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Postfeminist Career Retreatism Among Women Leaders in the Public Sector

Joan Ballantine, Corina Sheerin and Patricia Lewis

Abstract

We examine how postfeminism with its emphasis on individualism, empowerment and the assumption that equality is achieved, is implicated in how women leaders respond to a gendered work culture. Drawing on interviews with women leaders in the Northern Ireland (NI) public sector, and through thematic analysis, we demonstrate how they enact and resent postfeminist norms, rejecting postfeminist career promises. We develop the notion of postfeminist career retreatism to encapsulate how despite experiences of a gendered culture, they locate the decision to retreat from their career within themselves. Consequently, external barriers to equality are translated into individual shortcomings, leaving the discriminatory status quo intact.

Keywords: Women leaders, neoliberalism, postfeminism, postfeminist career retreatism; discriminatory status quo

Introduction

This article examines how postfeminism as a cultural phenomenon with its emphasis on individualism, choice, and personal achievement alongside the assumption that gender equality has been achieved, is implicated in the way elite women leaders working within the NI public sector interpret and respond to a gendered work culture. Rather than feeling a sense of empowerment derived from their individualised, personal negotiation of gendered constraints, we reveal how they experience disappointment and discomfort within their leadership roles. This unease moves them to engage in what we call postfeminist career retreatism characterised by a withdrawal from seeking more senior positions.

Increasing women's presence in leadership positions has been an important element of gender equality initiatives in recent years, with organisations and governments actively supporting efforts to grow the number of women leaders (Williamson et al., 2020). Yet, despite the positive promotion of women's leadership skills, leadership remains a male preserve (van't Foot-Diepeveen et al, 2021; Diehl and Dzubinski, 2024). Reflecting this, just over 10% of all

Fortune 500 companies were led by women as of January 2024 (Hinchliffe, 2023; Grant Thornton, 2024). Similarly, within public sector leadership, while women make up 46% of public administration globally, only 30% of all senior decision-making roles are occupied by women (United Nations, 2021; Women Leaders Index, 2020).

Within the public management literature, leadership and gender has been a topic of research interest. Increasing the numerical representation of women in leadership has been a key concern of this research, with a range of theoretical perspectives – gender stereotypes, role incongruity, lack of role models, glass ceiling, glass cliff, (re)doing gender – being drawn on to explain women’s absence (Funk et al, 2023; Hunt et al, 2023; Pandey et al, 2023; Rabe-Hemp et al, 2023; Williamson and Colley, 2023). Additionally, once in a leadership position, ‘...a significant body of research suggests that followers have deeply gendered responses to leaders’ (Pandey et al, 2025: 1786). As most research on the gendered responses to women leaders and their leadership focuses upon the private sector, further nuanced understanding of the gendered experience of leadership for women in the public sector is warranted.

To contribute to understanding of women’s leadership experiences in the public sector, we examine the influence of contemporary gender norms in NI. We position our study within the contours of the analytic category of postfeminism, to interrogate the gendered normative regime surrounding leadership. We critically engage with postfeminism as a patterned yet contradictory cultural phenomenon that has reconfigured and continues to shape contemporary gender relations in general and women’s experiences in leadership roles in particular (Wright, 2024). In doing this we direct attention at how postfeminism plays out in the NI context. While manifestations of postfeminism in the NI context have much in common with dominant, universalised accounts of this cultural phenomenon, the contextual specificity of NI, particularly in relation to gender, highlights how the prevailing masculinity of public sector leadership perpetuates a gendered work culture. Accordingly, while we present our analysis of

women leaders' response to this gendered work culture within the broad framework of postfeminism, we also consider how its general elements mesh with the contextual conditions of NI (Henderson and Taylor, 2020).

Through its constituent elements of feminism and neoliberalism, postfeminism is understood in terms of the emphasis it places on the feminist values of choice, empowerment and agency, alongside the importance it attaches to the neoliberal celebration of individual volition and self-transformation (Lewis et al, 2022). In mobilising postfeminism as an analytic category, we are concerned with understanding the experiences of women leaders as they navigate leadership in the public sector at a time when postfeminism promises that to progress, all women need is to be more confident (Orgad and Gill, 2022), self-disciplined (Gill, 2017) and continually engage in practices of physical and psychic self-transformation (Benschop and Lewis, 2025). On the surface, adherence to postfeminist values seems to provide career possibilities for women, opening up historically closed off activities such as leadership. Yet, postfeminism is suffused with contradictions such as the inconsistency between the belief that getting promoted and moving up through an organization is an obviously 'good thing' and something we should all want. However, in reality, promotion is not fully accessible to everyone, particularly women, who must individually manage a gendered workplace. Problematising the experience of this type of contradiction, the current study focuses on 24 interviews with a very specific group of leaders within the NI public sector - those women who already occupy senior positions, just below the role of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) or equivalent, but who have decided not to seek further promotion. We ask the following research questions: how do senior women experience leadership in the public sector and what effect do leadership experiences have on their desire to seek further career progression?

Our research makes several contributions to the public sector management literature. First, we mobilise postfeminism as a theoretical frame to examine women's experiences as leaders in the public sector where postfeminist norms have reconfigured the pursuit of equality as an individual endeavour removed from the sphere of political regulation. Second, we present the concept of postfeminist career retreatism which encapsulates the limits of an individualised approach to dealing with a gendered work environment. Underpinned by a postfeminist logic, women leaders locate the source of their struggles and the decision to retreat from their career within themselves and not within the wider gendered context. Third, we contextualise our use of postfeminism to the NI public sector, revealing how postfeminist norms in the NI context perpetuate gender inequalities. We reflect on the repercussions caused by the loss of female talent and the entrenchment of men in leadership positions.

Neoliberalism, Postfeminism and the Public Sector

Neoliberalism, the Public Sector and Gender

This research is set within the public sector, a space where leaders operate not just within an organisational context but also in a political, social and constitutional setting. Influenced by the collective interests of society alongside a politically led agenda, public sector leaders are often faced with organisational goals which are complex and ambiguous (Backhaus et al. 2022). Over time, public administrations have undergone significant reform moving towards market-oriented approaches known as New Public Management (NPM), an approach significantly criticised under the umbrella term of post-NPM. Critics of NPM argue that it is overly complex and fragmented, placing efficiency and performance above 'equity and democratic values' (Reiter and Klenk, 2019, 12). Alternatives such as New Public Governance (NPG) emphasise collaboration, viewing public service as a pluralistic process involving multiple stakeholders (Osborne, 2010). Similarly, Public Value Management (PVM)

emphasises the goal of public value creation away from a narrow focus on efficiency and performance (O’Flynn, 2021). Aligned with these changes, shared forms of leadership and concern for the common good are emphasised (Crosby and Bryson, 2018).

While NPG and PVM both promote collaboration, they continue to be shaped by neoliberalism which has been described as ‘the defining political-economic paradigm of our time’ (Bessant et al., 2015: 419). Post-NPM critiques do not favour the ‘total negation’ of NPM practices around issues such as performance, but rather what emerges is a ‘variation of the old model created by adding new structures and instruments without abolishing the previous ones’ (Reiter and Klenk, 2019: 25). Accordingly, neoliberalism continues to provide ‘the ideological framing for societal level changes’ (McDonald-Keer and Boyce, 2023: 202). Thus, social relationships remain shaped and configured by market-centric ideals while political judgements are influenced by economic rationalities (Kann-Rasmussen, 2024; Ravenswood, 2023).

Despite being framed as gender neutral and rational, NPM and post-NPM approaches lead to gendered effects which exacerbate gender inequality with male and female public sector leaders experiencing leadership in distinctly different ways (Kyla-Laaso et al., 2021). Leadership identity under the NPM regime ascribes and elevates ‘macho masculinity emphasising a ruthless, competitive and individualistic subject position and the promotion of competitive presenteeism’ (Davies and Thomas, 2002: 471). Similarly, while NPG has a dominant rhetoric of collaboration and inclusion, it often fails to consider the underlying gendered assumptions related to participation and decision-making (Kann-Rasmussen, 2024). Williamson and Colley (2023) argue that public sector reforms underpinned by neoliberalism have undermined advances to achieve gender equality. Initiatives such as flexible work arrangements sit alongside an ‘always on’ culture and expectations of unlimited availability. This applies across different national contexts with empirical studies in Israel (Lavee and Kaplan, 2022) and Indonesia (Thamrin et al, 2023) demonstrating that neoliberal reforms lead

to gendered outcomes for women. Yet it is assumed that gender equality has been achieved, and women can individually address experiences of discrimination by developing and implementing a range of coping strategies. This paradox, evident within many forms of contemporary organisation, has been revealed through the analytic category of postfeminism which is closely aligned with neoliberalism. Gill (2007: 164) asserts that ‘the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism’. Gill (2016) describes postfeminism as a type of gendered neoliberalism where the characteristics of the latter are articulated through the feminist principles of autonomy, freedom and choice. Through its connection to neoliberalism, postfeminism is an element of mainstream public sector transformation that has significant implications for women leaders, within what is traditionally, and remains, a masculine domain. Accordingly, to gain further understanding of the lived experiences of women leaders within the public sector, we draw on postfeminism and its alignment with neoliberalism as our theoretical frame.

Neoliberalism and Postfeminism

Both neoliberalism and postfeminism work by influencing the behaviour and psyche of individuals, configuring them as human capital, through the extension of a market logic to all areas of life. As human capital, individuals are encouraged to understand themselves as made-up of skill sets and capabilities, with their behaviour and activities either increasing or decreasing their value and self-worth in the present and in the future (Shimoni, 2023). As a ‘distinctive sensibility’ of neoliberalism that is ‘partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideals’ (Gill and Scharff, 2011: 7), postfeminism facilitates the contemporary neoliberal reconfiguration of femininity (Nash and Moore, 2019). This occurs through postfeminism’s cultural patterning of traditional gender norms alongside feminist principles of autonomy and empowerment. This co-existence manifests in practices of self-optimisation,

self-transformation and self-surveillance framed by ideals of individualism, choice and empowerment, presumptions that gender equality has been achieved, beliefs about ‘natural’ sexual difference between men and women, and the view that retreating to home to care for children is a choice rather than an obligation (Williams, 2000, Blair-Loy, 2005, Gill, 2007, Lewis et al., 2022, Smith and Hatmaker, 2024). Accordingly, women are culturally required to be disciplined in maintaining their femininity (e.g. appearance, managing family) while at the same time using wisely their ‘increased freedom, choice and independence’ to build career opportunities (McDermott, 2024: 7).

These postfeminist elements have shaped women’s experiences in leadership roles. For example, the postfeminist emphasis on ‘natural’ sexual difference has contributed to the emergence of feminine forms of leadership which have sought to challenge the default understanding of leadership as masculine. However, the postfeminist emphasis on individualism and empowerment invites women to understand themselves as autonomous individuals whose future lies in their own hands. With an emphasis on hard work and individual responsibility, women are expected to address any gender challenges they face as solitary individuals. In relation to leadership, ‘the road to success is constructed as lying within each individual woman’ (Benschop and Lewis, 2025: 939). The ‘compulsory individuality’ (Cronin, 2000) of postfeminism constitutes the issue of gender equality as no longer requiring a state-based policy response to transform the structural context but rather is secured through the individual optimisation activities of women.

The postfeminist requirement that women should ‘carry’ structural inequalities on their individual shoulders and develop psychological solutions to address them, has opened up a gap between the postfeminist promise of achievement in the world of work and the actual experience of building a successful career (Benschop and Lewis, 2025). Studies of leadership in the Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine (STEMM) field (Nash

and Moore, 2019), football (Bryan, 2022), and more recently academia and religion (Diehl and Dzibinski, 2024), highlight how women assume personal responsibility for discriminatory experiences connected to environments suffused with gender inequalities. This paradoxical position of experiencing inequality but denying it by focusing on their individual effort and choices made, means that strategies to address persistent discrimination occur within the constraints of the existing system but do not challenge it. Indeed, research indicates that experience of such contradictions can lead highly trained professional women to ‘choose’ voluntary exit from organisations, known as ‘opt-out’ (Stone and Lovejoy, 2004). While opt-out from organisations has received research attention, limited consideration has been directed at women who opt out of promotion, particularly in relation to advancement to the most senior levels. Such opt out of promotion is connected to the divergence between the promise and reality of postfeminism as the cultural background to women’s career experiences.

Increasingly, it is argued that attention should be paid to contextual and sociocultural differences when seeking to understand struggles around issues like promotion through a postfeminist lens. Accordingly, we contextualise our use of postfeminism to the NI public sector. The importance of contextualisation is highlighted by Dosekun (2020: 15) when she argues that ‘...postfeminism is Western culture but not essentially or exclusively, and not when it travels or arrives elsewhere. It rearticulates across time and space, including *within* the West’. De Simone and Priola (2022) examining women entrepreneurs in Italy demonstrate how the postfeminist ideals of empowerment, agency and responsibility are negotiated in ways that reflect features of Italian culture such as the reliance on extended family as a source of support. In interpreting women leaders’ experiences in the NI public sector, we consider how postfeminism moulds to this particular context to demonstrate how the gendered conditions deter women leaders from pursuing ‘a fantasy of success and/or advancing their careers at all costs’ (Nash and Moore, 2019: 10). They are induced to engage in a retreat from career

progression fuelled by a frustration with persistently negative gendered experiences. Yet despite this, we show that the normative regime of postfeminism, with its disproportionate focus on individual choice and empowerment acts to persuade them to locate the source of their retreat from promotion within themselves, obscuring the gendered power imbalances they experience in the public sector.

The NI Public Sector Labour Market Context

NI's labour market exhibits distinctive characteristics compared to other regions. Historically, the labour market has been shaped by the region's transition from an industrial to a service-based economy, largely because of neoliberal deindustrialisation from the late 1970s which saw the decline of male-dominated industries such as shipbuilding, engineering, and textiles (Brownlow, 2020; Joice, 2024). From the 1980s, public sector growth supported by United Kingdom (UK) government subvention (Birnie, 2023), partly offset these losses. NI, a devolved region of the UK, continues to remain more dependent on public sector employment than other UK regions, with approximately 27% of workers employed in public services compared to 18% nationally (Emerson, 2025; Northern Ireland Assembly, 2025; NISRA, 2025). This dependency also exceeds the OECD average of 18.6% but more closely aligns with the Nordic countries of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, where public sector employment accounts for around 30% of the workforce (Lupi et al., 2024).

The expansion of public sector employment in NI has also played a key role in transforming the gendered dynamics of the labour market. Women have disproportionately benefited, gaining access to a broad range of roles, spanning lower-paid, feminised positions (e.g., administrative, care, health work) and higher-skilled, professional posts in areas such as education and the civil service (RalSe, 2020). The proportion of women working full-time in the public sector increased from 48.9% in 1990 to 64.3% by 2022 (RalSe, 2024). The public

sector's relative job security and flexibility have also supported women's participation in the workforce and have positively contributed to a narrower gender pay gap in NI compared to other UK regions (RalSe, 2025).

Although women form the majority of the public sector workforce, they remain under-represented in leadership. For example, within the Senior Civil Service, men dominate senior positions, holding 67% of Permanent Secretary posts and 62% of all Senior Civil Service positions. In health, women comprise 79% of the workforce yet only 20% of CEOs (RalSe, 2020). Gender disparities also persist on public boards: while women make up 44% of all board members, they hold only 27% of the most senior Chair positions (NISRA, 2025). Taken together, the statistics indicate that while NI's public sector has been an important employer for women, balanced senior-level representation has yet to be achieved.

Materials and Methods

Primary data was gathered as part of a larger nationally funded study investigating gender equality and leadership in the NI public sector. Approval to undertake the research was provided by the relevant ethics committee at the outset. Using a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling, one hundred and seven interviews were undertaken with senior public sector leaders, both men and women. Purposeful sampling was initially used to identify CEOs (or equivalent) of public sector organisations. Snowball sampling was then employed, with CEOs supporting the identification of further potential participants (both men and women) who occupy senior positions just below the most senior role. Thirty-three women holding a senior position just below that of CEO were interviewed. Of these, the twenty-four women who are the subject of the current study had opted out (representing 73% of the women interviewed at this level) of the CEO role. Important to note is that across the public sector there is some inconsistency in how the most senior role is referred to: while the term CEO is used, other terms include Permanent Secretary and Chief Accounting Officer.

Women in senior public sector roles in NI are few. As such, while it could be argued that twenty-four interviews are a relatively small sample, it was characteristically representative of the population and aligns with other studies of elite women in leadership: for example, Nash and Moore (2019) who interviewed 25 women in STEMM leadership and Bryan's (2022) study of 23 women leaders in sport. During our data collection phase, 'theoretical sufficiency' was reached (Dey 1999; Braun and Clarke 2019, 2021). We use the approach of theoretical sufficiency as opposed to data saturation to reflect the focus upon the quality rather than quantity of our interviews (Braun and Clarke 2021). Drawing on Dey (1999), theoretical sufficiency is defined by Braun and Clarke (2021:201) as an approach 'to capture the notion that data collection stops when the researcher has reached a sufficient or adequate depth of understanding to build a theory'. We argue that our findings upon reaching 24 interviews demonstrated a clear and repetitive set of postfeminist dimensions in the data, thus reflecting an appropriate level of conceptual depth.

Semi-structured interviews underpinned by an interpretivist stance were used to address the research questions, enabling participants to share perspectives while permitting deeper probing of sensitive issues (Bryman, 2016; Cresswell and Poth, 2016). Central to the research are the voices of the women themselves and the need to privilege their subjective meanings. This participant-driven approach aligns with feminist epistemologies which emphasise the value of capturing lived experiences and the importance of amplifying marginalised voices (Acker, 1990; Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Hesse-Biber 2014). The interview protocol was developed to align with the study's research questions and was informed by prior studies on women in leadership. The protocol comprised open-ended questions addressing key themes in public service career progression, including advancement, flexible work, work-life balance, recruitment, the role of informal networks, and organisational attitudes toward gender equality. This reflective approach facilitated the emergence of multiple perspectives, enabling insights

into both individual and collective experiences shaping women's progression to senior leadership.

Most interviews were conducted at the interviewees' workplaces, each interview lasting approximately ninety minutes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and stored securely to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Collectively the women brought over five-hundred years of experience with length of service in the public sector ranging from 11 to 40 years. In terms of childcare, most had responsibility for two or more children. All interviewees were white Caucasian reflecting the relatively culturally homogenous NI public sector population. Due to the small pool of women, we are unable to divulge the specific job titles of the interviewees, as to do so would jeopardise their anonymity. However, the sample drew from a range of public sector organisations including central government departments, local government and other public bodies (including arms-length bodies) representing education, agriculture, arts and healthcare. Table 1 contains each participant's demographic profile.

<Insert Table 1>

Method of Analysis

In line with the interpretivist qualitative underpinnings of this study, we sought to ensure that the findings emerged from women's own interpretations of their experiences. To support this, reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was applied as the method of analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012, 2019; Braun et al. 2023). RTA acknowledges the role of the researcher in creating meaning based on their detailed and reflective analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The process of data analysis was organic, subjective and cyclical, following the six-phase analytical process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012). Following familiarisation of the data, we identified 13 themes through the coding process. This led to three overarching and interacting themes: *'Enactment of Postfeminist Norms'*, *Resentment of Postfeminist Norms* and *Rejecting Career Progression*. Through an iterative movement back and forth between the data

and theoretical literature, we identified from our analysis a new concept, that of *Postfeminist Career Retreatism*. Figure 1 shows an extract of our coding process.

<Insert Figure 1>

Findings

The findings are presented in line with the three overarching themes: Enactment of Postfeminist Norms, Resentment of Postfeminist Norms and Rejecting Career Progression

Theme 1: Enactment of Postfeminist Norms

The voices of the women contained a dominant rhetoric which leaned into *individualism* and the need for women to self-improve, self-manage and self-transform when operating at a senior level. Women were expected to commit fully to work and failure to do so, implied a lack of commitment, ability or letting the side down. To meet expectations, women were compelled to ‘be resilient’ in their leadership journey. This resilience in reality hid the constant pressure faced and reinforced neoliberal norms.

Unanimous agreement that family life should not interfere with work and career goals emerged from the findings, as illustrated by Kate, a senior executive with 25 years of experience.

“It’s hard work, it’s very time consuming. I would have to say at all senior levels there is extensive commitment. I’m here 9am to 5pm, 9am to 9pm at least once a week and when I go home I do at least another 2 to 3 hours about four nights a week and then of course the infamous Sunday night or Sunday afternoon depending what’s on. You can fit work and around homework and family work etc. I do a lot of work in the evening time to ensure that you know, my PA and the other members of my team can go (Kate)

Kate’s perspective mirrored the other women whereby long hours, and job commitment are normalised at a senior level, with family life being sacrificed. In the public sector setting, this sacrifice was often compounded by a powerful sense of “duty” and “responsibility” which in

turn led to overwhelming guilt. Caroline describes “tiptoeing past” colleagues offices while leaving work, “automatically [feeling] as if I’m a shirker”. Such self-concepts and dispositions were shaped by expectations that you must “do whatever your job requires” (Karen). This was set against the public sector framing of senior leaders as “representative[s] of the community” (Grace) who had a responsibility to “serve” (Joanne) and “deliver a service to the community” (Helen). The civic element of public service leadership intensified the enactment of postfeminist norms with leaders not only facing organisational demands but also the responsibility of community representation. Emma, noted that “I am committed to public service ... I have to go to evening meetings... and show support to staff” while Orla succinctly summarised the constant pressure to be available observing that “your work, and life are one and the same ... you are out at night enjoying events and that’s part of work too”.

In addition to the challenges of balancing work and home, the women echoed each other in the view that they should be continuously *working on themselves* and “prepared and willing to take that next step to try and improve” (Jean). The “duty and responsibility at that level of seniority” (Caroline), alongside the performance-led ethos under the NPM regime, led to many of the senior women reflecting that while “it’s harder for females to achieve those higher ranks” (Jeanette) they “should always look at developing [themselves]” (Bernadette), and “work longer, harder hours than male counterparts” (Aine) to ensure success. Karen argued that they have a responsibility to “be on top of [the] brief”, do “whatever hours your job requires” and show you are “determined to succeed”.

Commitments outside the home were described as something that “does not go” (Jean) with senior leadership. Mary, a senior manager with over 20 years’ experience indicated “if you have a female at any level in the organisation and they’re telling you all about their problems ... that they have to juggle stuff at home and they carry that into work and expect someone else to solve it for them. That’s difficult”. Similar views were expressed by Pauline

that “the onus is on the individual to ensure that those caring responsibilities are managed while you’re at work because you are being paid to do the job, and your focus should be on that job”. For those that acknowledged the challenges in balancing home and work, there was an implicit understanding that “if you were to say, I’m finding it difficult to get everything done and manage my work/life balance” it would be perceived as “a weakness” (Anita). Such views directly align to postfeminist as well as neoliberal ideologies. The women also talked about their adoption of the ‘*always on*’ disposition at work. For most there was an acceptance that this was “a requirement of the job” (Mary), “it’s the nature of the work ... the buck stops with you” (Aine). Melissa, for example, remarked that constant availability was presented as a laudable trait. She recollected that those who have been well-known for being “complete workaholics [were represented] as role model[s]”, a portrayal shaped by neoliberal and postfeminist ideals that valorise relentless productivity, individual achievement, and self-sacrifice at work. This workaholic culture reinforces the expectation that employees must be always available and visibly dedicated, often at the expense of their personal lives and well-being. Hannah for example noted that “it’s quite reasonable to ask somebody to work Saturday and Sunday, when you’re in the [name of organisation] you are available at all times”. While some, including Caroline acknowledged it is “a terrible culture”, there was an acceptance that “when you have a fairly senior role, if you don’t expect to get phone calls and e-mails outside of hours then you are probably living in the dream world” (Pauline). Helen and Ciara both highlighted the normalisation of digital presenteeism whereby phones are never off, while Sarah noted that even on the weekend, and in the evenings, you are on for those “dinners, meeting and greeting, town and gown events”. Attendance at such events was essential for senior women to be perceived as productive “accountable and responsible” leaders (Grace).

The women's comments also reflected understandings of the *'perfect' public service leader*, which while notionally based on a merit principle were rooted in male hegemony and shaped by opaque power-based structures. These processes evidenced in the male networks underpinned by social connections, often mediated through sport excluded women from the most senior ranks. Helen notes: "there's the Golf society; it's perfectly innocent, you would think ... but sport segregates men and women... the mechanisms that ought to bind us together binds bits of us together". Aine reflected that "a lot goes on in the golf club ... you might go to the rugby or football so you might have more socially in common with them [other men] making it easier to break into that group". Emma, Bernadette and Melissa were of the view that such connections reflected informal closure regimes. For example, Emma notes: "it's [work] like the golf club, they [senior men] know who their colleagues are. They network with them, they're in discussions with them, they're in working groups with them, they're familiar with them. It's still the rugby club, the GAA connections, the golf club ... I'm an outsider coming into this". Bernadette reflected on a recent promotion which was predicated on the understanding that "he would fit in well; his face would fit". Melissa, who voiced a similar perspective likened promotional campaigns to "a chessboard" where "we all knew who it was going to be before the competition was ever run ... there seems to be a network still operating at the senior levels that's making a lot of kind of decisions based on gut feeling and intuition". Denise also reflected on the predictability of male success: "the four golden boys, they were always going to get them [senior roles] I was never getting that post". Orla, reflecting on her lack of success in promotion noted the "dismissive attitude to women" of the Chair, a behaviour which was "expected [and] pervasive". Although a competency-based framework was formally in place for senior roles, the women revealed how informal, gendered practices subverted this. Jeanette aptly exposed the homosocial reproduction at play:

"There are no females [at senior levels], so therefore it's just the old boys club. Its jobs for the boys in terms of we will bring them up through the ranks and get them in the

right places ... they're all in the mould ... and unless you've come up through that mould you don't really know what they're [senior male gatekeepers] looking for. And I think you're at a definite disadvantage.”

However, rather than acknowledging the structural barriers faced, many of the women internalised responsibility for advancement and adopted the postfeminist logic of an ongoing cycle of self-surveillance about their (in)abilities and the need to engage with self-improvement strategies such as “learn[ing] to sell yourself” (Bernadette). Such strategies were adopted to gain experience and meet the criteria and expectations associated with the ‘perfect’ public sector leader – a construct which is implicitly grounded in male leadership norms.

Theme 2: Resentment of Postfeminist Norms

The experiences of the senior women navigating postfeminist norms revealed deep felt feelings of frustration, insecurity and loneliness. Thus, while postfeminist values superficially appear to have created career opportunities by opening access to traditionally male-dominated roles of leadership, these norms were found to be fraught with contradictions and resentment. Reflecting this, the voices of the women highlight the disparity between the belief that career advancement and promotion to the most senior level in the public sector are universally desirable and beneficial and the reality that such opportunities are not equally accessible. For example, Jeanette expressed a sense of *frustration* at the persistent uneven ‘playing field’ when it came to senior career progression:

“I know nowadays they try and get one female on the panel and all the rest of it. But you're still being primarily interviewed by men. ... They want clones ... they all look the same ... they just appoint all their mates and they're all men mates”.

The myth of flexible work arrangements also revealed itself as a point of frustration with the women expressing expectations that senior roles were “full time posts” (Caroline). Most agreed that flexible working was a myth at senior level. The women were aligned in their view that “this is my role, my job” (Kate) and it was essential to “do the hard graft myself”

(Aine). Those women who had engaged in flexible work practices experienced “negative attitudes [from colleagues] of not being fully committed” (Kate) while others worried about perceptions. Michelle reflected that “I only took 13 weeks maternity leave with both my children, I didn’t take any sick leave, I was determined I am not going to fall into the stereotype of the women who takes sick leave after her children are born because that attracted a lot of criticism from male colleagues”. Orla noted “that’s my job and I still have to do it no matter how many hours I work”, and for that reason “term time does not necessarily work for us” [senior roles]. Collectively these perspectives reflect postfeminist beliefs that equality has largely been achieved and that success depends on individual effort and the ability to prioritise work above all else.

However, despite adhering to this mantra, the women did not experience equal opportunities. Instead, what emerged was a level of fatigue and feelings of being *fed up*. Opaque promotion tracks and senior male gatekeepers who “make the [acting up] policy up as they go along” (Denise) led to the women feeling despondent. Acknowledgement that during promotion processes “we all knew who it was going to be before the competition was ever run” (Melissa) as well as the preservation of favouritism and sexism left the women feeling pessimistic. Denise reflecting on her own experience of progression concluded that the senior ranks of the public sector “is a male bastion and it will continue to be”. Bernadette reflected that when the “state of play” regarding male dominance was highlighted the common response was “c’est la vie ... we didn’t deliberately set out to be totally male dominated but that’s just the way it is”. Disillusionment with the lack of progress, despite living up to the prescribed norms of masculinised leadership facilitated through postfeminism, led to *psychological distress* for many. This manifested as burnout, exhaustion and stress. “[W]orking in excess of 60 hours a week and [doing] work at home” (Hannah) was normalised which in turn led to “exhaustion” (Nina/Grace) and “ill health” (Helen). Jean noted that evenings post her children’s

bedtime, it was necessary to “crank the machine[pc] back up [and] get on top of it [workload]”. Michelle reflected that her job was “very, very stressful, how I survive without ending up in a mental hospital I don’t really know”. Aine similarly recalled that even though she was “nearly burnt out, I do have to appreciate that if I go down there's a very big price to be paid for that by everybody”.

While the women are already successful senior public servants operating at a high level, feelings of *insecurity*, often articulated through conversations about feeling self-conscious, uncertain, or vulnerable about their abilities emerged. For example, Aine suggested that she felt “a slight awkwardness about [being part of the senior management team]”. Also, Denise, despite being on a senior management team felt “you don’t belong to this club” and as a result “operated on the basis that it was better to keep my mouth shut and be thought a fool than open it and be proved one”. Melissa’s highlighted feelings of being self-conscious at senior management meetings where the men would “be polite and they'll say hello to you, and you have coffee, but they instantly talk about football or cricket or things you're not going to be remotely interested in ... you feel they don't take any interest in you whatsoever”. Alongside feeling insecure, the women expressed a sense of *loneliness* while navigating the “male dominated” (Bernadette) senior ranks. Hannah labelled the senior ranks as the “boys club” while Aine revealed she “found it very lonely coming up [to the senior level]”. Michelle noted she was “the only women of my era really left in the organisation let alone that [grade], so it’s a lonely place from that perspective”. Nina’s similarly felt isolated recollecting that senior management was “a very lonely place to be ... you have a crowd of men and I’m not being sexist, but they are so macho”. In feeling isolated the women spoke of the lack of female role models at a senior level, however, simultaneously were adamant that quotas were unacceptable as a mechanism to support women in achieving senior roles. Quotas were presented as “self-defeating” initiatives reflective of “tokenism” (Wendy). Marie argued that such mechanisms

would lead to “more dysfunctional consequences” for women while Sarah leaned into the postfeminist narrative that “for women to be assured she has to make it on merit [and have made] personal sacrifices”.

Theme 3: Rejecting Career Progression

Having taken up the call of postfeminism through individualistic and masculinist led work practices, the women sought to bring their best selves to work. However, instead of feeling empowered, the women found that they *questioned themselves and their individual capabilities* in terms of where they fit. Women faced ongoing microaggressions at work with a perception that “you’ve done very well dear” [if women reached a senior role yet] “if those people had been men, nobody would have said a word” (Emma). Kate similarly experienced gendered prejudice whereby men’s career successes were characterised by a discourse of “well didn’t he do a real good job there” whereas for women it was “she is very ambitious isn’t she ... used in a pejorative way”. Imposter syndrome and beliefs that “someday someone’s going to find me out’ (Sarah) was felt in response to the rhetoric that “of course you’re only there because you’re a woman” (Aine) and “do you think if you had been a male he would have spoken to you like that?” (Karen). Sexist and misogynistic experiences were common amongst the women but often disavowed and written off as banter. Michelle, a public servant for over 30 years indicated that “you’d be the butt of all sorts of sexist and inappropriate practical jokes” which in turn necessitated “developing a bit of a thick skin and not take myself too seriously but some of it was also quite difficult to cope with so you did develop coping strategies”.

Despite leaning in and enacting postfeminist norms at work, the women did not progress in the way they anticipated. Men continued to dominate public sector senior management and according to Helen, masculinity and exclusion imbued every facet of work:

“You go up [to a senior management meeting], and it’s all full of men except maybe one or two women who are taking the notes. That’s the way it is. It’s a big, long table and you don’t know who sits where, so you don’t know how it operates. They [senior men] come in and start talking and they talk quietly about things, you know, in a kind of shorthand way and you don’t know what that’s about because you’re not party to that discussion. You sit at the table and some of them say hello to you, some of them who know don’t say hello to you, but they sit down. And you’re very much an outsider, it’s not just me, it’s not my imagination. When you talk to [women’s name], she’ll tell you; she hates it too. You’re very much outside this club ... it’s a very hostile feeling.”

Women were left to *feel like outsiders* who “do not fit” and do not reflect “the clones they [senior management] want”, no matter how much they tried (Jeanette). Governed by a masculine neoliberal script, the culture was experienced as “so macho [and] aggressive [and] that’s the way of it, you’ll never change it” (Joanne). This “very aggressive culture [adopted] to try and improve performance” led to a feeling among the women that “if you’re not doing the shouting and roaring and kicking and screaming then there is a perception that you’re not good. She’s a nice girl but she’s not going to get the results ... it’s quite a macho culture in that regard” (Emily). The *persistence of an androcentric leadership* ideology led to women feeling excluded from the “shared camaraderie” (Aine) of the “old boys’ network where [they] look after each other” (Kate). Denise, reflecting on senior appointment boards felt “there is a definite personal bias against female”. Thinking about her own journey she concluded that her career aspirations were curbed as she was “not in the mould”. Hannah similarly noted that the senior appointment gatekeepers “have created a sort of picture” of who they want which Jeanette felt led to men being able to “slip up the ranks more easily”. Karen concurred acknowledging that the “old boys together.. we look after one another” attitude continued to dominate senior appointment competitions. Unfortunately, even when the merit principle was applied, the overarching issue of male domination discouraged women from advancing further.

Postfeminism presents to women a picture that they can have it all if they work hard enough, however, this was simply not so. Instead of agency and choice, women faced an ongoing reinforcement of patriarchal norms and structural inequalities. Women blamed

themselves for not being able to be present as the perfect leader and manage home life seamlessly at the same time. For example, Hannah revealed she constantly felt:

“you're in a very senior position, you've got big responsibilities, you're working upwards, you're there to serve the Executive, all of that sort of high end focus on seniority, responsibility, which is fair enough because you're paid the salary to do that but there was no pink and fluffy stuff around we're good and kind and caring for all of you that have a young family or anything like that”.

Taking time off, and “family friendly policies blah blah blah” (Emily) while written down were “not seen as acceptable” (Michelle), reinforcing the need for women to internalise and solve the problem of balancing work and home if they want to progress - a reflection of postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies that emphasise personal responsibility and downplay structural barriers.

Retreating from CEO roles was labelled as a “life choice, a very individual and personal decision” (Ciara). Self-reflections highlighting a range of self-limitations including the perceived responsibility of senior roles being ‘*too much for me*’, a reluctant acceptance of the male status quo and a sense of fatigue with the postfeminist promise were revealed. Statements such as: “I’ve come to the realisation I’m not the great strategic visionary so the next step in here is Chief Executive and I would never be that”(Orla), “I’ve watched how he [the CEO] does it and I would not aspire to try and fill those kind of shoes” (Jean), “I am not afraid of hard work, I work hard in my current role but I would not be at that level, and I don’t think that is down to me feeling a lack of confidence or intimidated ... there might be an element of that, but essentially I just don’t feel that I would have the capability for it” (Marie). These statements reinforce the postfeminist narrative that women need to self-improve and transform to cultivate their professional ambitions.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article we reveal how the leadership experiences of successful women leaders in the NI public sector are shaped by postfeminism, Drawing on the themes of enactment and resentment of postfeminist norms and rejection of postfeminist career promises, we provide insight into women's lived experience as leaders and how they face exclusionary practices that are framed as individual problems requiring an individual often psychological solution. We make three contributions to the public sector management literature including the development of the concept of postfeminist career retreatism.

First, our study demonstrates how women leaders in the public sector are influenced by postfeminism, and that therefore their leadership experiences are a social outcome produced by historically and culturally specific norms (Hekman, 2014). Considering the seductive postfeminist language of empowerment, women leaders are open to new possibilities of career success borne out of changes in the normative constraints surrounding leadership. Nevertheless, despite a normative 'loosening' of the gender values circulating around leadership in general, emerging from our respondents' accounts is a masculine leadership orientation. The image of the 'successful' woman leader in the public sector emerges as one who is individualist, autonomous, makes the right choices and continuously engages in practices of physical and psychic self-transformation (Benschop and Lewis, 2025; Gill, 2017). Women leaders in this study sought to settle into the androcentric demands of leadership rather than disrupt them. Embracing the norms of postfeminism facilitates this integrationist approach, rendering these women leaders compatible with the masculine leadership which remains dominant in the public sector but leaves intact gender hierarchies (Bryan, 2022; Nash and Moore, 2019; Williamson and Colley, 2023). This contributes to the reproduction of gender inequalities that women suffer on a day-to-day basis and fuels resentment towards the postfeminism they live by (Amigot-Leache et al, 2023).

The co-existence of enacting and resenting postfeminist norms means that women have a complex relationship with postfeminism, and that promotion within the public sector seems, ‘strikingly untenable’ (McDermott, 2024: 7). This brings us to our second contribution of postfeminist career retreatism. Negra (2009: 25) identifies retreatism as one of the ‘key social practices of postfeminist culture’. This shepherds women out of work and maintains gender distinctions connected to the emphasis postfeminism places on ‘natural’ sexual difference. However, leaving work is not the only form retreatism can take. We present the notion of postfeminist career retreatism to conceptualise senior women leaders’ response to persistent inequality where individual achievement and self-optimisation are strong cultural norms that act to obscure structural barriers, despite being felt by those subject to them. Postfeminist career retreatism, understood as women refraining from seeking further promotion, has three characteristics. First, despite articulating the emotional distress experienced by working in the gendered culture of the public sector, the women leaders in this study do not identify the structural barrier of a masculine culture which takes a particular shape within NI as the reason for their career retreatism. Publicly admitting to distress, insecurity and loneliness due to being subject to a masculinist work culture, are unsayable within a postfeminist context that minimises structural inequalities and privileges individual achievement and self-transformation. Second, while the women leaders in this study engage in androcentric leadership, the cultural influence of postfeminism incites women to calibrate masculinised and feminised leadership behaviours. As Benschop and Lewis (2025: 939) state, there is ‘a particular pressure for women within a postfeminist context...to be (seen as) ‘reassuringly feminine’ through the expression of ‘niceness’, ‘gentleness’ and being ‘relentlessly pleasant’...alongside demonstration of an agentic, individualized...self’. Identification of the structural barrier of a gendered culture and expressing open discontent at their experience of persistent discrimination, leaves them open to being labelled as disruptive and unfeminine. Fear

of the latter makes identification of their discriminatory experiences as the reason why they refrain from promotion, unsayable. Third, because of this inability to publicly call out the discriminatory experiences that they are regularly subject to, women turn inwards to identify the reasons for their career retreatism. As such, external barriers to equality are translated into individual shortcomings that are addressed through a range of psychological adjustments – increasing resilience and confidence, adopting a positive mindset – leaving the status quo intact and discriminatory behaviours unchallenged. Notwithstanding their disappointment with postfeminist norms, we see that women leaders continue to adhere to them. They adopt the individualist strategy of interpreting their retreat from further promotion as down to their individual shortcomings and not the wider discriminatory context they work in.

Our third contribution is to contextualise our respondents' leadership experiences and engagement with postfeminism within the sociocultural context of the NI public sector. Consistent with earlier studies (De Simone and Priola, 2022), we argue that context is not merely a backdrop to the experiences of those interviewed: rather, it is actively entangled with the experiences of the women leaders. Engagement with postfeminist norms by the women leaders interviewed entrench patterns that systematically restrict their progression to the most senior levels, with the broader characteristics of the local context reinforcing the impact of postfeminism. For example, the region's relatively small population of circa 1.9 million means that the pool of potential candidates for senior roles is limited, while restricted pathways for career progression to senior management posts further reduces opportunities for progression (Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2024). Leadership trajectories in parts of the NI public sector have also been shown to be shaped by tightly knit social and professional networks that rely on established relationships. Rouse (2018) refers to the 'cloistered' and 'insular nature' of the NI Civil Service, in addition to low levels of workforce mobility when compared to other jurisdictions, which she argues has resulted in 'gendered internal values', where 'culture and

norms remain undiluted by external perspectives' (p.69). Evidence of the strong social and professional networks in the NI public sector is further suggested by Greer et al. (2015), who reported that 73% of senior civil servants were 'insiders' with over seven years' tenure and 63% had spent their entire career in the NI Civil Service. Murphy et al. (2017) similarly reveal that senior public sector managers often spent their entire professional lives within the same sector. As we demonstrated in our analysis, this context manifests in the emphasis women leaders place on a shared understanding of the 'perfect' public sector leader. In a small social context such as NI where 'everyone knows everyone', the designation of an individual(s) as 'leader(s)-in-waiting', often formulated within a male-centred sporting context such as a golf club, is very powerful and is difficult for a woman to challenge (Giazitzoglu and Whittle, 2025), giving rise to a particular experience of postfeminist gender inequality (De Simone and Priola, 2022).

The loss of female talent at the most senior level because of postfeminist career retreatism has significant organisational and societal repercussions, not just for NI but other societies who have a strong reliance on public sector employment and where women are already marginalised in senior decision-making roles. Retreatist departures deprive the public sector of experienced leaders whose perspectives are vital for shaping policies and decisions that reflect the needs of the population. Public administration priorities thus risk being shaped predominantly by male perspectives, potentially neglecting issues that disproportionately affect women and other underrepresented groups. This in turn weakens the capacity of public administrations to deliver equitable and inclusive outcomes. The retreatism of senior women also diminishes the pool of role models for aspiring female leaders, potentially discouraging younger women from pursuing careers to the most senior level. Despite these constraints, and consistent with a postfeminist logic, responsibility for overcoming the challenges encountered is frequently individualised, with expectations that they navigate exclusionary close-knit

leadership networks and social ties without support. Such narratives invariably obscure the systemic nature of inequality in the public sector, framing it instead as a matter of personal resilience. This not only diminishes the visibility of structural constraints but also serves as an active force that reproduces and sustains male dominance in the most senior roles, embedding cultural and structural barriers that are resistant to change.

Our study makes important contributions to the literature but is not without limitations. Limited generalisability and possible response bias should be considered. While our study is purposeful in the selection of women already holding a senior position, the inclusion of men would allow for a comparative element in the research. Additionally, we draw on qualitative interview data for senior women from only one geographical region. Further research could address these limitations by considering the lived experiences of senior men and senior women operating in different geographical jurisdictions of the public sector. Attention could be directed at how pervasive postfeminist career retreatism is on the part of senior women leaders. Future research could also investigate how despite a disjuncture between women and a postfeminist environment connected to negative experience, they still maintain a bond with it. Examination of this bond could entail a consideration of how the specific political and historical conditions of a context like Northern Ireland, influence gender experiences. Finally, the research findings have revealed important policy implications, which in turn highlight the need for future research to examine how such insights impact policy development and implementation.

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Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants

Pseudonym	Employment Setting		Length of Service	Caring Responsibilities
	Local Govt	Central Govt		
Mary	√		22 years	Two dependent children
Aine		√	23 years	No dependents
Denise		√	13 years	No dependents identified
Karen		√	22 years	One dependent child
Melissa		√	16 years	Two dependent children
Caroline		√	13.5 years	Two dependent children
Joanne	√		20 years	Two dependent children
Pauline		√	16 years	One dependent child
Michelle		√	33 years	Two dependent children
Jeanette		√	11 years	Two dependent children
Anita		√	11 years	One dependent
Jean		√	15 years	One dependent child
Orla		√	34 years	Two dependents
Nina		√	36 years	Five dependent children
Marie		√	40 years	No detail provided
Helen		√	39 years	Two dependent children
Emma	√		23 years	Two dependent children
Bernadette	√		21 years	One dependent child
Hannah		√	27 years	Three dependent children
Grace		√	36 years	No dependents
Kate		√	25 years	Three dependents
Sarah		√	20 years	Three dependent children
Emily		√	12 years	No dependents
Ciara		√	35 years	No dependents

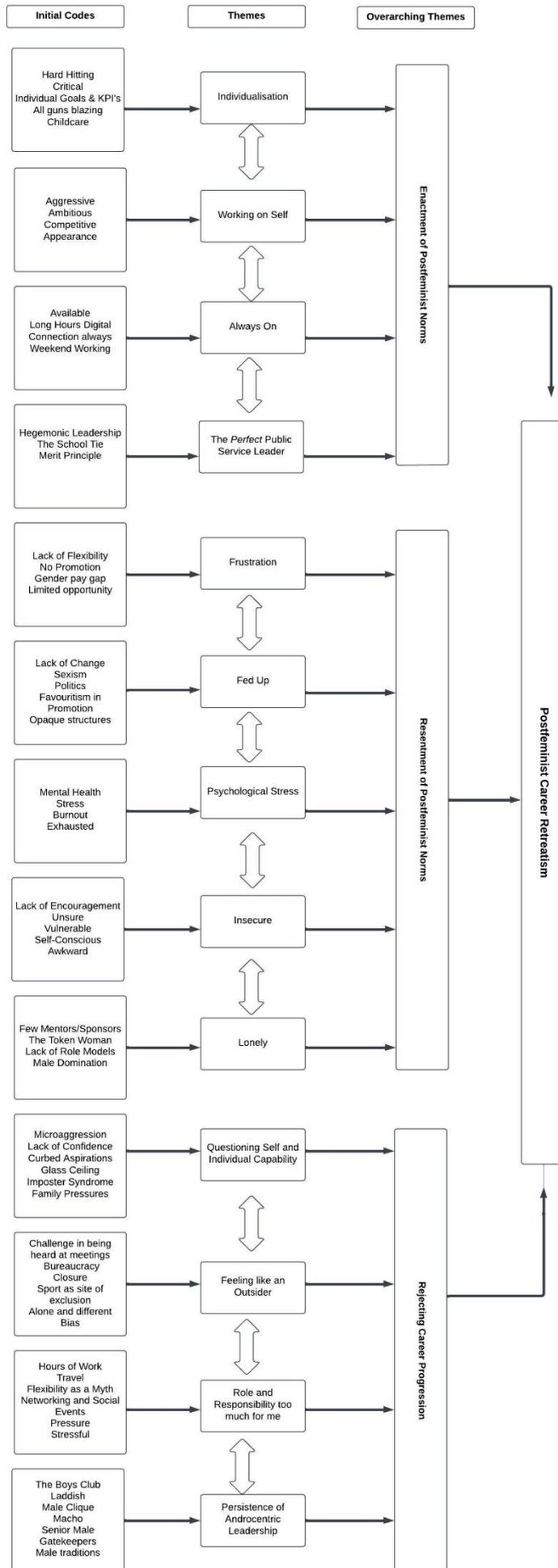


Figure 1: Coding Path