their leadership style or potential is perceived. Respondents expressed concern at being labelled as either soft or aggressive, depending on how strongly they aligned with conventional male leadership archetypes. To this effect, respondents felt that they had to walk a tightrope: demonstrate significant assertiveness to be viewed as competent, yet not so much that they would be criticised for unfeminine behaviour.

One particular officer confirmed that *‘sometimes when I adopt a collaborative approach I am wrongly perceived as displaying minimal authority or decisiveness. Conversely, when I assert myself and take a firmer stance, I am met with remarks that I should moderate my behaviour. This often creates a challenging dynamic, where it feels as though one is steering through a no-win scenario, criticised for being either timid or aggressive.’* — Lower Rank.

RCT (Eagly and Karau, 2002, pp. 573-598) delivers a compelling explanatory framework for these experiences. Female leaders endure penalties when there is an apparent incongruity between the female gender role and the qualities habitually expected of leaders. Interviewees shared that in the MPF, women are prejudiced either for not being masculine enough in their conduct or, in contrast, for violating prospects of femininity when they do embrace a more assertive style. This no-win contradiction confirms the gendered double bind supported in wider research (Ridgeway, 2009, pp. 145-160), where women in authority are critiqued and seen as weak whether they emphasise communal, consensus-building approaches or adopt a tougher decisive method and viewed as unfeminine or abrasive.

One senior leader pointed out a continuous effect of gendered leadership stereotypes, noting: *‘Unfortunately, there appears to be a predefined notion of the ideal leader, which often embodies traits classically associated with masculinity. However, true leadership is not about replicating the characteristics of one gender, but about authenticity and holding qualities that are inherently unique and effective in guiding others in different situations.’* — Higher Rank.

This perception was reflected by a junior ranking officer, who accentuated how organisational cultures often underpin a narrow leadership definition: *‘Sometimes, the institution at large holds a narrow picture of what constitutes true leadership, one that leaves minimal space for traditionally female strengths.’ — Lower Rank.*

Building upon this, another higher ranking officer highlighted how gendered strengths, predominantly empathy and listening are crucial in police forces: *‘Qualities such as active listening and empathy are paramount in units like Gender-Based Domestic Violence and Victim Support, where female officers constitute a larger segment compared to males. Empathy and listening skills are crucial in building trust, encouraging victim cooperation and efficiently dealing with sensitive cases. Recognising and valuing these attributes improves policing effectiveness and nurtures trust.’ — Higher Rank.*

Nonetheless, in response to these predispositions, a participant mentioned adopting coping mechanisms. These ranged from keeping opinions on hold to avoid backlash, moderating her tone and sometimes working hard to prove herself.

‘I often project a tough impression at work, but it can prove to be emotionally and mentally exhausting. I have encountered instances where male officers deliberately adjust their tone or manner of engagement when dealing with female colleagues, in ways that contrasts from their approach with male equivalents.’ — Higher Rank.

This account resonates with findings by (Phelan and Rudman, 2010, pp. 807-820) concerning backlash effects. Women who behave in customarily masculine styles may face social penalties, yet if they don't, they are perceived as weak leaders. This endless negotiation can lead to stress and burnout, as participants in this study attested.

On a positive note, respondents collectively proposed leadership development programmes and bias-awareness initiatives to counter vent these issues within the force. They further argued for a wider definition of what comprises leadership within the force, one that supports several leadership styles and underscores results and team outcomes over stylistic conformity. Others recommended creating a forum for successful female leaders, both within and outside the MPF, to share their experiences and strategies, thereby standardising diverse leadership styles. By tackling the approach of what an ideal leader looks like, these measures aim to progressively erode the embedded bias identified by RQ1. Combating this theme would not solely assist women progress further up the ranks with lesser friction but also enhances the MPF's leadership by allowing a broader spectrum of talents and approaches to flourish.

The encounters of female officers traversing gendered double standards align thoroughly with the RCT (Eagly and Karau, 2002, pp. 573-598) and echo outcomes from international policing studies. Females in policing globally often endure a delicate balancing act between assertiveness and likeability, a dynamic recognised extensively in the US (Heilman, 2001, pp. 657-674) and the UK (Silvestri, 2017, pp. 289-300). Notably, the MPF findings illustrate challenges observed in Kenya (Onyango, 2021, pp. 147-161), where female police officers face opposition when deviating from

traditionally feminine styles or embracing authoritative leadership traits. Contrastingly, Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Norway have vigorously redefined leadership paradigms within their police force to appreciate and reward collaborative, empathetic and relational leadership styles, customarily regarded as feminine (Van der Lippe et al., 2004, pp. 391-405). The MPF's passage towards stretching its definition of effective leadership signifies a critical step in the right direction but entails institutional commitment through leadership development programs that support various leadership approaches.

Both lower and higher-ranking participants intensely depicted the burden of steering gendered double standards. Lower ranks highlighted the emotional toll of being continuously judged, too passive if collaborative and too aggressive if assertive, generating a leadership paradox that compelled their capacity to lead authentically. Higher-ranking officers reiterated these matters and accentuated the necessity of redefining the MPF's leadership model to value traits such as collaboration, emotional intelligence and empathy. They supported leadership development programmes, bias-awareness training and platforms showcasing several leadership styles to wear down these prejudices.

This theme aligns precisely and recurrently with RCT, exhibiting how females in policing remain subject to gendered leadership expectations that not necessarily reflect the breath of effective leadership. The results uncover that in the absence of a transparent and more inclusive conceptualisation of leadership, women's progression into leadership positions will not solely be limited by the system, but also by perception.

4.3.4. Theme 4: Support Systems and Mentorship

Access to professional networks and mentorship were deemed as paramount to occupational progression, yet every participant admitted that it is unevenly dispersed, especially along gender and tenure parameters. Responses revealed a stark contrast: participants who joined the MPF more recently were assigned mentors, whereas those with a longer tenure, particularly women, often started their careers without any formal and informal support. A lower ranking officer described getting valuable mentorship early on, openly pointing that various female colleagues who joined before her did not have similar guidance. Similarly, a higher ranking officer credited her appointed mentor in preparation for promotion opportunities, highlighting the impact mentorship made during her career trajectory. These accounts show that mentorship initiatives have not been consistent over time and that earlier cohorts, mostly females, were systematically excluded, leading to inadequate opportunities for development and progression.

‘When I was sworn into the force, my assigned mentor helped me get accustomed to police work. Without her invaluable guidance, I’d still be stuck. Moreover, I consider myself fortunate that I had a mentor who supported me, especially since many of my female colleagues who were sworn into the force before me, did not benefit from the same support. Mentorship, being a relatively new phenomenon in the force, was not available to them.’ — Lower Rank.

‘Indeed, during my initial tenure at the lowest ranks of the organisation, my appointed mentor provided practical knowledge and instrumental experience, particularly for selection interviews,

promotion-related courses and also psychological encouragement. Undoubtedly, in the absence of mentorship, I would not have attained the current rank that I hold today.’ — Higher Rank.

Other participants uncovered a significant obstacle to progression: limited formal mentorship opportunities in the MPF. Although a mentorship programme was initiated in recent years, it was constrained to newly appointed constables during their two-year probationary stage. Participants conveyed a lack of structured mentoring for officers beyond that initial period. This absence often compelled officers to seek informal mentorship, trusting the support of sympathetic senior colleagues. Those who could not secure such guidance regularly stated feeling overlooked and hesitant about how to steer the organisational system. These findings directly connect to RQ1, as they show a systemic gap that obscures female officers’ access to progressive opportunities crucial for upward mobility. Furthermore, the reliance on informal mentorship indicates a potential approach that female officers might adopt to ascent through the ranks, albeit inconsistently, addressing RQ3.

‘Navigating career progression in the MPF sometimes feels like struggling to learn a sophisticated dance routine without being taught the whole choreography. The lack of coordinated mentorship across ranks leaves various officers struggling to find their rhythm and uncertain about how to progress effectively.’ — Lower Rank.

The feeling of being left alone was intensified for some females, having fewer exemplars in higher ranks to look up to. Compounding this issues, the QBP (Derks et al., 2016) unfolded during multiple accounts by junior officers, who perceived some high rank female officers as obstacles rather than supportive.

‘Certain female officers ahead of us seem more focused in proving their individual skills and solidifying their position, rather than offering guidance to other junior female colleagues.’ — Lower Rank.

This reflection aligns closely with the QBP provided in the literature, where females in male-dominated organisations may detach themselves from other women to safeguard their own status (Derks et al., 2016, pp. 456-469).

Nevertheless, some participants pointed out that this was not a universal behaviour and praised female superiors who actively supported them, illuminating that female role models do exist in the MPF. These manifestations imply that when senior women embrace a mentorship frame of mind, it can successfully alleviate the isolation of junior ones.

‘I feel privileged to have a female superior who not only supports me, but also openly shares both her successes and challenges. She personifies that women holding high leadership

positions can uplift others rather than competing against them, a refreshing differentiation to leadership approaches that tend to be individualistic or unsupportive.’ — Lower Rank.

Overall, participants expressed a unified consensus for planned and institutionalised mentorship programmes. They envisioned a system that would pair a subordinate female rank with a superior counterpart across all ranks, generating a culture of intentional knowledge contribution and continuous support. Participants also shared an agreement that mentors need not always be females. Male allies in senior ranks can also play a vital role in championing skilful female officers.

‘What truly matters is not the gender of a mentor, but their capability to be approachable, attuned and emphatic to the distinct challenges female officers face. Us, higher ranking officers must be willing to actively advocate for our subordinates when opportunities surface, providing meaningful advice, encouragement and experiences.’ — Higher Rank.

Given the lack of female officers in topmost ranks, most mentors in the current state are likely to be male. By also recognising that males can be exceptional mentors to female officers, a formal and structured mentorship programme would ensure that males are sensitised to the specific challenges women encounter, boosting the overall effectiveness of the mentorship process. By implementing these support measures, the MPF could facilitate confusion and isolation respondents accounted for, thereby accounting for one of the key inhibitors identified in RQ1 – the absence of mentorship and informal support networks available to female officers. Concurrently,

nurturing a mentorship culture is in itself a progression strategy, directly equating to RQ3 – which explores strategies female leaders can utilise to successfully rise through the ranks in the MPF, as participants undoubtedly identified mentorship and structured support as crucial tools for development.

The inadequate structured mentorship programmes within the MPF, particularly extending the probationary cycle, exhibits broader transnational challenges in policing. Empirical research from Canada (Huey and Ricciardelli, 2015, pp. 194-2023) and Australia (Miles-Johnson and Fay, 2023, pp. 1-12) shows that female officers commonly depend on informal mentorship or are altogether barred from support networks indispensable for career progression. However, jurisdictions such as Norway and New Zealand have longstanding holistic mentorship arrangements across all ranks, significantly contributing to the increased presence of women in leadership roles (New Zealand Police, 2021; Bjørkelo et al., 2021, pp. 74-103). The MPF's existing mentorship package for new constables is a creditable start, yet escalating this initiative to generate cross-rank mentorship and peer support agendas would equate it with worldwide best practices whilst simultaneously help counteract feelings of isolation endured by many female officers within the organisation.

Triangulated results reliably highlighted mentorship as a vital, yet inconsistent facilitator of career advancement. Lower-ranking officers saw the lack of structured support systems beyond the probationary stage and described having to obtain informal guidance or sometimes being left without any. In contrast, higher-ranking officers underlined their own reliance on mentorship and acknowledged their obligation to institutionalise such support for upcoming cohorts. Both ranks

projected formal mentorship programmes that extend throughout hierarchical ranks and pair junior with senior officers, irrespective of gender, to construct a more equitable leadership landscape.

As a recurring theme, the mentorship void within the MPF supports answers from broader policing literature: informal systems support those already connected, often relegating females. Institutionalising mentorship is therefore not just a corrective measure but also a strategic imperative for destroying systemic gender hurdles and supporting leadership development.

4.3.5. Theme 5: Work-Life Balance and Flexibility

Balancing career advancement with family obligations was universally described by participants as a tightrope walk. Comparable to many male-oriented jobs, women in policing endure structural challenges when navigating caregiving responsibilities (Williams, 2001, pp. 1-46). Several participants recounted being judged negatively for taking maternity leave or requesting flexible hours, echoing wider patterns of gendered consequences in professions (Correll et al., 2007, pp. 1297-1338), but put more acute within a police context. In particular, the perception of motherhood and caregiving is seen a sign of reduced commitment and viewed as remarkably prevalent among decision-makers within policing institutions (Brown and Gillick, 1998, pp. 122-132). While such policies are often framed as supportive of women, participants perceived them as contributing to career stagnation, generating uneasiness between formal flexibility and informal cultural expectations (Dick and Cassell, 2004, pp. 51-72).

‘Whilst acknowledging that things have now improved under the current police administration, this was not always the reality. When I resumed duties from maternity, I was informed that I would not be returning to my previous posting and will be assigned to an alternative role. Despite objecting and seeking further clarification behind the decision, this verdict was non-negotiable and not open for further consideration.’ — Lower Rank.

There were also explanations of women intentionally postponing having children, or having fewer ones than they desired, due to the heightened perception that extended time off or childcare obligations could derail their progress in the MPF:

‘After having my second newborn, I felt that I was loaded with what I would call a motherhood tax on my career. I indirectly fell off the promotion radar and while my male colleagues were accelerating forward and embracing new challenges, my own career trajectory stalled after I took maternity entitlements.’ — Lower Rank.

Despite these challenges, several participants did point out recent family-friendly policy enhancements by the MPF, such as the introduction of remote working arrangements and flexible working schemes, which were praised for their practical intent and utility. Such initiatives were perceived as significant milestones towards promoting a more supportive and adaptable working environment, especially in reaction to the dynamic needs of employees.

‘I genuinely did not expect that our police force would implement family-friendly measures such as remote working and flexi-working schemes. It came as a surprise and in my view, these have been game changers. Remote and flexible work are not merely convenient, but they have been crucial tools in enabling me to stay in this role after experiencing parenthood.’ — Lower Rank.

Whilst this testimonial underscores its capability in retaining talented females who might have stepped down due to family pressures, some participants also noted that benefitting from flexibility is still subtly viewed as a trade-off against leadership potential.

‘The chance to benefit from remote working and flexible hours is regrettably, not available for everyone. Remote working is constrained to administrative units and can only be utilised once a week, whilst flexi-work is likewise restricted dependent on the nature of the work. This creates an uneven playing field, where one female employee may take advantage of these measures, whilst another, due to the operational demands of her role, may not enjoy the same access.’ — Higher Rank.

Participants presented proposals to better reconcile work and life balance with career growth. These included extending the duration and eligibility of remote and flexi work arrangements and offering customised schedules for parents of young children, in particular those who are both members of the MPF. The overall scope of these recommendations is to dismantle both formal and informal penalties linked to caregiving obligations.

'It is essential that the organisational culture surrounding the MPF actively encourages men to utilise paternity leave and make use of flexible working arrangements to the same extent of women. Normalising men's contribution in family-related aspects would not only advance greater equity in the distribution of caregiving responsibilities but also diminish the prejudice and disproportionate burden that currently tends to be put on women.' — Higher Rank.

This idea resounds wider societal proposals and EU Directive 2019/1158/EU on WLB (European Union, 2019) which supports shared responsibilities between genders. It also resonates with the ideal worker norm discussed by (Williams et al., 2013, pp. 209-234), wherein full-time availability is mistakenly paralleled with commitment. Moreover, in tandem with RCT and ideal worker notions discussed in the literature, the endurance of an expectation that true leaders devote themselves single-mindedly to the occupation was apparent here. Challenging this wrong belief, participants asserted that it is still feasible to both a committed officer and a parent. By normalising and executing supportive measures, the force can retain competent females, which answers part of RQ3 concerning strategies for climbing the promotion ladder and safeguarding that parenthood does not unfairly disadvantage any officer, which addresses a major obstacle from RQ1.

The enduring conflict between caregiving obligations and leadership aspirations identified amongst participants is a pervasive issue across global policing contexts. Research within US and European police forces highlight that females repeatedly opt out of leadership pathways due to actual tensions between work demands and family duties (Matus, 2020; Jónasdóttir, 2021). In the UK, proactive approaches such as the Return to Investigative Practice Project (Gov.uk, 2022) and

flexible working arrangements (NPCC, 2022) have shown gaugeable success in retaining female officers and easing their resumption into leadership alleyways after parental leave. Comparatively, the MPF's implementation on WLB policies and flexible shift configurations mark a progressive and nascent phase. Implanting extended flexible working arrangements into actual policy, rather than leaving them to superior discretion, would place the MPF more closely alongside leading international police forces committed to gender-inclusive leadership development.

Respondents across ranks shared the attitude that caregiving duties, notably motherhood, were commonly penalised formally through stalled promotions and informally through perceptions of reduced commitment. Lower ranks described feeling sidelined after availing of maternity leave or enduring career stagnation, while higher ranks underlined structural limitations in flexible working arrangements and their unequal availability. They advocated for gender-neutral application of such policies and normalising paternity leave to demolish traditional caregiving expectations.

Detected as an emergent theme, this topic mirrors both international research and local contexts, where gendered societal expectations reinforce obstacles to leadership. The findings point out for a pressing requirement for the MPF to expand its flexible working patterns, not merely as a benefit but also as a structural commitment to gender equity. WLB is not solely a personal challenge but an organisational responsibility that directly affects retention and leadership progression.

4.3.6. Theme 6: Symbolism Versus Substantive Reform

Participants expressed both appreciation and scepticism toward the MPF's recent gender equality initiatives and diversity streaming. On one hand, various respondents hailed that observable changes, such as having women in high-profile positions or public-facing commitments to equal opportunity have exerted a positive impact on determination and aspirations.

'Seeing a woman in a leadership role fundamentally shifted my self-perception. It affirmed the imperativeness of representation in nurturing ambition and reshaping one's understanding of potential career trails.' — Lower Rank.

Participants across ranks agreed that seeing women attain leadership status that were previously closed off to them, for example the appointment of a Deputy Commissioner in 2021 was brought up as inspiring.

'Seeing women accomplish these substantial milestones exhibited that meaningful change is actually possible. It signalled that the door is open now in a way it had not been for preceding generations. Such an example sets an influential marker of change and provides role models whose successes illustrate that progress is both achievable and within reach.' — Higher Rank.

Contrarily, there was a pervasive and widely-recognised attitude that a void exists between the organisation's public statements and the actual daily experiences women face on the ground. Such disparity mirrors a bigger concern that the MPF's external messaging, often enclosed as progressive and inclusive, does not adequately align with or address the realities and challenges faced by females during practical situations.

***'Occasionally it feels like the MPF's obligation to gender equity is more of a box-ticking exercise rather than a legitimate institutional shift. Females appear in posters, videos and reports, but when it comes to the real decision-making spaces, there is a lack of female representation in highest quarters and our voices frequently still feel like an afterthought.'* — Lower Rank.**

A participant even doubted whether promotions of certain women in highest echelons were somewhat tokenistic, projected to fulfil external obligations or quotas rather than genuinely integrating women into leadership, raising the spectre of tokenism (Kanter, 1997). Another participant also indicated that women are only elevated to unstable leadership positions during periods of turmoil or in dysfunctional units, setting them up for intensified scrutiny and risk of failure, invoking the fear of the GCI (Ryan and Haslam, 2005, pp. 81-90).

***'At times, I wonder whether women are appointed to leadership positions that others are hesitant to take up, deemed as challenging or high-risk, so if things go wrong, it reinforces negative judgements or offers explanations for future exclusion.'* — Lower Rank.**

‘Across the years, I witnessed scenarios where female officers, after being promoted to senior roles and assigned to demanding roles or challenging environments, ultimately chose to step down from their post and quit the force after a few years. While every situation is unique, this pattern highlights the complex series of pressures and expectations that can sometimes supplement such advancements.’ — Higher Rank.

On the question of affirmative action and quotas, certain respondents conveyed uncertainties about the idea of promoting women simply to satisfy numerical outcomes, articulating concerns that such measures can inadvertently delegitimise women’s successes and underpin stereotypes of tokenism. Conversely, other participants maintained that without the establishment of quota systems, structural hurdles to gender equality might endure indefinitely. They argued that relying solely on organic progress would be inadequate to disrupt deeply entrenched patterns of discrimination in leadership and decision-making spaces.

‘We’ve been speaking about gender parity for decades but without setting clear and numerical targets, nothing really matters. Quotas have their flaws, but they impose organisations to confront their biases.’ — Lower Rank.

‘I think quotas are double-edged knives. On the one hand, they make room for women who might otherwise be overlooked. But at the same time, I wouldn’t want everybody to think I got to where I am just to tick a box.’ — Higher Rank.

To confirm that gender equity reforms exhibit actual impacts, participants emphasised the need for developing thorough evaluation frameworks. These incorporated setting specific-measurable outcomes such as increasing women in certain units or ranks, improved retention assessments or better response from female staff on inclusion and regularly auditing progress toward these targets. Moreover, they urged for transparency and accountability during the execution of reforms, for instance, publishing annual reports on promotion statistics by gender and carrying anonymous climate surveys to gauge whether women feel developments in their everyday working environment.

The sensitivity of political interference in promotions and symbolic appointments within the MPF represents a context-specific obstacle not as outstandingly documented in larger, decentralised policing systems like the US or UK. However, this challenge is often evident in smaller jurisdictions where political and organisational structures are firmly interwoven (Fleming and Lafferty, 2003, pp. 37-49). While symbolic promotions, a form of tokenism, have been critiqued globally (Kanter, 1977; Ryan and Haslam, 2010, pp. 56-64), the MPF's situation deepens this challenge due to the minimal number of senior roles available and the heightened visibility of leadership appointments in a small-scale policing atmosphere. Global benchmarks advocate for the enactment of independent promotion boards and oversight mechanisms to preserve meritocracy and alleviate the chances of political interference (Caldwell, 2024). Adopting these mechanisms would strengthen institutional credibility and nurture greater trust in promotion processes among female officers.

Both lower and higher-ranking participants deemed visible female leaders and public-facing commitments as markers to gender equity but saw symbolism an unreliable indicator of progress. Lower ranks expressed disbelief that these reforms turn into genuine inclusion, citing tokenism and GCI settings where females are promoted into unpredictable or high-risk positions. Higher ranks were markedly vocal about the deficiency of systemic evaluation frameworks and called for institutional protections such as external audits and climate surveys to ascertain reforms turn into substantive cultural changes.

This emergent theme echoes the incoherence between appearance and experience. It affirms accounts of policy-practice decoupling, showing that surface-level transformations, when not supplemented by structural change and accountability, risk boosting the very inequalities they seek to pull apart. Participants claimed that authentic transformation requires not just representation but restructuring of power and continuous commitment to equitable leadership trajectories.

4.4. Key Hurdles and Enablers of Female Leadership in the MPF

In synthesising the data collected through TA, table 3 distils key hurdles and enabling factors that shape women's leadership trajectories within the MPF. While the earlier sections of this chapter have presented an in-depth exploration of participants' views and perceptions throughout six overarching themes, this table aids as a visual synthesis that consolidates the core findings. By juxtaposing the challenges combatted by female officers with the positive developments stemming within the MPF, the table improves clarity and accessibility of findings. It also allows readers to

quickly grasp the patterns confirmed in the research, while highlighting areas where targeted interventions and policy reforms may produce the most considerable impacts.

Theme	Key Hurdles Identified	Key Enablers Identified
Career Progression and Structural Barriers	Lack of transparent promotions; informal networks; political interference; limited access to elite units	Formal policies improving transparency; new mentorship programme for recruits; horizontal movement policy introduced
Organisational Culture and Informal Norms	Gendered assumptions; exclusion from bonding activities; male-oriented leadership styles	Inclusive language in recruitment; gender-neutral titles; zero-tolerance policy on harassment
Leadership Perceptions and Gender Bias	Double-bind effect (too soft vs too assertive); misalignment with male leadership archetypes	Growing recognition of diverse leadership styles; acceptance of empathy and collaboration in specialised units
Support Systems and Mentorship	Mentorship limited to new recruits; lack of structured mentorship for other ranks	Some officers benefiting from informal mentors; increased awareness of mentorship value
Work-Life Balance and Flexibility	Caregiving pressures; societal expectations limiting mobility	Implementation of work-life balance policies; anonymous reporting platforms; flexible shifts discussed
Emergent Context-Specific Themes	Political influence in promotions; perception of symbolic promotions	Internal acknowledgment of these challenges; calls for

		independent oversight in processes
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Table 3: Summary of Key Hurdles and Enablers to Female Leadership Within the MPF

4.5. Cross-Rank Thematic Insights: Comparative Reflections Across Hierarchical Levels

Table 4 depicts a cross-rank comparative analysis of themes as conveyed by participant responses occupying both lower and higher ranks within the MPF. Its scope is to elucidate how thematic patterns are commonly or differently felt depending on the officer’s hierarchical position. This comparison enables a more granular interpretation of how shared challenges may be understood with varying degrees of agency, insight or strategic response. It also augments analytical rigour by showcasing convergence and divergence in answers, strengthening the credibility of triangulated qualitative findings.

Theme	Lower Ranks	Higher Ranks	Comparative insights
Career Progression and Structural Barriers	Acute frustration over exclusion from informal networks; perceived stagnation	Recognise incremental reforms but identify political interference and lack of transparent promotion pathways	Frustration permeates both rank groups, with increasing strategic insight at higher levels; structural barriers are persistent but interpreted with varying degrees of agency
Organisational Culture and Informal Norms	Experiences of subtle exclusion, male bonding practices and cultural adaptation	Strong emphasis on cultural leadership; recognition that inclusivity must go	All levels recognise that unwritten rules persist; low ranks adapt behaviour, while

		beyond cosmetic reforms	high ranks call for value-driven leadership
Leadership Perceptions and Gender Bias	Double-bind of being ‘too soft’ or ‘too aggressive’; struggle with role incongruity	Advocacy for redefining leadership archetypes to embrace diversity and authenticity	Universal experience of gendered bias, but increasing ability at higher ranks to challenge and redefine leadership expectations
Support Systems and Mentorship	Mentorship emerging but unevenly accessible; Queen Bee phenomenon noted	Strong advocacy for formal mentorship programmes; responsibility to mentor next generation acknowledged	Mentorship viewed as critical at all levels, though its institutionalisation remains inconsistent; high ranks positioned as catalysts for change
Work-Life Balance and Flexibility	Caregiving responsibilities perceived as career setbacks; maternity leave concerns	Recognition of systemic penalties for caregiving; calls for normalisation of paternity leave and flexible work policies	Shared concern over work-life balance; high ranks position flexibility as an organisational imperative rather than a gendered issue
Symbolic vs Substantive Reform	Appreciation of female role models but scepticism towards tokenism and glass cliff appointments	Emphasis on embedding gender equity in institutional processes; calls for external auditing and accountability mechanisms	Both ranks recognise the danger of superficial reforms; high ranks promote solutions anchored in transparency and leadership accountability

Table 4: Cross-Rank Comparative Analysis: Lower and Higher Ranks

4.6. Thematic Classification Framework: Recurring and Emergent Themes Mapped to Research Questions Addressed, Literature Review Linkage and Research Contribution

Table 5 acts as a structured synthesis that groups the six overarching themes as either recurring, aligned with established international literature, or emergent, context-specific to the Maltese policing environment. This thematic configuration not only boosts the theoretical underpinnings of the research but also highlights the distinctive organisational characteristics of the MPF. By mapping each theme to corresponding RQs and literature this table explains the study's contribution to both scholarly insight and practical policy discourse. It also substantiates the realist inquiry philosophical approach by determining how universal gender dynamics overlap with localised institutional realities.

Theme Type	Key Themes	Research Question(s) Addressed	Literature Review Linkage	Contribution to Research
Recurring	Career Progression and Structural Barriers	RQ1	Glass Ceiling (Cotter et al., 2001); Tokenism (Kanter, 1977); Role Congruity Theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002)	Confirms structural barriers prevalent in policing globally; validates theoretical frameworks within the MPF context.
Recurring	Organisational Culture and	RQ1 and RQ2	Organisational Socialisation	Reinforces how cultural conformity within

	Informal Norms		Theory (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979); Masculine Police Culture (Brown, 2007)	policing marginalises women; highlights the internalisation of hyper-masculine norms in the MPF.
Recurring	Leadership Perceptions and Gender Bias	RQ2	Role Congruity Theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002); Backlash Effect (Phelan and Rudman, 2010)	Demonstrates the double-bind faced by female leaders; reflects gendered expectations entrenched in police leadership.
Recurring	Mentorship and Support Systems	RQ1 and RQ3	Mentorship Importance in Policing (Archbold and Schulz, 2008)	Confirms need for structured mentorship to break informal male-dominated networks within police leadership pathways.
Emergent	Work-Life Balance and Flexibility	RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3	Work-Life Balance Challenges in Policing (Williams et al., 2013); EU Directive 2019/1158 on Work-Life Balance	Provides localised evidence of the gendered impact of caregiving duties on leadership progression in Malta.

Emergent	Symbolism vs. Substantive Reform	RQ1 and RQ3	Policy-Practice Decoupling (Jabbouri et al., 2022); Diversity Without Inclusion (Silvestri, 2017)	Uncovers MPF-specific gap between policy rhetoric (inclusive titles, uniforms) and real workplace cultural change; offers actionable reform recommendations.
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Table 5: Thematic Classification Framework: Recurring and Emergent Themes Mapped to Research Questions Addressed, Literature Review Linkage and Research Contribution

4.7. Conclusion

This chapter has presented an extensive analysis of six overarching themes derived from qualitative interviews with female officers in the MPF. The results expose a dynamic interchange of cultural, structural and perceptual barriers that continue to curtail women’s progression into leadership roles, despite policy-driven reforms. Participant answers were rich in both critique and cautious optimism, providing a nuanced comprehension of the contemporary gender landscape within the MPF.

Themes such as cultural exclusion, leadership bias and informal gatekeeping reflect persistent patriarchal norms, while praise for gender-neutral policies and flexible working arrangements underlines areas of improvement. The analysis also uncovered contradictions in mentorship access, the emotional toll of conforming to gendered expectations and the enduring tension between

symbolic visibility and actual influence. These themes overlap, shaping career trajectories and personalities of female officers.

The findings were further amalgamated through a structured summary of hurdles and enablers to female leadership within the MPF, offering a balanced outlook of both challenges and developments within the organisation. Moreover, participants' suggestions for raising a gender-inclusive leadership gave valuable practical comprehensions for future improvements.

Additionally, the cross-rank data triangulation analysis posed an authentic comparative viewpoint across different leadership roles within the MPF. This offered a differentiated understanding of shared experiences, demonstrating that while several barriers are universal, the perceptions and strategies espoused by officers evolve with rank. This triangulated analysis enhanced the methodical rigour of the study and ensured that diverse perspectives were realistically captured.

Overall, this chapter confirmed that addressing female leadership within the MPF requires a multi-level and systemic approach. This entails not just policy reforms but also targeted cultural transformation, structural adjustments and the institutionalisation of support mechanisms. These are indispensable in alleviating the barriers that women endure and in nurturing a broader leadership landscape for future female generations.

Having presented and critically analysed the findings drawn from qualitative research, the subsequent chapter will synthesise these findings within the broader picture of the research's questions and issues. It will systematically discuss the implications of the identified themes in line with existing theoretical frameworks, offering insightful explanations of the results. Furthermore, the fifth and final chapter will answer the three main RQs, determine how this research contributes to existing knowledge about gender equity and leadership offer practical recommendations aimed at addressing the highlighted challenges and lastly propose valuable avenues for further scholarly investigation.

5. Chapter 5 – Conclusion

5.1. Introduction

The last chapter delivers a synthesis of the study undertaken to investigate gender disparities within the MPF. Employing a rigorous qualitative methodology rooted in realist inquiry, this research offers a detailed investigation of structural, cultural and organisational obstacles, capturing nuanced views and perspectives of MPF female officers. This chapter summarises the research findings, addresses RQs and objectives, discusses key aspects, delineates academic contributions, provides recommendations, proposes avenues for further research and concludes on the importance of achieving gender equity in police leadership.

5.2. Main Research Issues

5.2.1. Research Question 1

The first RQ explored the opportunities and hurdles female officers face in achieving top leadership positions in the MPF. Findings unveiled numerous barriers to progression. Although gender-neutral titles, uniforms and inclusive recruitment terminology were implemented (Theme 6 – Symbolism vs Substantive Reform), their practical impact was limited, often cosmetic without real cultural change. The GC persists (Theme 1 – Career Progression and Structural Barriers), with many females unable to progress beyond middle ranks despite qualifications and competence.

Promotions remain shaped by informal recognition, networks and restricted access to prestigious units – form of internal gatekeeping that disadvantage women. This supports (Theme 2 – Organisational Culture and Informal Norms), where unwritten rules uphold a macho leadership archetype. Advancement often relies on informal affiliations rather than merit, reinforcing inequality.

Cultural norms further sideline women by backing traditionally masculine traits (Theme 3 – Leadership Perceptions and Gender Bias). Empathy is seen as weakness, assertiveness as aggression, capturing the double bind by RCT.

Political interference in transfers and promotions adds complexity to the Maltese context, reflecting how small-state dynamics intensify gendered exclusions. Participants also emphasised a lack of structured mentorship and sponsorship (Theme 4 – Support Systems and Mentorship), with informal support inconsistent and occasionally undercut by intra-gender tensions of the QBP.

WLB was another significant hurdle (Theme 5 – Work-Life Balance and Flexibility). Caregiving responsibilities restricted access to career-enhancing roles and reinforced perceptions that females lack commitment or ambition.

5.2.2. Research Question 2

The second RQ explored leadership qualities female officers exhibit in the MPF. Results reveal they display qualities aligned with transformational leadership – empathy, emotional intelligence, communication, collaboration, adaptability and inclusivity. These were particularly evident in (Theme 3 – Leadership Perceptions and Gender Bias), with participants highlighting their applicability in Domestic Violence and Victim Support Units, where females excel numerically.

Across ranks, participants emphasised collaborative leadership, embracing teamwork and openness over command-and-control tactics. This corresponds with authentic leadership models and contrasts with traditionally masculine traits like dominance and assertiveness, prevalent in Rapid and Special Intervention Units, where women are absent (Theme 2 – Organisational Culture and Informal Norms).

Despite their effectiveness, these qualities remain undervalued. Many participants expressed suppressing collaboration and communication, fearing assertiveness would be viewed as aggressiveness, confirming double standards and bias outlined in RCT.

Several officers emphasised resilience and adaptability, often mastered in response to organisational challenges and cultural resistance. These attributes featured prominently in (Theme 1 – Career Progression and Structural Barriers), where females adapted their leadership style to fit dominant norms.

Ultimately, female officers display empathy, emotional intelligence, collaboration, adaptability, inclusivity resilience and strong communication, qualities essential to policing but sometimes undervalued due to prevailing cultural expectations.

5.2.3. Research Question 3

The third RQ explored strategies female officers use to rise through the ranks in the MPF. Results show that officers employ a plethora of strategies. The most frequently cited encompassed:

- 1) **Balancing assertiveness with emotional intelligence** – Participants calibrated their tone and comportment to avoid being perceived as either soft or aggressive (Theme 3 – Leadership Perceptions and Gender Bias), a balance essential to gaining respect while evading criticism.
- 2) **Seeking informal mentorship** – While formal mentorship is absent, some officers identified supportive superiors who advocated for their development (Theme 4 – Support Systems and Mentorship), with informal relationships offering career guidance.
- 3) **Aligning with operational norms while retaining authenticity** – Many adapted to organisational behaviours to gain acceptance (Theme 2 – Organisational Culture and Informal Norms). However, central leadership values namely empathy and collaboration were sidelined, reflecting internal resilience.

- 4) **Navigating informal networks strategically** – Officers noted that inclusion in decisions often rested on social capital. Some females expanded their presence to counter gatekeeping (Theme 1 – Career Progression and Structural Barriers).

- 5) **Advocating for institutional change** – Senior participants increasingly recognised the boundaries of individual strategies and began championing organisational reforms like transparent promotion systems and gender-sensitive training (Theme 6 – Symbolism vs Substantive Reform).

Whilst these strategies reflect resourcefulness, they expose that personal adaptation alone is insufficient. Sustainable development entails structural reforms, aligning individual attempts with institutional accountability and inclusive leadership structures.

5.3. Contribution to Existing Knowledge, Theoretical Insights and Comparative Context

This research significantly advances academic and professional knowledge on gender leadership equity in policing by bridging empirical gaps in Malta, applying relevant theoretical contexts and situating findings within broader international frameworks.

The study offers a qualitative account into female officers' views and perceptions within the MPF, extending beyond prior Maltese research by addressing systemic leadership barriers rather than

fragmented matters such as harassment (Caruana, 2001), stress (Arnaud, 2008) or institutional sexism (Camilleri, 2021). Insights into informal gatekeeping, symbolic promotion practices and political interference expand knowhow of how gendered dynamics persist in small-state policing.

Findings were largely anchored in RCT (Eagly and Karau, 2002), which surfaced as most resonant. Female officers consistently balanced assertiveness with warmth, showing a double bind in gendered leadership expectations. This supports global literature framing leadership as culturally masculine (Ridgeway, 2009), criticising women regardless of style. The QBP (Derks et al., 2016) also applied to Malta's tightly-knit institutional setting, where senior officials seemingly distanced themselves from potential leaders, reinforcing exclusion.

The research shows successful international reforms that contrasts with Malta's experience. Norway achieved substantial female leadership through mentorship and transparent promotion systems (Bjørkelo et al., 2021). New Zealand Police institutionalised gender-sensitive leadership trails yielding near-parity at mid-to-senior ranks (New Zealand Police, 2021). Victoria Australian Police used cross-gender sponsorship and advisory networks to dismantle informal exclusion (Victoria Police, 2020). These success stories underscore Malta's lack of independent oversight, merit-based promotions and inclusive mentorship. Political interference, frequently mentioned by participants, echoes challenges in other small states like Cyprus, where tightly interwoven governance impedes impartial leadership appointments (Kamenou, 2020).

5.4. Practical Recommendations

Grounded in the study's empirical results and benchmarked against comparative international practices, several recommendations were proposed to ease practical and sustainable gender equity reforms within MPF.

5.4.1. Implementation of Independent Oversight Mechanisms

Implementing independent oversight mechanisms ascends from (Theme 1 – Career Progression and Structural Barriers) and (Theme 2 – Organisational Culture and Informal Norms), where participants highlighted opaque promotion processes and exclusion from influential informal networks. Higher echelons, also noted political interference as an obstacle to decision-making, particularly amplified in small-state contexts like Malta. To counter these challenges, the MPF should establish independent oversight bodies to audit promotions and transfers. These must include external experts and civil society representatives with no vested interests to ensure, merit-based decisions. Reviews should be guided by gender-disaggregated data, with outcomes frequently published. Embedding such mechanisms within broader governance reforms, supported by equality monitoring groups, would stimulate fairness, build trust and dismantle gendered leadership bottlenecks. This aligns with best practices from Sweden (Brå, 2023), UK (HeForShe, 2021) and Australia (Australian Federal Police, n.d.) where independent oversight has advanced gender equity in police leadership.

5.4.2. Comprehensive Mentorship and Sponsorship Initiatives

Introducing comprehensive mentorship and sponsorship initiatives emanates from (Theme 4 – Support Systems and Mentorship). While some officers benefited from informal support, many described unequal access to guidance and at times, intra-gender distancing tied to the QBP (Derks et al., 2016). This lack of support dents progression and leadership access. To address this, the MPF should implement formal mentorship and sponsorship programmes across all ranks promoting cross-gender participation and distinguishing between mentorship (guidance and development) and sponsorship (active advocacy). As career progression often relies on informal networks, structured programmes can increase transparency and equity. International initiatives underscore their prominence. The UK demonstrated formal mentoring in advancing females (Jones, 2017), whilst Gambia’s collaboration with the UK’s Thames Valley Police boosted female officers’ confidence and leadership aspirations (DCAF, 2024). Hong Kong and Singapore also ran structured mentorship and development schemes that facilitated recruitment and career growth (Hong Kong Police Force, n.d.; Singapore Police Force, n.d.). Embedding such initiatives into policy, backed by leadership, would create a more inclusive leadership pipeline in the MPF.

5.4.3. Structured Leadership Development Framework

In response to structural and cultural barriers (Theme 1 – Career Progression and Structural Barriers) hindering equitable leadership progression within the MPF, a structured leadership development framework must be institutionalised for newly promoted and high-potential leaders. This addresses absence of formal leadership mechanisms (Theme 2 – Organisational Culture and Informal Norms) that reinforce reliance on informal networks. This should incorporate inclusive

leadership, ethical decision-making, strategic thinking and emotional intelligence, qualities exhibited by female officers but undervalued in prevailing norms (Theme 3 – Leadership Perceptions and Gender Bias). Studies have shown that leadership programmes embedding these competencies challenge perceptions rooted in hyper-masculinity (Theme 4 – Leadership Bias and Gendered Expectations) and cater for diverse and equitable promotion outcomes (Pearson-Goff and Herrington, 2013, pp. 14-26) Components such as formal mentorship, leadership shadowing and peer-learning would mitigate support gaps (Theme 5 – Support Systems and Mentorship) and counter tokenism and symbolism (Theme 6 – Symbolism Versus Substantive Reform) by offering merit-based pathway to leadership. Evidence from Sweden demonstrates how leadership development opportunities, particularly when equated with cultural change and mentoring can support the inclusion of women in higher ranks (Haake, 2018, pp. 241-252). Ultimately, this operationalises the MPF’s commitment to institutional transformation by cultivating leadership excellence, advancing gender equity and ensuring a sustainable leadership pipeline reflective of the force’s evolving values.

5.4.4. Compulsory Gender Sensitivity Training

The implementation of compulsory gender sensitivity training echoes insights from the study, particularly (Theme 2 – Organisational Culture and Informal Norms and (Theme 3 – Leadership Perceptions and Gender Bias). Participants across ranks underscored how implicit informal norms and masculine-coded activities shape workplace dynamics, often disadvantaging female officers. These reinforce RCT and OST, illustrating how informal behaviours maintain exclusion. To counter internalised biases, several participants suggested mandatory training, notably for higher

ranks. Globally, similar interventions have yielded success. In Canada, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police executed obligatory gender and cultural competency training as part of reforms after scrutiny over systemic harassment, improving workplace climate and focus on diversity (RCMP, 2020). Similarly, the UK College of Policing embedded gender competence into officer development and made it a compulsory criteria in promotion assessments (College of Policing, 2018). Therefore, mandatory training tailored for all MPF members, especially decision-makers can assist shift deep-seated biases. Drawing on worldwide best practices, such training should prioritise unconscious bias, behavioural accountability and experiential learning as critical measures towards institutional inclusivity.

5.4.5. Improved Family-Friendly Organisational Policies

Strengthening family-friendly organisational measures was grounded in (Theme 5 – Work-Life Balance and Flexibility) which arose from participant accounts detailing how caregiving responsibilities clash with demanding shift patterns and promotion expectations. Several interviewees stated that despite existing policies promoting flexibility, inconsistent application reinforces perceptions that females are less committed. These experiences reflect widespread policing trends, where weak family-friendly options hinder women’s upward mobility (Burke and Mikkelsen, 2005, pp. 133-143).

Similar challenges unfold in Indian and South Korean police forces, where rigid organisational patterns and minimal institutional support deter female progression (Chaudhuri et al., 2018, pp. 16-46). In contrast, countries such as the US and Germany implemented extensive measures in

policing, such as the 32-hour workweek and compressed hour leadership roles, which improved retention and leadership diversity. For these policies to succeed, they must be institutionalised and culturally normalised. Without confronting stigma around flexible arrangements in male-subjugated environments, policies risk underuse. The MPF should not only formalise these initiatives but also implant them within its ethos, or gender parity in leadership remains elusive.

5.5. Areas for Further Research

Research findings underline areas for further academic inquiry, each having potential to expand understanding and guide future policy transformations. The succeeding sub-sections outline these crucial areas:

5.5.1. Comparative Institutional Studies

Future studies can conduct a more direct comparative analysis of international police forces. Comparative institutional research can authenticate patterns and barriers detected in this research and evaluate the efficacy of policy interpositions through different jurisdictions. Comparative studies show how different organisational cultures and policies influence the experiences and progression of female officers, highlighting the important of context-specific reforms (Roché and Fleming, 2002, pp. 256-270). These studies can clarify which structural reforms or cultural settings are flexible and which are context-dependent, contributing to the layout of tailor-made equity frameworks in policing.

5.5.2. Longitudinal and Experimental Research Studies

Whilst this research presents a snapshot of gendered experiences within the MPF, future studies can benefit from the application of both longitudinal and experimental research designs. Longitudinal studies are necessary to assess the sustained impacts of recent reforms and cultural shifts across time. Tracking career paths of female officers through extended periods allows for the assessment of whether policy interventions actually translate into enhanced retention, job fulfilment and promotion outcomes (Guajardo, 2015, pp. 20–36). In parallel, experimental studies can be instrumental in discovering biases within policing organisations, allowing researchers to isolate effects of specific variables and assess causality, offering robust signs of discriminatory patterns and the efficacy of interventions in law enforcement (Worden et al., 2020). Integrating both research designs can propose a thorough interpretation of dynamics influencing career paths of female officers in policing.

5.5.3. Exploration of Male Views and Perspectives

Given the institutional numerical supremacy of male officers in the MPF, further research can gauge their views and perspectives on gender equity. Understanding male officers' insights about female leadership, inclusivity attempts and structural reforms is fundamental to spotting causes of resistance or support. Engaging male officers in discussions about gender equity is necessary, as their experiences and attitudes substantially influence police organisational cultures (Buhrig, 2024, pp. 1-8). Such insight is especially pertinent for transforming informal cultural norms and creating environments where both genders can lead inclusively.

5.5.4. Intersectional Evaluation of Gender Equity

While this research focused mainly on gender, future studies can adopt an intersectional lens to see how various markers such as ethnicity, age, sexual orientation and parental status compound or mitigate leadership obstacles. An intersectional approach would offer a more comprehensive view of discrimination and exclusion patterns encountered by different groups of female officers (Christiani, 2017). Intersectionality is crucial in recognising how overlapping identities influence unique discrimination patterns in police forces.

5.6. Conclusion

This research has delivered an extensive nuanced exploration of various organisational challenges females in the MPF endure. It stresses the profound complexity and the imminent need of tackling gender disparities through holistic institutional reform. The research outcomes provide robust evidence-based recommendations targeted at diminishing entrenched systemic barriers and fostering substantive cultural and structural transformation within the MPF. By contributing considerably to academic scholarship and offering practical and actionable strategies, this research represents a vital step forward towards attaining genuine gender equity and organisational effectiveness in policing leadership.

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Appendix 1 – Consent Form (English Version)



Participant's Consent Form

Female Officers Behind the Badge: Uncovering the Pathways Towards Top Leadership Positions: A Study on the Malta Police Force

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Lydon Paul Spiteri. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty or prejudice. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in a face-to-face semi-structured interview in which the researcher will ask questions about my experiences, challenges and perspectives as a female police officer within the Malta Police Force. The purpose of this interview is to explore and analyse the barriers and pathways for female officers aspiring to reach top leadership positions in the organisation. I am aware that the face-to-face semi structured interview will take approximately between thirty to sixty minutes. I understand that the face-to-face semi structured interview is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.
4. I understand that my participation entails no anticipated risks. My identity will not be disclosed in any publications or outputs arising from this study (e.g., final dissertation, publications, etc.), and upon audio-recording and transcription-to-text, all interview transcripts will be pseudonymized for data protection purposes.
5. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study.
6. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
7. I understand that upon successful completion of the study, all non-published records will be securely destroyed and anonymous transcripts will not be retained after the completion of the dissertation.
8. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.

9. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.
10. I am aware that, by marking the first-tick box below, I am giving my consent for this face-to-face semi-structured interview to be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed).
- I agree to this face-to-face semi-structured interview being audio recorded.
 - I do not agree to this face-to-face semi-structured interview being audio recorded.
- Nonetheless, I do agree to taking part in the interview (without audio recording).
11. I am aware that extracts from my interview may be published (e.g., in a dissertation, academic journals) and/or presented (e.g., during conferences, meetings), either in anonymous form, or using a pseudonym (a made-up name or code, e.g., respondent A).

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Lydon Paul Spiteri
lydon.spiteri.17@um.edu.mt
+356 99527412

Dr. Luke Joseph Buhagiar
luke.buhagiar@um.edu.mt
+356 2340 6537

Appendix 2 – Consent Form (Maltese Version)



Formula ta' Kunsens tal-Parteċipanta

Female Officers Behind the Badge: Uncovering the Pathways Towards Top Leadership Positions: A Study on the Malta Police Force

Jiena, hawn taht iffirmata, nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi li nieħu sehem fl-istudju ta' Lydon Paul Spiteri. Din il-formula ta' kunsens tispjega t-termini tas-sehem tiegħi f'din ir-riċerka.

1. Inghatajt l-informazzjoni bil-miktub u/jew bil-fomm dwar l-iskop tar-riċerka; kelli l-opportunità li nagħmel il-mistoqsijiet, u għal kull mistoqsija ngħatajt tweġiba b'mod sħiħ u sodisfaċenti.
2. Nifhem ukoll li jiena libera li naċċetta li nieħu sehem, jew li nirrifjuta, jew li nwaqqaf il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi meta nixtieq mingħajr ma nagħti spjegazzjoni jew mingħajr ma niġi ppenalizzata jew min mingħajr ma niġi preġudikata. Jekk nagħzel li nipparteċipa, jaf niddeċiedi li ma nwegibx kull mistoqsija li ssirli. F'każ li nagħzel li ma nkomplix nieħu sehem fl-istudju, l-informazzjoni li tkun laħqet ingabret mingħandi tithassar sakemm ikun teknikament possibbli (ngħidu aħna, qabel ma tiġi anonimizzata jew ippubblikata), u sakemm l-għanijiet tar-riċerka jkunu jistgħu jintlaħqu u ma jintlaqtux serjament. F'dak il-każ, l-informazzjoni tiegħi tintuża u tinzamm anonima.
3. Nifhem li ġejt mistiedna nipparteċipa f'intervista semi-struttura bil-wiċċ u l-persuna li qed jagħmel ir-riċerka se jistaqsini mistoqsijiet dwar l-esperjenzi, l-isfidi u l-perspettivi tiegħi bhala uffiċjal mara fil-Korp tal-Pulizija ta' Malta. L-għan ta' din l-intervista hi li tesplora u tanalizza l-ostakli u l-passi għal uffiċjali nisa li jaspiraw li jilħqu pożizzjonijiet ta' tmexxija oġhla fl-organizzazzjoni. Jien konxja li l-intervista semi-strutturata bil-wiċċ ser tieħu bejn nofs siegħa u siegħa. Nifhem li l-intervista semi-strutturata bil-wiċċ ser ssir f'post u f'hin li jkun konvenjenti għalija.
4. Nifhem li l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi ma tinkludi l-ebda riskji mistennija. L-identità tiegħi mhux se tiġi żvelata febda pubblikazzjoni jew riżultat li johrog minn dan l-istudju (eżempju, dissertazzjoni finali, pubblikazzjonijiet, eċċ.) u wara r-rekordjar tal-awdjo u t-transkrizzjonijiet għal-kibta, it-transkrizzjonijiet kollha tal-intervisti jiġu pseudonimizzati għal skopijiet ta' protezzjoni tad-data.
5. Nifhem li bil-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi f'dan l-istudju, m'hemm l-ebda benefiċċju dirett għalija.
6. Nifhem li, skont ir-Regolament Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Data (GDPR) u l-legislazzjoni nazzjonali, għandi dritt naċċessa, nikkoreġi u, fejn hu applikabbli, nitlob li l-informazzjoni li tikkonċernani tithassar.
7. Nifhem li wara li jitlesta' dan l-istudju b'suċċess, ir-rekords kollha mhux ippubblikati se jiġu distrutti b'mod sikur u t-transkrizzjonijiet anonimi mhumiex se jinżammu wara li titlesta din id-dissertazzjoni.

8. Konxja li l-identità tiegħi u d-dettalji personali tiegħi mhux se jiġu żvelati f'xi pubblikazzjoni, rapport jew prezentazzjoni li tista' tohroġ minn din ir-riċerka.
9. Inghatajt kopja tal-ittra ta' tagħrif biex inżommha u nifhem li se ningħata wkoll kopja ta' din il-formula ta' kunsens.
10. Konxja li, jekk nimmarka l-ewwel kaxxa ta' hawn taħt, inkun qed nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi biex l-intervista semi-struttura bil-wiċċ tiġi rrekordjata bl-awdjo u maqluba f'kitba fl-istess waqt (traskrizzjoni).
 - Naqbel li l-intervista semi-struttura bil-wiċċ tiġi rrekordjata bl-awdjo.
 - Ma naqbilx li l-intervista semi-struttura bil-wiċċ tiġi rrekordjata bl-awdjo. Madankollu, naqbel li nieħu sehem fl-intervista (mingħajr ir-rekordjar tal-awdjo).
11. Konxja li siltiet mill-intervista tiegħi jistgħu jiġu jkunu ppubblikati (eż., f'teżi u ġurnali akkademiċi) u/jew ipprezentati (eż., waqt konferenzi u laqgħat), b'mod anonimu jew bl-użu ta' psewdonimu (isem ivvintat jew kodiċi, eż., parteċipant A).

Qrajt u fhimt l-istqarrijiet ta' hawn fuq, u naqbel li nipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju.

Isem il-parteeipanta: _____

Firma: _____

Data: _____

Lydon Paul Spiteri
lydon.spiteri.17@um.edu.mt
+356 99527412

Dr. Luke Joseph Buhagiar
luke.buhagiar@um.edu.mt
+356 2340 6537

Appendix 3 – Information Letter (English Version)



Information letter

28/12/2024

Dear Participant,

My name is Lydon Paul Spiteri and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a master's degree in public policy leadership. I am conducting a research study for my dissertation titled Female Officers Behind the Badge: Uncovering the Pathways Towards Top Leadership Positions: A Study on the Malta Police Force; that is being supervised by Dr. Luke Joseph Buhagiar. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study is to investigate the challenges female officers face in the Malta Police Force as they pursue leadership roles and also explore pathways to support their progression towards top leadership positions. This research seeks to discover systemic and cultural barriers, as well as strategies for empowerment and to nurture a more inclusive leadership landscape within the force. Your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of the unique challenges faced by female officers in law enforcement and propose actionable recommendations to promote gender equity within the force. Insights from this research could lead to policy reforms and cultural changes that benefit current and future generations of female officers in leadership roles. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to engage in a semi-structured, face-to-face interview during which you will share your experiences, challenges and viewpoints concerning career progression and leadership within the Malta Police Force. The interview will be conducted in a setting that is convenient for you and you will have the option to skip any questions or withdraw at any time without any penalties or prejudice. All responses will be kept confidential and used solely for research purposes. The semi-structured interview will last for approximately thirty to sixty minutes based on your availability and takes the form of a discussion.

Data collected will be treated confidentially and securely stored. Raw identifiable data will be encrypted and stored offline in a password-protected manner. Any material in hard copy form, such as consent forms or interview transcripts, will be placed in a locked cupboard. To protect participant anonymity, responses will be coded or anonymised, with identifying details removed or aggregated into broader categories where necessary.

Access to the data will be restricted to myself and my supervisor. In exceptional cases, such as during the examination process, examiners may also be granted access. All data will be used solely for the purposes of this study and handled in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the University of Malta.

The findings which emerge from this research may be published (e.g., in a dissertation, academic journals) and/or presented (e.g., during conferences, meetings). Your name (or any other identifying information) will not appear when the findings are reported.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.

If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you. Your participation entails no anticipated risks. Participation is completely voluntary, you may withdraw at any time and you can skip any questions. Confidentiality and anonymity will be safeguarded and interviews will be conducted in a private setting at a date and time that suits your convenience.

Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased.

Upon successful completion of the study, all non-published records will be securely destroyed and anonymous transcripts will not be retained after the completion of the dissertation.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, you may contact myself or my supervisor on the details provided below.

Yours Sincerely,

Lydon Paul Spiteri
lydon.spiteri.17@um.edu.mt
+356 99527412

Dr. Luke Joseph Buhagiar
luke.buhagiar@um.edu.mt
+356 2340 6537

Appendix 4 – Information Letter (Maltese Version)



Ittra ta' Taghrif

28/12/2024

Għażiża Parteċipanta,

Jiena Lydon Paul Spiteri, student fl-Università ta' Malta, u bhalissa qed insewgi kors fil-livell ta' Masters fil-Public Policy Leadership. Ir-riċerka għad-dissertazzjoni tiegħi jisimha: Female Officers Behind the Badge: Uncovering the Pathways Towards Top Leadership Positions: A Study on the Malta Police Force; t-tutor tiegħi hu Dr. Luke Joseph Buhagiar. B'din l-ittra nixtieq nistiednek tipparteċipa fir-riċerka. Hawn taħt issib aktar informazzjoni fuq l-istudju li qed nagħmel u fuq xi jkun l-involvement tiegħek jekk tiddeċiedi li tiegħu sehem.

L-għan tal-istudju hu li jinvestiga l-isfidi li l-uffiċjali nisa jiffaċċjaw fil-Korp tal-Pulizija ta' Malta hekk kif jippruvaw jilhqqu pożizzjonijiet ta' tmexxija. Barra minn hekk, tistharreġ ukoll opportunitajiet biex jiġu appoġġjati fit-triq tagħhom lejn il-quċċata tat-tmexxija. L-istudju jfittex li jiskopri ostakli sistematiċi u kulturali, kif ukoll strateġiji ta' tishih u miżuri biex jinholoq xenarju ta' tmexxija aktar inklussiva fil-korp. Sehemek jgħin biex ikun hawn iżjed għarfien dwar l-isfidi uniċi li l-uffiċjali nisa jiffaċċjaw fil-Korp tal-Pulizija u b'hekk jiġu proposti numru ta' rakkomandazzjonijiet li jistgħu jippromovu l-ekwità tal-ġeneri fil-korp. L-għarfien minn din ir-riċerka jista' jwassal għal riformi fil-politika u bidliet kulturali li jkunu ta' vantaġġ għall-uffiċjali nisa attwali u kemm dawk futuri fejn jidhlu pożizzjonijiet ta' tmexxija. L-informazzjoni kollha li tingabar fir-riċerka tintuża biss għall-fini ta' dan l-istudju.

Jekk taqbel li tipparteċipa, tintalab biex tiegħu sehem f'intervista semi-strutturata bil-wiċċ, waqt li taqsam l-esperjenzi, l-isfidi u l-opinjoni tiegħek dwar l-iżvilupp tal-karriera u t-tmexxija fil-Korp tal-Pulizija ta' Malta. L-intervista se ssir f'post li jkun konvenjenti għalik u inti għandek il-possibilità li tista' taqbeż xi mistoqsijiet jew tieqaf milli tipparteċipa fi kwalunkwe mument mingħajr ebda penalità jew preġudizzju. Ir-risposti kollha se jibqgħu kunfidenzjali u jintużaw biss għal scopijiet ta' riċerka. L-intervista semi-strutturata se ddum bejn tletin u sittin minuta skont id-disponibilità tiegħek u tiegħu l-forma ta' diskussjoni.

L-informazzjoni miġbura se tiġi trattata b'kunfidenzjalità u maħżuna b'mod sikur. Id-data identifikabbli se tiġi kkriptata u maħżuna offline b'format protett bil-password. Kull materjal, bħal formoli ta' kunsens jew transkrizzjonijiet tal-intervista, se jitqiegħedu f'kabinett magħluq. Biex tiġi protetta l-anonimità tal-partiċipanti, ir-risposti se jkunu kodifikati jew anonimizzati, fejn dettalji identifikabbli jitneħħew jew jiġu aggregati f'kategoriji aktar wiesgħa fejn ikun meħtieġ.

L-aċċess għad-data se jkun ristret għalija u s-supervizur tiegħi. F'każijiet eċċezzjonali, bħal proċess tal-eżami, l-eżaminaturi jistgħu wkoll jingħataw aċċess. Id-data kollha se tintuża biss għall-iskopijiet ta' dan l-istudju u tiġi trattata skont il-linji gwida etiċi tal-Università ta' Malta.

Ir-rizultati li joħorġu minn din ir-riċerka jistgħu jkunu ppubblikati (eż., f' tezi u ġurnali akkademiċi) u/jew ipprezentati (eż., waqt konferenzi u laqgħat). Ismek (jew kwalunkwe informazzjoni oħra li tista' twassal biex tinkixef l-identità tiegħek) mhux se jidher meta jithabbru r-rizultati.

Il-partecipazzjoni tiegħek f'dan l-istudju tkun għalkollox volontarja; fi kliem ieħor, inti libera li taċċetta jew tirrifjuta li tiegħu sehem, mingħajr ma tagħti raġuni. Inti wkoll libera li twaqqaf il-partecipazzjoni tiegħek fl-istudju meta tixtieq, mingħajr ma jkollok tagħti spjegazzjoni u mingħajr ebda riperkussjoni. Jekk tagħzel li tirtira mir-riċerka, l-informazzjoni li tkun laqgħet ittiegħdet fl-intervista miegħek tithassar sakemm ikun teknikament possibbli (ngħidu aħna, qabel ma tiġi anonimizzata jew ippubblikata), u sakemm l-għanijiet tar-riċerka jkunu jistgħu jintlaħqu u ma jintlaqtux serjament. F'dak il-każ, l-informazzjoni tiegħek tintuża u tinzamm anonima.

Jekk tagħzel li tippartecipa, jekk jogħġbok innota li ma hemm l-ebda benefiċċju dirett għalik. Il-partecipazzjoni tiegħek ma tinkludix riskji mistennija. Il-partecipazzjoni hija kompletament volontarja, tista' tieqaf fi kwalunkwe ħin u tista' taqbez kwalunkwe mistoqsija. Il-kunfidenzjalità u l-anonimità se jiġu mħarsa u l-intervisti se jsiru f'ambjent privat f'data u ħin li huma konvenjenti għalik.

Bħala partecipanta, għandek id-dritt, skont ir-Regolamenti Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Data (GDPR) u l-leġislazzjoni nazzjonali, li taċċessa, tikkoreġi u fejn hu applikabbli, titlob li l-informazzjoni li tikkonċernak tithassar.

Wara li jitlesta dan l-istudju b'suċċess, ir-rekords kollha mhux ippubblikati se jiġu distrutti b'mod sikur u t-transkrizzjonijiet anonimi mhumiex se jinżammu wara li jitlesta din id-dissertazzjoni.

Qed ngħaddilek kopja ta' din l-ittra biex iżzommha bħala referenza.

Grazzi tal-ħin u l-kunsiderazzjoni tiegħek. Għal iżjed informazzjoni, tiddejjaqx tikkuntattja lili jew lit-tutor tiegħi. Id-dettalji tagħna ssibhom hawn taħt.

Napprezza jekk tikkunsidra din it-talba.

Tislijiet,

Lydon Paul Spiteri
lydon.spiteri.17@um.edu.mt
+356 99527412

Dr. Luke Joseph Buhagiar
luke.buhagiar@um.edu.mt
+356 2340 6537

Appendix 5 – Permission Letter (English Version)



Request for permission to conduct research

Malta Police Force
Police General Headquarters
St. Calcedonius Square
Floriana, FRN 1530, Malta

28/12/2024

Dear Malta Police Force,

My name is Lydon Paul Spiteri and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master's Degree in Public Policy Leadership. I am conducting a research study for my dissertation titled *Female Officers Behind the Badge: Uncovering the Pathways Towards Top Leadership Positions: A Study on the Malta Police Force*. This study aims to investigate the challenges female officers face in the Malta Police Force as they pursue leadership roles and also explore pathways to support their progression towards top leadership positions. This research seeks to discover systemic and cultural barriers, as well as strategies for empowerment and to nurture a more inclusive leadership landscape within the force. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Luke Joseph Buhagiar.

I am hereby seeking your permission to conduct research involving interviews with female officers from the Malta Police Force. My data collection methods will involve semi-structured, face-to-face interviews where participants will share their experiences and viewpoints regarding career progression and leadership within the force. The interviews are expected to last approximately thirty to sixty minutes, depending on the depth of the responses provided and participant availability. Data will be securely stored and used exclusively for research purposes to enrich understanding and promote gender equity in leadership roles within the Malta Police Force.

The interviews will be conducted with female officers across different ranks within the Malta Police Force, ensuring fair representation from both higher-ranking and lower-ranking positions. The aim is to include at least one interview per rank to capture diverse outlooks, experience and challenges female officers endure at different hierarchical levels, where the estimated number of participants will range between a minimum of six and a maximum of eight participants.

Participation will be entirely voluntary and participants will be free to withdraw at any point, without any repercussions. Data collected will be pseudonymised to protect the identities of participants. Participant identity will not be disclosed in any publications or outputs arising from this study (e.g., final dissertation, publications, etc.), and upon audio-recording and transcription-

to-text, all interview transcripts will be pseudonymized for data protection purposes. All data will be securely stored in password-protected digital files. Only my supervisor, examiners and I will have access to this data. The data will be used solely for research purposes and retained for the period stipulated by University of Malta research ethics guidelines, where upon completion of the study all records will be securely destroyed.

Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor; both our contact details are provided below.

Thank you for your kind consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Lydon Paul Spiteri
lydon.spiteri.17@um.edu.mt
+356 99527412

Dr. Luke Joseph Buhagiar
luke.buhagiar@um.edu.mt
+356 2340 6537

Appendix 6 – Permission Letter (Maltese Version)



Talba għall-permess biex issir riċerka

Korp tal-Pulizija ta' Malta
Kwartieri Ġenerali tal-Pulizija
Pjazza San Kalċedonju
Floriana, FRN 1530, Malta

28/12/2024

Għażiż Korp tal-Pulizija ta' Malta,

Jiena Lydon Paul Spiteri, student fl-Università ta' Malta, u bhalissa qed insegwi kors fil-livell ta' Masters fil-Public Policy Leadership. Ir-riċerka għad-dissertazzjoni tiegħi jisimha: Female Officers Behind the Badge: Uncovering the Pathways Towards Top Leadership Positions: A Study on the Malta Police Force. L-għan tal-istudju hu li jiġu identifikati l-isfidi li jaffaċċjaw l-uffiċjali nisa fil-Korp tal-Pulizija ta' Malta waqt li qed ifittxu rwoli ta' tmexxija, kif ukoll li jiġu esplorati modi biex tiġi appoġġjata l-progressjoni tagħhom lejn pożizzjonijiet għolja ta' tmexxija. It-tutor tiegħi hu Dr. Luke Joseph Buhagiar.

Qed niktiblek biex nitlobok il-permess inwettagħ riċerka li tinvolvi intervisti mal-uffiċjali nisa fil-Korp tal-Pulizija ta' Malta. Il-metodi ta' ġbir tad-data tiegħi jinkludu intervisti semi-strutturati u wiċċ imb wiċċ, fejn il-partecipanti se jaqsmu l-esperjenzi u l-fehmiet tagħhom dwar il-progressjoni fil-karriera u t-tmexxija fil-Korp. Il-ġbir tal-informazzjoni se jinvolvi intervisti li mistennija jdumu bejn tletin u sittin minuta, skont it-tip tar-risposti mogħtija u d-disponibbiltà tal-partecipanti. Id-data se tinzamm b'mod sigur u tintuża esklussivament għal skopijiet ta' riċerka biex tibni iżjed għarfien u tippromwovi l-ekwità tal-ġeneri f'pożizzjonijiet ta' tmexxija fil-Korp tal-Pulizija ta' Malta.

L-intervisti se jsiru ma' uffiċjali nisa li jokkupaw gradi differenti fi hdan il-Korp tal-Pulizija ta' Malta, sabiex tiġi żgurata rappreżentanza ġusta kemm minn dawk f'karigi oġhla kif ukoll minn dawk f'karigi aktar baxxi. L-għan hu li tiġi inkluża mill-inqas intervista waħda għal kull grad, sabiex jingabru prospettivi varji, esperjenzi differenti u sfidi distinti li jiltaqgħu magħhom uffiċjali nisa f'livelli differenti tal-ġerarkija. In-numru stmat ta' partecipanti se jvarja bejn minimu ta' sitta u massimu ta' tminn partecipanti.

Il-partecipazzjoni f'dan l-istudju hija għalkollox volontarja u l-partecipanti se jkunu liberi li jieqfu jiehdu sehem meta jixtiequ, mingħajr ebda riperkussjoni. L-informazzjoni miġbura se tkun psewdonimizzata biex jiġu protetti l-identitajiet tal-partecipanti. L-identitajiet tal-partecipanti mhix se jiġu żvelati fi kwalunkwe pubblikazzjoni jew riżultat li jirriżulta minn din l-istudju (eż.

dissertazzjoni finali, pubblikazzjonijiet, eċċ.). Barra minn hekk, wara li jsir ir-rekordjar tal-awdjo u t-traskrizzjonijiet għal-kitba, it-traskrizzjonijiet tal-intervisti kollha se jiġu psewdonimizzati għal skopijiet ta' protezzjoni tad-data. It-tutor, l-eżaminaturi u jiena biss se jkollna aċċess għal din l-informazzjoni. Id-data kollha se tinżamm b'mod sigur f'files diġitali protetti b'password. Aċċess għal din id-data se jkun limitata għalija, is-supervizur tiegħi u l-eżaminaturi. Id-data se tintuża biss għal skopijiet ta' riċerka u tinżamm għal perjodu stipulat mill-linji gwida tal-etika tar-riċerka tal-Università ta' Malta, fejn wara li jitlesta l-istudju, ir-rekords kollha se jiġu meqruda b'mod sigur.

Għal iżjed informazzjoni, tiddejjaxx tikkuntattja lili jew lit-tutor tiegħi. Id-dettalji tagħna ssibhom hawn taħt.

Napprezza jekk tikkunsidra din it-talba.

Tislijiet,

Lydon Paul Spiteri
lydon.spiteri.17@um.edu.mt
+356 99527412

Dr. Luke Joseph Buhagiar
luke.buhagiar@um.edu.mt
+356 2340 6537

Appendix 7 – Interview Questions (English Version)

1. Can you explain your career journey within the Malta Police Force, including any key milestones or turning points?

Rationale: This question aligns with the career progression theme highlighted in both research objectives and methodology. It invites reflective answers and gives participants room to detect essential career moments, allowing them to understand how gender dynamics may have influenced their trajectories.

2. What do you perceive as the main structural or institutional barriers that hinder women from progressing into leadership roles within the Malta Police Force?

Rationale: Anchored in the first research objective and the concepts of the Glass Ceiling and Organisational Socialisation Theories, this question revolves around systemic factors, including promotion processes, unit assignments or lack of mentorship, key issues underlined throughout chapters 1 and 2.

3. In your experience, how does the culture within the Malta Police Force support or discourage women in leadership?

Rationale: This question draws from Organisational Socialisation and Role Congruity Theories addressing the concerns of informal norms, workplace dynamics and cultural expectations on leadership. It mirrors focus on workplace cultures as discussed expansively in the second chapter.

4. Have you ever encountered situations where your leadership style was perceived differently because of your gender? How did you respond to those perceptions?

Rationale: This question explores Role Congruity Theory and lets participants to unpack gendered perceptions of leadership behaviour, whether they were deemed as either too soft or too assertive. It also captures coping strategies used in such settings.

5. Do you feel that women in higher ranks within the Malta Police Force act as mentors or role models? Why or why not?

Rationale: Addressing the Queen Bee Phenomenon, this question discovers whether senior female officers inspire or distance themselves from junior women. It inquires into intra-gender relationships and the presence or lack of support structures.

6. Can you describe any moments where you felt encouraged or supported in your career progression, either formally or informally?

Rationale: To balance the barriers-focused questions, this invites debate on facilitators of career progression such as mentorship, leadership programs or encouraging supervisors. It echoes the second research objective on identifying opportunities.

7. How do caregiving responsibilities or expectations outside of work impact your professional ambitions or ability to take on leadership roles?

Rationale: This directly engages with work-life balance challenges and societal expectations, as underscored in the literature review. It also aligns with European Union Directive 2019/1158/EU on work-life balance and Maltese gender equality strategies referenced in chapter 1.

8. What are your thoughts on symbolic promotions? Do you believe women are ever placed in leadership roles to meet diversity quotas rather than based on merit?

Rationale: This explores Tokenism Theory and the Glass Cliff concept. It allows respondents to reflect critically on whether institutional change is genuine or performative, which ties into the analysis of policy-practice decoupling in the Malta Police Force.

9. In your view, what leadership traits or qualities are most effective within the Malta Police Force and how do you see yourself aligning or deviating from these expectations?

Rationale: Connected to the second primary research question about leadership qualities of female officers, this encourages self-reflection and ties back to insights on ideal leadership through a gendered lens.

10. What changes or initiatives do you believe would most effectively support women in advancing to leadership roles in the Malta Police Force?

Rationale: This question supports the third research objective, developing practical recommendations. It captures participants' insider perspectives on actionable reforms such as mentorship schemes, family-friendly policies or targeted leadership training.

Appendix 8 – Interview Questions (Maltese Version)

1. Tista' tispjega l-vjaġġ tal-karrieta tiegħek fil-Korp tal-Pulizija ta' Malta, inkluż kwalunkwe mument importanti jew punti ta' bidla?

Hsieb: Din il-mistoqsija tikkorrispondi mat-tema tal-progress fil-karriera kif diskussa kemm fl-ghanijiet tar-riċerka u l-metodoloġija. Din tistieden twegibiet riflessivi u taġhti spazju lill-partecipanti biex jidentifikaw mumenti essenzjali fil-karriera, u b'hekk jifhmu kif id-dinamika tal-generu setgħet influwenzat il-vjaġġ taġħhom.

2. X'tahseb li huma l-ostakli strutturali jew istituzzjonali primarji li jkexxlu lin-nisa milli jipprogressaw għal rwoli ta' tmexxija fil-Korp tal-Pulizija ta' Malta?

Hsieb: Ispirata mill-ewwel għan tar-riċerka u l-kunċetti tal-*Glass Ceiling* u *Organisational Socialisation*, din il-mistoqsija tiffoka fuq fatturi sistemici bħal proċessi ta' promozzjoni, ħatriet f' taqsimiet jew nuqqas ta' munieraġġ, fatturi prinċipali diskussi tul kapitli 1 u 2.

3. Fl-esperjenza tiegħek, kif thoss li l-kultura fil-Korp tal-Pulizija ta' Malta tappoġġja jew tiddiskoraġġixxi n-nisa fit-tmexxija?

Hsieb: Ispirta minn teoriji bħal *Organisational Socialisation* u *Role Congruity*, din il-mistoqsija tindirzza fatturi bħal normi informali, dinamiċi fuq il-post tax-xoġhol u aspettativi kulturali fuq tmexxija. Din tipproduċi ħarsien dwar il-kulturi fuq il-post tax-xoġhol kif diskuss b'mod espansiv fit-tieni kapitolu.

4. Qatt iltqajt ma' sitwazzjonijiet fejn l-istil ta' tmexxija tieghek gie pperċepit b'mod differenti minhabba l-ġeneru tieghek? Kif irregixxejt ghal dawn il-perċessjonijiet?

Hsieb: Din il-mistoqsija tesplora t-teorija ta' *Role Congruity*, u tippermeti lill-parteċipanti jesploraw perċessjonijiet ta' tmexxija marbuta mal-ġeneru, jekk jitqiesu bhala wisq ġentili jew wisq awtorevoli. Din tinkludi wkoll strateġiji użati ta' kif jiġu ttrattati dawn is-sitwazzjonijiet.

5. Thoss li n-nisa f'karigi gholjin fil-Korp tal-Pulizija ta' Malta jaġixxu bhala mentors jew mudelli ta' aspirazzjoni? Ghaliex iva jew le?

Hsieb: Ippreżentat mill-fenomeni tal-*Queen Bee*, din il-mistoqsija tesplora jekk ufiċċjali f'karigi gholjin jgħinux jew jiddistakkawx ruħhom minn ufiċċjali f'karigi inqas. Din tesplora r-relazzjonijiet ta' intra-ġeneru u s-sistemi ta' appoġġ jew in-nuqqas tagħhom.

6. Tista' tiddeskrivi xi mumentu fejn hassejtek imhegga jew appoġġjata fil-progress tal-kariera tieghek, kemm formalment kif ukoll informalment?

Hsieb: Bhala bilanċ għall-mistoqsijiet dwar l-ostakli, din toħloq dibattitu dwar l-fatturi li jiffacilitaw il-progress bhal mentoraġġ, programmi ta' tmexxija jew superviżuri li jinkoraġixxu. Din tirrifletti it-tieni objettivi tar-riċerka dwar l-identifikazzjoni ta' opportunitajiet.

7. Kif ir-responsabbiltajiet tal-kura jew l-aspettativi barra mix-xogħol jimpattaw l-ambizzjonijiet professjonali tieghek jew l-kapaċita' li tiehu rwoli ta' tmexxija?

Hsieb: Din direttament tinvolvi l-isfidi ta' bilanċ bejn hajja u xogħol, kif ukoll l-istennijiet tas-soċjeta', kif diskuss fir-reviżjoni tal-letteratura. Din qiegħda wkoll f'parallel mad-direttiva 2019/1158/EU tal-Unjoni Ewropeja draw il-bilanċ bejn xogħol u hajja kif ukoll strateġiji nazzjonali tal-ugwaljanza tal-ġeneru msemmija f'kapitlu 1.

8. X'inhuma l-hsibijiet tieghek dwar promozzjonijiet simboliċi? Tahseb li n-nisa kultant jitpoġġew fi rwoli ta' tmexxija biex jintlahqu kwoti ta' diversita' aktar milli fuq mertu?

Hsieb: Din tesplora t-teorija *Tokenism* u l-kunċett ta' *Glass Cliff*. Din tagħti lok għall-partecipanti biex jirriflettu b'mod kritiku dwar jekk il-bidla istituzzjonali hijiex ġenwina jew performattiva, li tgħaqqad mal-analiżi tal-politika u l-prattika fil-Korp tal-Pulizija ta' Malta.

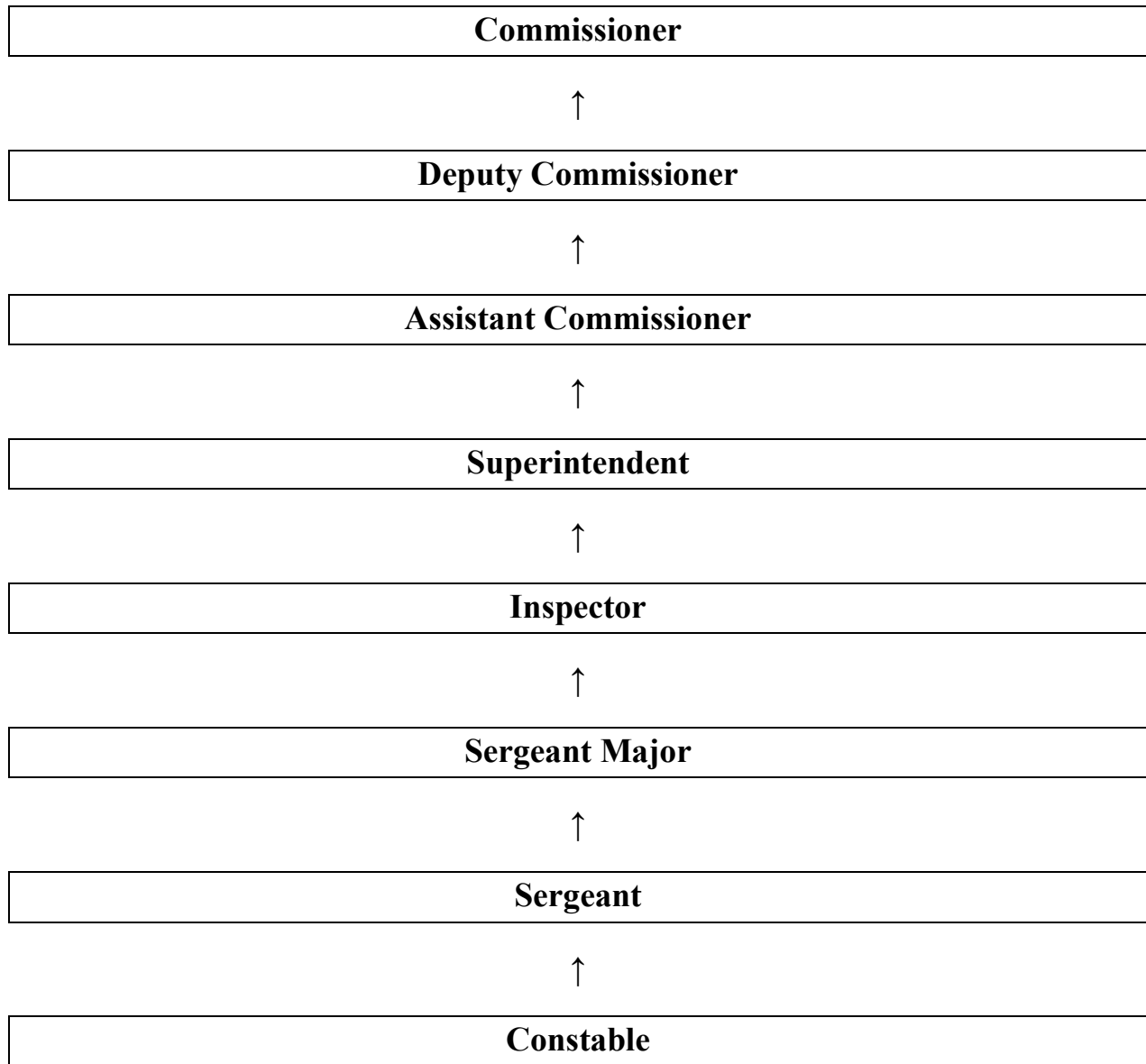
9. Fl-opinjoni tieghek, liem huma l-karatteristiċi jew il-kwalitajiet tat-tmexxija l-izjed effettivi fil-Korp tal-Pulizija ta' Malta, u kif tara lilek inniffsek tikkorrispondi jew tiddevja minn dawn l-aspettattivi?

Hsieb: Marbuta mat-tieni mistoqsija tar-riċerka dwar il-kwalitajiet tat-tmexxija tan-nisa, din tteġġeg riflessjoni fuq livell personali u tqabbad lura mal-perċessjonijiet ta' tmexxija ideali mill-lenti ta' ġeneru.

10. X'tibdil jew x'inizjattivi tahseb li jkunu l-aktar effettivi biex jappoġġjaw lin-nisa biex jadvanzaw għal irwoli ta' tmexxija fil-Korp tal-Pulizija ta' Malta?

Hsieb: Din il-mistoqsija tappoġġja t-tielet objettiv tar-riċerka u tohloq rakomandazzjonijiet prattiċi. Din tiġbor perspettivi interni mill-partecipanti dwar bidliet prattiċi bħal skemi ta' mentoring, politika favur il-familja jew taħrig immirat għal tmexxija.

Appendix 9 – Rank Structure of the Malta Police Force



Appendix 9: This basic hierarchical structure of the Malta Police Force outlines the official ranks in ascending order from the lowest to the highest. It serves as a visual representation of the internal chain of command, starting from Constable at the base level and progressing upward to the highest rank of Commissioner. The hierarchy reflects the formal organisation and progression levels within the Malta police force.