



# The festival industry and gender inequality: The case of Edinburgh, the world's leading festival city

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores issues women face in achieving leadership positions in the festivals sector, and their experiences of gender inequality. The setting is Edinburgh, the UK's leading festivals' tourism destination. Underpinned by feminist research, this study involved semi-structured interviews, including visual methods, with 33 women. Participants were employees or freelance workers in Edinburgh's festivals. Findings were diverse, specific to the individual participants, but some themes were recurrent. Women who had worked in the industry throughout their career reported that while the representation of women leaders in Edinburgh's festivals sector has improved, some aspects remain challenging. This study is the first to consider women's roles and leadership experiences in Edinburgh's festivals and contributes to existing literature in the field of tourism and event studies specifically in terms of gender stereotypes and inequalities in the festivals sector.

## 1. Introduction

This paper explores issues that women face in achieving leadership positions in the festivals sector, and what (if any) types of gender inequality occur in this context.

The setting of this research is Edinburgh (Scotland, UK). Employment in Edinburgh's festival sector can be described as women dominated, with 70% of people employed in this sector being women (Dashper, 2018; BVEP, 2020; Creative Scotland, 2024). Moreover, with the recent appointment of a woman at the helm of the Edinburgh International Book Festival, seven of the eleven Edinburgh Festivals now have a woman as a director (Edinburgh Festival City, 2023). Further, in 2022 the Edinburgh International Festival appointed its first woman as Director. As the oldest and possibly the most prestigious of Edinburgh's main festivals, this gives strong evidence of a move towards gender equality in the festival sector. Additionally, it is significant that, 50 % of the Edinburgh International Festival board were women in 2019 (Edinburgh International Festival, 2019).

The relatively high volume of women working in festivals aligns with the number of women who enrol in undergraduate and postgraduate Event Management degrees at universities in the UK. This is a very high proportion, accounting for almost 90 % of students (Thomas, 2017). Despite these numbers and the changes in representation, men continue to occupy most senior roles and positions of influence such as CEO and

board of governance positions. Less than 20 % of women occupy senior management and board positions in the event industry (BVEP, 2020; Creative Scotland, 2024; Dashper, 2018, 2019; Thomas, 2017).

Evidence of an increased concern about this inequality is the creation of the Gender Representation of Public Boards Bill (2018). The bill set a target for 50 % of non-executive members of public boards in Scotland to be composed from women. This came into force in 2020. However, by 2022 only 88 of 130 listed public authorities had met this target (The Scottish Government, 2024). This came into force in 2020, however, of 130 listed public authorities, in 2022, so far 88 have confirmed reaching this gender representation objective (The Scottish Government, 2024).

Another aspect to consider when discussing women role positions in the festival sector, is the power festivals hold. Festivals are, indeed, seen as a place where social and political messages can be delivered and spread (Davies, 2021; Laing & Mair, 2015). They can create a social space for change, where there are open and public discussions about issues that are considered as important to society (Sharpe, 2008). Importantly, spaces are never politically or socially neutral (Cahuas, 2023; Rose, 1993). As Coyle and Platt's (2019) study of feminist festivals in the UK concludes, festival space has capacity for feminist politics; for raising the political awareness and confidence of women in political discourse, in general, and feminist politics in particular. Festivals can be spaces for the empowerment of women.

This study is qualitative and underpinned by feminist research,

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which affirms that research should be non-sexist; focusing on creating benefits and advancement for women and putting the gender at the centre of the enquiry (Hekman, 2007; Herron, 2023; McHugh, 2014). It analyses the gendered context of women lives, empowering women, exposing gender inequalities, and advocating for improvements of women's social status as well as social change (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007; Cosgrove & McHugh, 2002; O'Quinn et al., 2024). To gain an understanding of the situation for women working in Edinburgh's festivals sector, the research involved semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2014) with 33 women. The participants were employed by Edinburgh's festivals, or were working as freelancers at the city's festivals, on both part- and full-time basis. During the interviews, visual methods were used, specifically photo voice (Coffey, 2023; Fahey, 2017), which is a form of photo-elicitation. These are useful tools for understanding in-depth experiences of participants in interview settings (Matteucci, 2013).

The research objective was to understand and evaluate the issues faced by women in Edinburgh's festival sector in achieving leadership positions. This is the first academic study to reveal leadership experiences and roles of women in the Edinburgh festivals sector, and contributes to existing literature concerning women leadership in festivals (e.g., Almathami et al., 2022; Almathami et al., 2024; Arts Council England, 2022; Ehrich et al., 2022; Ellerson & Gbadamassi, 2019; Finkel & Dashper, 2020; Gisbert Gracia & Rius-Ulldemolins, 2020; Gisbert & Rius-Ulldemolins, 2019; Golemo, 2023; Intan, 2020; Jones, 2020; Lekalake Plaatjie, 2020; Loist & Prommer, 2019; Nissen, 2023; Pernecky et al., 2019; Platt & Finkel, 2020, 2018; Verhoeven et al., 2019; Wall-Andrews et al., 2022) as well as in the field of tourism and events management and studies (e.g., Calver et al., 2023; Cánoves et al., 2004; Clayton, 2016; Dashper & Finkel, 2021; Werner, 2021; Dashper, 2020; Ferguson, 2011; Gebbels et al., 2020; Hammond, 2003; Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2019; Morgan & Pritchard, 2019; Moswete & Lacey, 2015; Richardson, 2018; Santero-Sanchez et al., 2015; Swart et al., 2024; Wilson & Chambers, 2023; Xiong et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2020). Specifically, this paper identifies a chasm between the support and opportunity for leadership roles, and the actual experiences of women when starting a family, or else during time of childcare. The extensive and unsociable hours of employment within festivals forces a move towards part-time positions with little opportunity to progress. Moreover, for women who are in leadership roles the analysis here identifies gender compromises. These affect adaption to a leadership style that is both patriarchal and allows men to perpetuate stereotypical values. By doing so, this study expands the discussion around motherhood, the patriarchal view on leadership and their consequences on women's career.

### 1.1. The context of the study

The setting for this study is Edinburgh, in Scotland (UK), which is branded as the 'world's leading' festival city (Edinburgh Festival City, 2023). Edinburgh has a long and well-established history of staging arts and cultural festivals in its historic centre (Todd, 2022). The city of Edinburgh first hosted the Edinburgh International Festival, Festival Fringe, and International Film Festival in 1947 (Bartie, 2013). At this time, the aim was to provide a platform to bring people and artists together from around the world (Edinburgh Festival Fringe, 2023). That year, although not invited to perform, eight companies decided to stage their shows in Edinburgh, giving life to the first Festival Fringe (Edinburgh Festival City, 2023). Since then, Edinburgh's destination

management stakeholders have aimed to harness and develop the city's festivals to drive event tourism (Todd et al., 2017). Edinburgh's contemporary festivals portfolio has grown to eleven annual city-based arts and cultural festivals.<sup>1</sup> Today these reside under the 'Festivals Edinburgh' strategic brand umbrella, which was established in 2007. Festivals Edinburgh is comprised of Directors from Edinburgh's eleven principal festivals and has a "mission to maintain and develop the value of the festivals" and Edinburgh's Festival City's position locally and globally, through: development and delivery of collaborative projects and initiatives which support programme development, and leadership and audiences acting on behalf of and representing the collective strengths of the Edinburgh Festivals" (Edinburgh Festival City, 2023). Recently released data on the economic impact of the Edinburgh Festivals (BOP Consulting and Festivals Edinburgh, 2023) shows that the 2022 festivals attracted 3.2 million attendances, generated by around 700,000 attendees. They contributed £407 m in Edinburgh, and £367 m in Scotland. It is important to note that Edinburgh hosts further festivals and events that are not grouped under Edinburgh Festivals. In all, there are more than 20 recurring festivals in the city every year, including: Leith Comedy Festival in October; Fringe of Colour in August; and Edinburgh International Magic Festival in July, among others.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Femininity and masculinity in leadership theory and leadership style

#### 2.1.1. Definitions

There remains no universally accepted definition or concept of leader and leadership (Howieson, 2019). The literature relating to leadership is extensive (Elkhwesky et al., 2022; Ford, 2005; Howieson, 2019; Hunt et al., 2018). Early interactions of leadership theory consider leadership powers and traits as innate. In 'great-man' or 'heroic' theory (emergent in the 1840), power is considered to be something one is born with (Malakyan, 2014). As the name suggests, this also means being born a man. Leadership theory development through time is largely agreed upon as being classified by particular eras. Broadly, these theories can be described as *Trait*, *Behavioural*, *Situational*, and *New leadership* (Abson, 2021; Bass, 1990; Benmira & Agboola, 2021).

Leadership of events and festivals has received attention, applying a variety of leadership style interpretations (Abson, 2021; Leigh et al., 2021; Van der Wagen, 2007; Wilks, 2015). Such leadership styles include *charismatic* (Bryman, 1993); *servant* (Eva et al., 2019); *transactional* (McCleskey, 2014), *transformational* (Bass & Riggio, 2006); *authentic* (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2011), *ethical* (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Lawton & Páez, 2015), and *situational Leadership* (McCleskey, 2014).

Festival leaders have been considered to demonstrate *charismatic* leadership style (see: Caust, 2004; Ensor et al., 2007, 2011). Charismatic leadership requires leader-follower relations, where the leader is viewed with great reverence by those who follow (Bryman, 1992, 2004; Conger et al., 2000). Contrary to this, the leadership style at Gladmat Festival, Norway, was identified by Einarsen and Mykletun (2009) as being autocratic, with evidence of hero worship. Entrepreneurial, transactional, and transformational theories were also suggested when discussing the leadership style of the festival (Wilks, 2015).

Notably, across all of the styles, the prevailing leadership literature is only from a western world perspective, where there is predominant focus on white men as leaders (Hoyt & Murhpy, 2016; Rosette &

<sup>1</sup> Edinburgh International Science Festival; Edinburgh International Children's Festival; Edinburgh International Film Festival; Edinburgh Jazz and Blues Festival; Edinburgh Art Festival; Edinburgh International Festival; Edinburgh Festival Fringe; Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo; Edinburgh International Book Festival; Scottish International Storytelling Festival; Edinburgh Hogmanay



Livingston, 2012). Further, as Schedlitzki and Edwards (Schedlitzki & Edwards, 2021, p251) comment: “robust insights that would confirm a clear difference between leadership styles and leader effectiveness due to gender” have not been considered in the literature.

Despite some leadership styles being more prominent, and more researched than others, as Wilson (2013, p52) says of transformative leadership theories, they are “strategic response to a range of social, political, economic factors and events”. It is not possible to generalise leadership theories or to establish universal laws about leadership, as the wider social, political contexts shape leadership, which is conditional and situational, as it is the relationship with the followers and how they interact with leaders (Hamrin, 2016; Wilson, 2013, 2017; Wilson et al., 2017). The question of power is often downplayed in mainstream leadership theories, as leadership theories can be seen to claim objective truths, without acknowledging the subjective nature of their interpretation, nor the opaque nature of the power relation that leadership theory may normalise (Alveus & Klitmøller, 2024; Wilson, 2013). New leadership approaches, such as collective leadership (Anderson & Sun, 2017; Boone & Hendriks, 2009; De Brún & McAuliffe, 2023; Dionne et al., 2014; Empson & Alveus, 2020; Fairhurst et al., 2020; Fang et al., 2022; Friedrich et al., 2009; Friedrich et al., 2016; Raelin, 2018; Yammarino et al., 2012; Zhu et al., 2018) and feminist leadership (Mavin et al., 2023; O’Brien, 2017; O’Malley & Johnson, 2018; Shaed, 2018; Sinclair, 2014) are taking a revolutionary approach to leadership. These more recent discussions about leadership challenge the principle that leadership is in one person. Further, they often challenge the concept of leadership and the need for it, instead proposing a greater need for justice and change, or a leadership which is intersectional (Derry, 2023). Thus, it is possible to see the emergence of definitions whereby Leadership is characterised by participatory decision-making models, power sharing, and using consensus, empowering, and emphasising the importance of diversity and collective action (O’Malley & Johnson, 2018; Shaed, 2018). The focus should be on gender and power dynamics, with the goal to create egalitarian environments (Chin, 2004; O’Malley & Johnson, 2018).

### 2.1.2. Gender power relations

An interesting element that has emerged in many studies of leadership and women is the dichotomy between male and female and the gendered idea of masculinity and femininity (Ackerly & True, 2010; Hsu et al., 2021; White & Diekmann, 2023). The way the female gender is stereotypically viewed is associated with qualities which are more fitting to caring roles, rather than to leadership positions. A leader must be strong, powerful, and aggressive, skills that a man has by nature (Dashper et al., 2023; Núñez Puente & Gámez Fuentes, 2017). Positioning masculine and feminine as polar opposites has confined men and women to gendered sex-role stereotypes, since childhood (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007). This can make it difficult for women to find their own way of operating within workplaces socially seen as masculine, leaving them with no other option that adopt men’s working traits (Due Billing & Alvesson, 2000). The reason for this is that the workplace has always been associated with a place of power and authority. These two qualities have, in turn, traditionally been considered features owned by men (Xiong et al., 2022). This has placed women leaders in contradictory roles between their gender identity and the masculine qualities of holding power, as their gender is not congruent with the role they have (del Carmen Triana et al., 2024; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Mavin, 2008).

Masculinity and femininity are considered to not be fixed concepts, but rather, are constantly changing, while being culturally and historically subjected to the meanings attributed to them (Due Billing & Alvesson, 2000; White & Diekmann, 2023). Butler (1988) was one of the first to underline how sex and gender are two different concepts, by comparing the act of performing on stage as an actor to gender. Gender is performative, therefore, and only real to the extent that it is performed. Butler’s (1988) work contributes to an understanding that gender and identity are not necessarily binary. Until then, the prevailing

view was the stereotypical division between man/woman without embracing other variables (Mooney, 2020). As Butler (1988) states, genders constitute univocal signifiers, and are polarised and stabilised. Consequently, gender is made to comply with a model which contradicts its performativity. Performing one’s gender correctly means creating reassurance; while performing it wrongly, creates a backlash. This is apparent in leadership, where women are expected- because of their gender - to be communal, good listeners and carers. When a woman leader behaves in an agentic way, for example, more aggressively, then she is going against how her gender tells her to behave (del Carmen Triana et al., 2024; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Gender roles are social constructions, which manifest in stereotypes and cause issues for women leaders. However, because they are social constructions stereotypes linked to gender, they may be broken down. This can happen with genuine social change, where occupational and domestic work segregation is weakened, and consequently the perspective and perception of women’s and men’s roles changes (Chizema et al., 2015).

### 2.2. Women leadership

Women and leadership research first emerged in the 1970s. This was not because women were not part of the workforce but was due to them gaining increased leadership positions. At this time, the number of women in academia was also increasing, which fuelled interest in this topic (Hoyt & Simon, 2018). One of the first questions raised about women in terms of leadership was their ability as women to lead (Derks et al., 2016). Following from distinctions between masculinity and femininity, the idea of differentiating leaders based on their gender, despite seeming simple, in reality brings a series of stereotypes and beliefs. As Schein (1973) observes, the stereotype, “think manager-think male” (Ryan et al., 2016, p450) is based on the idea that only men can become leaders as they have certain traits, considered essential. This is because of their gender, being agentic, powerful, and strong (Hoyt & Simon, 2018; Wiesel et al., 2024). Literature on leadership styles of men and women has long focused on the idea that leaders elicit a set of expectancies depending on people’s characterisation of them as either male or female (Kubu, 2018). The perspective on this topic has greatly changed, as has the idea of who makes a good leader: from a powerful leader who makes all the decisions, to a more collaborative one (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Hobbins et al., 2023). Women are now studied in the field of leadership research, and attention has shifted to the quality that they can bring to the company as leaders (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Mendez & Busenbark, 2015; Xiong et al., 2022). While there have been an increased number of women on company boards, this veils the fact that in UK, in 2021 only 31 women (14.2 %) held executive roles, including 8 CEOs across 27 companies with women executives in the UK’s FTSE 100 (Catalyst, 2022; Vinnicombe et al., 2022). In 2022, these numbers slightly increased to 36 women executive 41 directorships across 33 companies with women executives (Vinnicombe & Tessaro, 2023). Globally, in 2021, 26 % of all CEOs and managerial director were women (Catalyst, 2022). In academia, women staff accounted for 50 % of full-time staff reported to HESA and 66 % of part-time staff in 2022/23 (HESA, 2024).

Leadership research has investigated the reasons why women have struggled to reach leadership positions (Hoyt & Murhpy, 2016). Some studies have considered the differences in leadership styles between men and women, and have found these to be limited (Calás & Smircich, 2006; Carvalho et al., 2018; Schedlitzki & Edwards, 2021). These attributes are thus not seen as the result of gender differences or behaviours in leadership style (Mendez & Busenbark, 2015). Further reasons for the lack of presence of women in leadership positions have been considered, and one of the most suggested is a lack of fit between women’s characteristics, skills and aspirations and those thought to be needed for effective leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hoyt & Murhpy, 2016; Vial et al., 2016). The lack of fit is strongly connected to a recurring tradition of a leader. This can be summarised as being white and being male. As



previously analysed, being a woman does not fit with this image of masculine leadership standards (del Carmen Triana et al., 2024; Eagly & Karau, 2002), nor with the masculine way of seeing what an ideal worker should be: constantly on calls, with high availability to work overtime, and less domestic duties (Liu et al., 2020). Historically, leadership was seen as a masculine enterprise, emphasising that men have the desirable qualities to become leaders (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Hobbins et al., 2023).

Researchers have taken different stands regarding the issue of women and leadership, and specifically so with respect of the low numbers of leaders who are women (Mendez & Busenbark, 2015). Further, rather than a focus on what women lack (Amanatullah & Tinsley, 2013; Artz et al., 2018), or underlining why they do not fit in leadership positions (Meeussen et al., 2022; Wood & Eagly, 2012), some research has argued that, conversely, women are good leaders (Eagly & Carli, 2003). In addition, scholars have highlighted the issues women face when they reach leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Srivastava & Nalawade, 2023; Vinnicombe & Mavin, 2023). Some of the key challenges identified are gender pay gaps, and differences in promotion. Further, barriers faced by women in the course of employment include the glass ceiling (Carvalho et al., 2018; Javadizadeh et al., 2024; Mistry et al., 2024; Srivastava & Nalawade, 2023) and maternal wall (Delacruz & Speer, 2023; Ma et al., 2022), which lead to women being offered fewer opportunities in the workplace (Mendez & Busenbark, 2015; Xiong et al., 2022).

Glass ceiling is a metaphor used to indicate the invisible barriers that obstacle women's career development in the workplace (Carvalho et al., 2018; Erkal et al., 2022; Glass & Cook, 2016; Heinrichs & Sonnabend, 2023; Srivastava & Nalawade, 2023; Yaghi, 2018).). A report from Creative Scotland (2017), showed that 57 % of women working in the creative industries in Scotland are more likely to work part-time and to be the primary carers of children, compared to men, who only 9 % of them described themselves like this. Moreover, 44 % of women taking part in this report also commented that they consider gender as a barrier to their career progression. Furthermore, a study conducted in 2018 by Power Play<sup>2</sup> (Power Play, 2019) on the Edinburgh Festival Fringe emphasised that men were earning an average of 60 % more than women, even if women dominated most sectors of the Fringe. This is confirmed in a further study by Creative Scotland (2024), which found the gender pay gap to still be persistent in culture and creative organisations in Scotland.

By trying to understand the, arguably, difficult situation in which women find themselves as leaders, researchers point to the reasons why they do not reach higher managerial roles alongside the challenges women must face and overcome (e.g.: Derks et al., 2011; Faniko et al., 2017; Faniko et al., 2021). In doing so, the focus has moved and the issue of being a woman leader is considered to be caused by the difficult working conditions and stereotypes women leaders face in companies (Srivastava & Nalawade, 2023; Vinkenburg et al., 2011).

### 2.3. Women and gender (in)equality in the festivals sector

The need for more research on the topic of gender, women and leadership has been suggested by several authors (e.g.: Nunkoo et al., 2020; Pritchard & Morgan, 2017). It is agreed that the tourism, hospitality, and event fields are characterised by gender inequalities, but this subject has not attracted much academic interest so far (Mooney, 2020; Walters, 2018). The tourism academy has been reluctant in assessing and engaging with its own inequalities and the role that gender plays (Jiménez-Esquinas, 2017), although this field of study is growing (Alarcón & Cole, 2019; Scheyvens, 2007; Swain, 2007; Swart et al.,

2024; Wilson & Chambers, 2023). At the same time, gender research has not been explored adequately in relation to the events industry either (Calver et al., 2023; Pielichaty, 2015). Reviews of gender research in tourism have showcased how most of the academic leaderships are men-dominated (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015). Only recent, tourism research has adopted critical, diverse, intersectional approaches, that consider gender in relation to race, age, class, and sexuality (Chambers & Rakić, 2018; Wilson & Chambers, 2023).

Gender inequalities take place in the context of events and festivals, and the focus on event organisers and staff is becoming more and more considered (Almathami et al., 2022; Almathami et al., 2024; Ehrich et al., 2022; Ellerson & Gbadamassi, 2019; Finkel & Dashper, 2020; Gisbert Gracia & Rius-Ulldemolins, 2020; Golemo, 2023; Intan, 2020; Jones, 2020; Lekalake Plaatjie, 2020; Loist & Prommer, 2019; Nissen, 2023; Platt & Finkel, 2020; Verhoeven et al., 2019; Wall-Andrews et al., 2022). Women festival goers, sexual harassments, sexism, and objectification of women's bodies have also been researched (Gisbert & Rius-Ulldemolins, 2019; Pernecky et al., 2019). There are several inequalities women face, the glass ceiling persists in the tourism, hospitality, and events industry (Villarroya & Barrios, 2022). Some of the barriers are promotion and pay gaps that favour men (Thomas, 2017; Creative Scotland, 2024), and inflexible working hours (Dashper, 2018). Generally, gender barriers are strongly connected to structural ones. While men do not have interruptions in their career advancement, women may have to take break during maternity leave (Ma et al., 2022), and after with childcare, or as main carer for elderly relatives (Delacruz & Speer, 2023; Due Billing, 2011; Friedman, 2015; Soumya & Deepti Dabas Hazarika, 2021). This is confirmed in the results of UK reports (Creative Scotland, 2017; Power Play, 2019). This becomes a problem when the structure of working, and career progression are based on the male worker, who is permitted to work longer hours, and travel (Acker, 1990; Arun et al., 2004; Leuze & Strauß, 2016). This is not generally the case for women, who are the first and main caregiver in the house (Mitchell, 2022).

Indeed, the high percentage of women working in the lower management of the festival industry could at least partly be explained by barriers associated with family and caring responsibilities (Villarroya & Barrios, 2022; Wreyford, 2013). Often the long working hours and evening and weekend commitments in festivals clash with family ones, e.g. school pick-ups (Freund et al., 2024; Freund & Hernandez-Maskivker, 2021). Maternity leave does not only cause a gap in women's career it can also create difficulties in returning to work. As example, breastfeeding and other aspects of childcare may be seen as unacceptable, i.e., social taboos. Further they might be negatively judged to go back to work rather than staying at home and look after their children (Freund et al., 2024; Grandey et al., 2020; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). Moreover, being a mother may also force women to choose a lower paid job, sometimes part-time, so that it is more compatible with their children needs (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020; Steinbring et al., 2024; Webber & Williams, 2008). This makes it difficult for women to achieve leadership or senior position. Gaps in employment are viewed negatively. Men are, instead, seen as committing to their employment and career development without break (Webber & Williams, 2008).

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research approach

Feminist research investigates the biases of research and a mainstream research epistemology which focuses on the man - and which considers women's experiences as irrelevant in the creation of knowledge (Hekman, 2007; Herron, 2023; Radtke & Stam, 1994). As investigated by other feminist researchers, social reality is characterised by contradictions, and choosing one epistemology over others to frame the work is difficult, leading to feminist epistemologies shading into one

<sup>2</sup> Power Play is an award-winning activist theatre company, they use guerrilla-style immersive theatre and data activism to fight gender inequality in UK theatre (Power Play, 2024)



another (Stanley & Wise, 1992; Zalewski, 2003). Therefore, the specific epistemology chosen for this study is between feminist standpoint (Harding, 2008; McHugh, 2014) and feminist postmodern (Letherby, 2011; Millen, 1997). The study does not want to position one standpoint as truer than others. It recognises that some women are oppressed, but that power, authority, and organisational culture have specific and personal impacts upon the women interviewed for this study. The postmodern perspective claims that the polarisation between femininity and masculinity should be broken down (Kostikova, 2013; Millen, 1997). However, it also asserts that creating a knowledge is oppressive, and a truth cannot be made (Letherby, 2011). This is why the philosophical framework chosen for this study is located between the feminist and postmodernist standpoint. The results will offer a truth of the situation of some women working in the Edinburgh festivals, without claiming to represent one truth shared by all women working in the Edinburgh Festivals.

Feminist research exposes the masculinist bias that characterises methods and research in the social science (Hekman, 2007), challenging basic assumptions in existing disciplines (Jaggar, 2008), where women and femininity have been looked and studied in contrast to men, and masculinity, as if women only exist in relation to men (Harding, 2008). At the same time, feminist research does not simply concern adding women and incorporating them into an established body of knowledge (Harding, 2008). What feminist scholars do is to work on what has been previously studied, but with a different interpretation. They criticise the perspective that research had on women as considered as less intelligent than men, using the androcentric framework (Wiley, 1990). Feminist research aims at putting light on the distortions, omissions of research, and challenging conclusions from research findings that consider evidence taken only from narrow or small samples of populations (McHugh, 2014). Moreover, feminist scholars remark the gender power dynamics that take place in many elements of women's life, research being one of them. In doing so, they show that a gender and other contextual variables can create a bias when conducting scientific research. Bias that exists in the science which is then validated and accepted by the scientific community (Rosser, 2008).

Furthermore, there has been a call for a gender approach and the use of feminist theories in the field of tourism and events, as gender has often been left on the side (Chambers et al., 2017; Figueroa-Domecq & Segovia-Perez, 2020; Pritchard & Morgan, 2017). Recent work in tourism and events has demonstrated the importance of conducting research that includes a gender perspective (Figueroa-Domecq & Segovia-Perez, 2020; Swart et al., 2024; Wilson & Chambers, 2023). It helps in understanding the different social constructions of men and women, the different opportunities they have, and the influence these have in all aspects and phases of research. In line with the aim of this study, specifically in the context of events, research that includes feminist theory also contributes to a greater understanding of the different realities, suggesting ways to reduce gender inequalities (Figueroa-Domecq & Segovia-Perez, 2020; Wilson & Chambers, 2023).

In its research design, this study adopted a qualitative approach by conducting online semi-structured interviews, with the aid of visual methods. Semi-structured interviews enabled specific topics to be addressed by the interviewer, while giving the participants the space to consider and form their own answers (Rabionet, 2011). The visual methods that were used were photo voice and photo elicitation. Photo voice is a form of photo elicitation, which is used as a tool to provoke, and elicit responses during the interview (Balomenou & Garrod, 2019; Matteucci, 2013; Richard & Lahman, 2015; Sofield & Marafa, 2019). Photo-voice is useful in supporting an action-orientated, participant-direct method (Coffey, 2023; Sutton-Brown, 2014). With photo voice, photos or images are taken or produced by the participants (Balomenou & Garrod, 2019; Coffey, 2023). Specifically, this was employed to discuss the participants' experiences and perceptions of gender inequalities in Edinburgh's festivals sector. The reasons behind these choices of qualitative methods were two-fold. The first is linked to the

philosophical framework of this study, which is feminist research. The overarching aim was to give space to women to tell their own stories. Such qualitative methods were deemed as an appropriate and adequate method to capture women's individual and personal voices and experiences of working in the arts festival in Edinburgh (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). The second reason aligns with the discussion of several scholars of tourism and event studies who forward the increased use of qualitative methods in tourism management and related disciplines as qualitative research is still used and published less in comparison to quantitative research (see for example, Nunkoo et al., 2020; Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015).

### 3.2. Data collection

The participants of this study were women who were either working in or had previously worked in one of the festivals in Edinburgh. A two-stage sampling method approach was employed (Bell et al., 2022). Initially, participants were sourced via established Edinburgh festivals websites, where contacts were publicly available. Further initial sampling was undertaken through social media channels. These channels included LinkedIn, Facebook groups for each of the festivals, the *Creative Edinburgh* website and via *Fringe Festival Connect*, a digital platform for both performers and employees. A further second stage snowball sampling approach outside of these professional online communities was employed (Morgan, 2008). This second process was in response to the challenges of finding and reaching woman working in the festivals sector of Edinburgh who were not core staff members in one of the established Edinburgh festivals, i.e., it allowed contact with people on a freelance basis. The interview protocols can be seen in Appendix 1.

The researchers acknowledge the limitation of snowball sampling and the dangers of 'closed group' referrals, i.e., limiting diversity or wider representativeness of findings. This is because any eligible participant who was not linked to the original set of informants— in this case the major Edinburgh festivals— did not have access to the study. For this reason, the researcher actively tried to search for potential participants in many different platforms, such as Facebook groups and LinkedIn search. A total of 33 Interviews took place via the Microsoft Teams online meeting platform between April and June 2022. The interviews lasted approximately one hour. All interviews were recorded, and this automatically generated a transcription. Photos and images were only shared on the participants' screen during their interviews. After 33 interviews, it was noticed that the topics and themes were similar and no new information was given, therefore saturation was reached.

The interviews were semi-structured (Brinkmann, 2014). This allowed the research to discuss specifically eight themes and have opportunity to prompt further responses. The choice of semi-structured interviews also allowed the participants to have space to tell her own story. The first question included a general question on participants' former and current roles in the Edinburgh festivals, their experience at the festivals, and if they had caring responsibility, whether for childcare of the elderly. Following that, participants were asked to identify both the positive and negative work experiences at the Edinburgh festivals that they felt comfortable to share. Thereafter, each participant discussed, respectively, what feminism meant to them, and how they felt society and cultural norms impact women. The penultimate question allowed the participants to consider what festival leadership is. Then, finally, the last question regarded how the lockdown and the spread of the virus of Covid-19 affected them [See appendix 2]. The questions were asked in a conversational way, and were based on the literature review, therefore the key themes that emerged confirmed what has been previously discussed in relation to gender issues in the tourism and hospitality sectors (e.g. Ma et al., 2022; Xiong et al., 2022). However, space was given to the participants to discuss other topics that they wanted to share, such as volunteering; gender; the festival cycle; the future of the industry and women working in festivals.



3.3. Participants

Invitation to participate to the study was initially sent to 148 women between March and May 2022. Of these, 33 participants took part in the data collection. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were given to the participants and all information, names, and links to festivals organisations, and the names of colleagues, were deleted after each interview took place.

The employment role and age of participants varied. Participants range from those in their 20s to those in their late 50s. Working experience in the festival industry was also diverse, with some having just started, right up to others with more than 30 years' experience. The role and the type of contract also were different. Table 1. illustrates the range of job roles represented by the participants.

3.4. Data analysis

Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used, as an analysis approach to uncover deeper themes from the data, such as social meanings, power relations, and giving voice to the oppressed population (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). TA remains uncommonly used to interpret written text in tourism research and has only recently become more prevalent (Walters, 2016). Following Braun and Clarke (2006) the approach consisted of six steps. The first step was to familiarise yourself with the data, which meant to read through the transcriptions several times. Second, was an initial generation of codes, collating data relevant to each code. Codes were initially divided depending on the questions answered. The third step involved searching for themes, which is when codes are grouped together into potential themes. The fourth step was to review themes and make sure they worked in relation to the coded extracts. Fifth was defining and naming of themes, that is to keep refining the specifics of each theme and the overall story of the analysis. Finally,

Table 1  
Participants profile.

Participant code	Job Role
Caroline	Freelance producer and art administrator
Francesca	Program manager, co-artistic director of own theatre company, board member
Laura	Community artist, project manager, festival programmer
Anna	Community engagement
Christine	Trained actor, works in film industry and event
Lucia	Work with festivals in academia and with industry
Helena	Head of development
Margaret	Program assistant, art practitioner
Jessica	Marketing officer
Rebecca	Program manager
Kate	Director of finance and commercial
Juliet	Festival Director
Lisa	Program leader
Paula	Development officer
Mary	Manages venues for Edi festivals
Annie	Environmental Sustainability Officer
Liz	Director of development and marketing
Rose	Individual giving manager
Nicky	Communities program director
Reese	Production Manager show
Eloise	Festival Manager
Olivia	Programme manager
Charlotte	Festival coordinator
Maddie	Production Manager
Emma	Founder and event manager
Amelia	Marketing and communications
Isabella	General Manager
Victoria	Chief Executive
Michelle	Festival Director
Melanie	Head of learning and engagement
Lucretia	Programme Manager
Betty	Various several experienced in the past
Geri	Head of marketing and communication

the sixth step was the production of the data discussion. Data analysis was undertaken using a Miro Board, an online visual tool, where codes were first generated, and then grouped into themes. Data from the transcripts was saved, so that continuous reviewing of the themes in relation to the data and the codes was possible.

4. Results and discussion

According to TA used for the data analysis, three main themes with related subthemes emerged from the interviews. These can be summarised as follows. The first theme was men being favoured in festival organisations and having higher roles. The second theme was around how maternity impacts and hinders women's careers and thirdly, an overview of leadership still being seen as masculine was a key theme. The following discussion is focused on these themes and the related sub-themes.

4.1. Men are favoured in the festival organisations

The first key theme emerging from the interviews was that men are favoured in festival organisations. Yet the employment in the festival sector in Edinburgh is women-dominated. Dashper (2018) had suggested that 70–80 % of staff are women. This balance of gender was also reported by participants in the present research:

*“And compared to other industries, it's always been like 90 % female. I mean that's a random fig. I've pulled, but it lets what it kind of feels like at least 90 %. it's it's quite stark. Like it's not, you know like 60 % female, 40 % male It feels very much like there'll always just be a few men in a sea of women (...) I don't know. [the reasons]”<sup>3</sup>* (Jessica).

The participants commented that working with so many women is a positive aspect of their work experience. Many highlighted it as a form of 'sisterhood' existing among them, where women in the festivals sector generally empower and support each other. Women in leading positions can therefore set an example and put effort into understanding the needs of their more junior women colleagues:

*“I think. I hope, that as I create a really supportive and enabling environment both personally, but then also professionally if I say that people need training or they're less skilled in one area than another then we'll sit down and talk about that and talk about what's the best route for support for them. Is it coaching, is it an MBA? (...) I think especially my whole approach to UM inclusion and childcare and supporting women through maternity and supporting women through care with their families. (...) Responsible for care or support in that sort of way”* (Juliet).

However, despite the high percentage (80 %) of women working in Edinburgh festivals, there is a significant factor that needs to be taken into consideration in this context (Dashper, 2018). This is the fact that men, who are the minority in terms of number of staff in festivals, usually have higher positions in these organisations. Indeed, the remaining 20 % of those working in festivals are men who generally hold higher positions, such as CEO, directors, and Board members (Dashper, 2018). The majority of women are in lower management roles (Freund & Hernandez-Maskivker, 2021). On the matter, Francesca points out: *“The typical board ... When you think of a board, you know, it's white: pale male and stale and that's the type of board member.”*

Indeed, there are several ways men are favoured in the industry, and often chosen over women, as Francesca adds:

*“I think there is a tendency to go for what you know. And if men are still leading the industries, you know, if men are still the artistic directors of the majority of theatres across the UK, if they're the artistic directors of*

<sup>3</sup> 1 The verbatim comments are presented as said, without editing. Only the names of the participants have been changed for anonymity.



*the majority of festivals in the UK. You choose what you know and you know men. We're perpetuating this constant Cookie Cutter type scenario" (Francesca).*

#### 4.1.1. Men get more career opportunities

The first subtheme of theme one was concerned with how men are given more opportunities to work on their career compared to women and consequently the festivals are led by men:

*"I could always feel that I don't know that the male presence was more dominant to be honest (...) if I think about the festival, to be honest, yes, it's more male lead" (Rebecca).*

Many participants commented around the same theme as to that stated by Rebecca that festivals are led by men. Men do get more opportunities in the festival industries, and this would explain why fewer women have senior positions, as Francesca says: *"There's also less for us to pick because there's less men and they get the opportunities first"*.

An additional reason suggested by participants to understand why this happens is childcare. This causes women to struggle to get promotions as they have breaks in their career or go back to work with part-time roles, as will be discussed in more detail later, in section 4.3. This break, or gap, caused by childcare particularly affects the dominant model of career progression, which requires linearity and continuity (Arun et al., 2004). As Acker's (1990) discussion around the theory of gender organisations suggests, the norm for organisational structures and processes is based on the man worker's behaviour and perspectives, with his working-time arrangements. In this context, part-time roles are seen as an obstacle to the career. Working overtime, travelling, and constant availability are all considered as the norm (Leuze & Strauß, 2016).

This situation is reflected in the report by Creative Scotland (2017), where it was highlighted that women were more likely to work part time, and be the primary carer of children, while men in the sectors are more likely to work in senior roles, and to earn more.

*"(Asked why more men at director level): I think it is probably to do with people going on maternity leave. I know women who have left the industry because they just weren't earning enough money, similarly with men. And I think that often again we support men in going for jobs that are kind of the next step. I think there's a language within how we've talked about career development with men that is very much about attainment and getting to the top level. Whereas I think with women it's often much more about like are you happy with where you're at rather than do you want an X thing? Umm, so I think that can kind of like maybe change perceptions." (Olivia).*

#### 4.1.2. Women and the attitude of feeling guilty to work on their career

The second subtheme of theme one considers the situation from the point of view of women and how they feel guilty to work on their career and how women are usually not prepared to discuss and negotiate raises, promotions, and salaries when compared to men. The reasons why they are not proactive on these matters might be caused by social factors, such as how women are socialised not to be too pushy (Artz et al., 2018), or fear to be considered unlikable (Amanatullah & Tinsley, 2013). This goes back to how children are educated, and how parents and teachers encourage little boys to be assertive, while little girls need to show empathy and be egalitarian (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007). These gender roles continue also when it comes to choosing a job. As Laura and Nicky state:

*"So there's no notion of who takes up space, who's allowed to take up space, who has been trained to take up space, to ask for more. And I think all of those things come into play. (...) We were trained to be administrators, to be caretakers, the ones behind the scenes fixing it" (Laura).*

*"I would say in terms of the salary question, I think as our sort of social conditioning up until this point, although I think it is changing, thank God, is that, you know women would undervalue themselves and men would overvalue themselves. You know, as women were kind of taught to be at smaller and men are taught to be the bigger. And so I think that comes from that to be honest. And I think there's a level of arrogance, I suppose, for men that women maybe don't have. Not all women would have." (Nicky).*

Women are subject to negative reactions when their behaviour is seen as too masculine, being for example viewed as agentic, or self-promotional (Amanatullah & Tinsley, 2013). Indeed, women might be seen to make fewer sacrifices for their careers, compared to men who spend less time with the family, work more hours and do more overtime. But external factors, such as the weight and responsibility of childcare on them, the discriminations they experience at work and the perception of not being the right fit to be at the top might all influence women's decision to work on their career (Meeussen et al., 2022). Internal choices are strongly impacted by external factors, being how women and men are socialised, how men are traditionally encouraged to focus on themselves and work, while women are directed to focus on the family (Wood & Eagly, 2012).

The rhetoric of the choice, as in women who actively choose not to work on their career, implies that men and women have the same opportunities (Meeussen et al., 2022). Given the inequalities women face in the workplace, this is not the case. The following quotes exemplify an inequality of choice and feelings of selfishness and guiltiness considering a career felt by women and identified in the literature. Lucia discusses the pressures on work and career, and then Nicky discusses how women might be prone to work for less:

*"I think you have to be quite driven and also you maybe have to be a bit selfish at times. You know lots of times I had to go away and you know, leave my kids and not be there for their birthday or something because I had to do something that was going to help my career. So it is a massive balancing act and constantly feeling guilty, but I'm sure men don't feel" (Lucia).*

*"And I think like in terms of women as a whole, I just think that there needs to be kind of a bit of a, there needs to be a look at the sector as a whole in terms of like resource within the sector because actually I do think part of the reason that the arts is underfunded and badly paid probably does come down to the fact that there's a lot of women and we have we do accept less and actually we need to stop doing that and be a bit more forthright about what we deserve in terms of what we're doing" (Nicky).*

#### 4.2. Being a mother and working in the festivals impact your work and career

The second major theme emerging from the data was that women returning to work after maternity leave face several challenges. This is particularly because the male career model persists, along with the belief that the worker will devote completely to their careers, working extremely long hours and with no hindrances from their personal life (Webber & Williams, 2008). Therefore women, after maternity leave, to adjust to childcare, might have to downgrade their position, if their managerial role requires a full-time commitment. Women with children are also not considered for promotion, and the time spent at home after giving birth causes a gap in their career and professional life (Schedlitzki & Edwards, 2021).

Moreover, typical work schedules are often not designed for mothers, with office hours clashing with children's nursery and school collections. This was the experience of some participants, such as Christine and Laura, who had to turn down job offers due to certain roles not being suitable for mothers of young children.



*“Other downsides are when you do have caring responsibilities and they’re not taken into considerations. And I’ve had to turn down jobs because of that” (Christine).*

*“If you’re a festival programmer, the way that festival program works at the moment is a sort of like prestigious position. It’s generally full-term role. It generally requires lots of travel, lots of antisocial working hours. That’s not gonna work if you are running a family running a household” (Laura).*

According to the [The Scottish Government \(2022\)](#), maternity leave can be up to 52 weeks, while paternity leave is either one week or two consecutive weeks. Eligible employees can also take unpaid parental leave to look after their child. Shared paternal leave was introduced in 2014, and it makes 50 or the 52 weeks of maternity leave transferable to the other social or biological parent ([Atkinson, 2017](#)). However, the initial division of length of leave between mother and father reinforces the gendered roles, the expectations of the woman to be a natural caregiver ([Mitchell, 2022](#)). As Anna says: *“The UK’s position on maternity leave then sets you up for childcare to be the women’s job.”*

Women, then, might even select jobs which are at a lower pay, but more compatible with care ([Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020](#)). Part-time roles are one of the solutions women adopt when returning to work, experiencing a stressful schedule among work, childcare, and housework ([Webber & Williams, 2008](#)). Those roles come with a series of repercussions on women careers, such as career gaps, no access to managerial roles, increased gender inequalities and gender pay gap, to name a few ([Webber & Williams, 2008](#)).

*“The fact that women have years gaps that they come back into the workplace, that they have caring responsibilities so they tend to want part time roles.” (Laura).*

*“It’s difficult because you know, we’ve got not lots of money, it’s just, you know, in terms of flexibility, if you give cause cause what we’re not heard before, generally once women have children quite often, not always, but quite often they might want to have a flexible work in contacts. So they’re not in full time, which is great, you know, I did it myself, but in a smaller organization that can be harder to manage.” (Kate).*

The difficulty for some mothers to work in Edinburgh’s festivals is that many of them take place over the summer (from June until August) when there are also school holidays. This requires them to either have a partner or family members who can take time off while they work most hours every day at the festivals: *“The worst bit is over the festival. And I mean, I just didn’t see my kids at all.” (Liz).*

Or they might decide not to take the job and leave the industry:

*“I mean, one thing I would say is we’re not allowed to take any holidays in August and it’s quite hard to take in holidays in July. So if I had been younger and my children were at school, I wouldn’t have applied for the job. So and I could see that actually the festival that we don’t have many people, but there’s nobody had a baby, for example, since I’ve been there, ohh no one person did, but then she left” (Kate).*

*“When I had my first child, I, you know, I had to pull away from events because I couldn’t work evenings and weekends.” (Christine).*

#### 4.3. Leadership in festival organisations is seen as stereotypically male

As discussed in the literature review, the dichotomy between male and female is strictly connected to leadership and how the leader is seen and perceived ([Ackerly & True, 2010](#)). The stereotypical way of looking at a leader as someone who must be powerful and aggressive brings the idea that women, who are seen as communal and caring, cannot be good leaders ([Núñez Puente & Gámez Fuentes, 2017](#)). This happens in some areas of the Edinburgh festivals as well, where women are not supposed to have qualities considered to be male, such as being agentic and aggressive, but are expected to be caring and able to find a compromise.

As Victoria shares her experience, this situation puts women in a difficult contradictory role. They should not display stereotypical men behaviours, but are not allowed to have stereotypical women emotions:

*“But there’s a huge part of the XX which is incredibly sort of corporate and commercial and structured, (...) slightly more aggressive masculine and the festival you find that you have people take a position that they expect you to come and compromise on. There’s there’s this idea that you know where the problem solvers as women, we’re the ones who will come in and solve the problem and find the compromise. While you know the sort of great thought, they either intellectually marvelous or artistically marvelous men and just sort of get to say what they want. And then it’s up to us to fix the problem.” (Victoria).*

*“All female emotion is unacceptable. I’m not allowed to burst into tears. I’m not allowed to shout at you. I’m not allowed to be equally as aggressive because each of those is somehow a problem in your interpretation of how I’m supposed to negotiate in this space and when you get into those difficult conversations, particularly where they where, there are gender differences and age differences as well at times where you’re like, well, would I have to be the one looking for a compromise here? What I have to be the soft one or the one who’s looking to negotiate, or the one who’s who’s looking to be open and inclusive and my language choices, why can’t I be offensive and insulting and aggressive, just like you’re being? (...) My behavior is unacceptable. Just because I’m not a man.” (Victoria).*

Think manager-think male ([Schein, 1973](#)), is the idea that only men can become leaders because by nature they have the essential traits to be one is also present in the festival sector, as Juliet comments:

*“But still some of the examples that I’ve I’ve experienced have made me think, ‘God, there’s still a very sort of male patriarchal kind of view of leadership out there at times’, you know.” (Juliet).*

Not only do women need to face challenges in the daily workplace to reach those leadership positions, as discussed previously, but gender inequalities and stereotypes continue to be present when they are leaders. Some participants in this study reported that when both men and women are in the same room, men rather than women are often not recognised as being the senior worker:

*“So I think there is that kind of assumption that If there’s a man in the room, he’ll be the boss” (Jessica).*

## 5. Conclusion

This work identified the often opaque nature of the relationships of power that much leadership theory harbours. In its review of literature, the work identified the challenges, discrepancies, and forms of leadership for women that exist in festivals. As feminist research, the research objective of this study was to understand and evaluate the issues that women who work in Edinburgh’s festivals sector might face in achieving leadership positions. The findings were diverse, and often particular to the individual participant and their experience. However, the analysis of the interviews provide data to answer the research objective, specifically presenting some prominent and recurrent themes. Women who had worked in the festivals sector for significant parts of their career reported that the representation of women leaders in Edinburgh’s festivals had improved, as it can be seen from the recent appointments of women to the Edinburgh International Festival and the Edinburgh International Book Festival. Furthermore, the environment in the Edinburgh festivals is empowering for women as they generally support each other and try to offer opportunities to junior women colleagues.

Many aspects have, however, remained challenging. As example, certain structures in the Edinburgh festivals are still men-dominated, and as research participants noted the Board of Trustees for many festivals remained dominated by “white, pale and stale” men ([BVEP, 2020](#);



Dashper, 2019; Thomas, 2017). The rules and ways of working are based on stereotypes and an aggressive way of making decisions and being leaders. Women leaders in the Edinburgh festivals sector struggle to find their place in such contexts, as they are both not allowed to adopt stereotypically masculine ways of leading, such as shouting, nor stereotypical female skills, such as being emotional (Ackerly & True, 2010; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Further, it was found that women leaders feel they are expected to compromise with male counterparts who can take on aggressive traits; while women may be patronised and looked down upon when working with a male colleague (Núñez Puente & Gámez Fuentes, 2017). On the other side, challenges are strongly connected to societal and cultural issues. Maternity is still an obstacle for women in advancing their careers; and it is assumed that responsibility for children and the elderly care remains predominantly a woman's role. This impacts women's career as they might have more career breaks and might have to choose part-time roles to have the flexibility to adjust to their caring responsibilities (Ma et al., 2022; Webber & Williams, 2008).

Edinburgh is renowned as a world festival city. Its key festivals have gained a global prominence regard progressive and inclusive arts and cultural performance. At the time of this research, our results suggest that women working in its festivals do not sense the same degree of openness with regard opportunity and form of leadership for women. This remains an important area of organisational development and research focus.

## 5.1. Implications

### 5.1.1. Theoretical implications

This study presents several theoretical implications. First, Edinburgh Festivals have been subject of many studies that look at the festivals from different perspectives, just to name a few: the tensions of making Edinburgh a festival city (McGillivray et al., 2022), Edinburgh festivals during the pandemic of Covid-19 (Ali-Knight et al., 2023; Piccio et al., 2022), festivals volunteers and workers' legal rights (Middlemiss, 2021), the festivalisation of Edinburgh (Hague, 2021). However, this paper can be seen as the first study on the situation of women working in the Edinburgh festivals.

Moreover, the study confirms gender issues which have been identified in previous research. Gender inequalities and the lack of women leaders and in senior positions in the events industry have been researched in the context of business events (Dashper & Finkel, 2020), and in terms of Industry Board memberships (Thomas, 2017). Additionally, gender inequalities from the perspective of event attendees (Platt & Finkel, 2020) and on women working in festivals (e.g.: Almathami et al., 2022; Almathami et al., 2024; Ehrich et al., 2022; Finkel & Dashper, 2020; Golemo, 2023; Intan, 2020; Jones, 2020; Lekalake Plaatjie, 2020; Nissen, 2023; Platt & Finkel, 2020; Wall-Andrews et al., 2022) have also been explored. However, this study expands the discussion on the implications that motherhood has on women and their career, the consequences that a patriarchal view of leadership has on women leaders and presents an overview of festival leadership experienced by women. Therefore, this study contributes to both leadership events literature, but also women leadership in festivals.

### 5.1.2. Practical implications

This study is a response to the paucity research relating to the role and experiences of women in festival industry and contributes to knowledge in the field of tourism, event, and hospitality research. Furthermore, its results are aligned with the 2030 Vision for Edinburgh

Festival City<sup>4</sup> (Edinburgh Festival City, 2022). One of the key issues that the Edinburgh Festivals are struggling with is, indeed, equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) (Edinburgh Festival City, 2022). The 2030 Vision for Edinburgh Festival City underlines how the pandemic exposed existing inequalities in society and how the festivals need to focus on increasing equality of opportunity, inclusion, and diversity in working conditions (Edinburgh Festival City, 2022). The findings of this research could support understanding what these inequalities are, and help the festivals organisations and leaders in Edinburgh, and elsewhere, working towards inclusion and diversity. The elements that they can focus on is to make sure mothers and women willing to start a family who work in festivals are given support throughout the pregnancy and during childcare. This can be done by creating networking and training opportunities which do not take place during school pickups time, evenings, and weekends. Given that Government support for parents is limited, companies can also consider childcare support and initiatives for women who want to go back to the industry after having been on maternity leave or those who have chosen to stay at home to take care of their children.

The study considers the Edinburgh Festivals, but it could also be conducted in other festival cities, to see, compare and evaluate if the issues are the same. Moreover, the study and its results can be applied in other related sectors, such as the events sector, but also more generally in the creative industries. In this sector, women workers, artists, and performers will also face non-standardised 9 am-5 pm office hours. The hospitality and tourism sectors, with seasonal demands similar to Edinburgh's summer festivals seasons, could also benefit from the findings of this study. Analysis of discussion in related literature has shown that issues women experience are similar. Accordingly, best practices could be shared to better support women in a range of professional environments. An example is the Menopause Group which has been introduced by the staff of one of the Edinburgh festivals, where both women and men of all ages voluntarily take part in meetings throughout the year. This has broken down the silence around a taboo topic, supporting women experiencing menopause to feel less alone, less stigmatised, and more included in the working place.

Finally, the findings around leadership skills could support women leaders to reflect upon current and future leadership practices within their individual festival setting and the festivals industry more broadly. As leadership is still seen as masculine by many working in the festival sectors, one way to overcome this challenge would be to support students who are studying towards a degree in events with mentoring so that they have the knowledge and tools to recognize leadership practices and expectations which are masculine, and how to deal with them. Furthermore, current leaders can work towards an inclusive leadership style, which overcome gender boundaries and expectations, such as collective and feminist leadership styles.

## 5.2. Limitations and future research

The limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the study considers only one setting, that is Edinburgh and its festivals. The findings are limited to Edinburgh and might not be transferable to other festival cities, in other geographical areas. Secondly, the sample of participant is limited in terms of diversity. It was difficult to reach women who are freelancers or temporary workers as their contacts were not available online. Most participants were white, middle-class women. Some of them commented that they came from a privileged background. Accordingly, they were less worried about the prospect of completing an

<sup>4</sup> The 2030 Vision for Edinburgh Festival City is based on the result of a collective internal research and external discussion with Edinburgh Festivals and Festivals Forum stakeholders, as well as local residents, artists and creatives through Creative Edinburgh, and from business through Edinburgh Chamber and Commerce (Edinburgh Festival City, 2022).



arts related degree, and the likelihood of low paid employment in the creative industries. Thirdly, the timing of this study can be seemed as a limitation. It proceeded two years affected by Covid-19. A move back to live events, and away from online or hybrid events, brought a number of new time pressures that may have restricted the numbers involved. A larger sample of participants could be considered in future study. Similarly, a more socially and ethnically diverse range of respondents may provide further insight. Fourthly, other aspects that could impact women, their working conditions, and the opportunity to move to higher roles, such as senior roles, should be considered. Among these, confidence, and the lack of it should be taken into consideration. Finally, it should be acknowledged that the Pandemic is also likely to have had an impact in the results of the study. While this is not a limitation, it is something to consider, as women were greatly impacted by this. How the Pandemic circumstances influenced their responses is not known but the struggle to home-school children, of being furloughed from their employment, and having more time taken up with caring responsibilities should be measured.

In terms of future research, it would be interesting to assess whether the situation presented here might be applicable to other festival sectors

in other geographical contexts, or transferrable to further related sectors. A comparison of different cultures and societies and their impact on the working conditions for women in the festivals sector would be interesting and could contribute greatly to the subject. An interesting comparison could be done with the cities of Australia, where several arts festivals take place, and many are led by women ([Diversity Arts Australia, BYP Group and Western Sydney University, 2019](#)). Finally, solutions to the issues that have been discussed in this study have not been considered. This can be an aspect to look in future research, for example collaborating with festival organisations in Edinburgh.

#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Benedetta Piccio:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Louise Todd:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Martin Robertson:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

#### Declaration of competing interest

None.

## Appendix A. Appendix 1

### A.1. Interview protocols

In compliance with the [Edinburgh Napier University's \(2018\)](#) Research Integrity standards, some steps were followed. First, participants were sent clearly communicated information about the project from the research, they were given two documents: the participant information sheet, with a general overview of the project, detailing the role the participant has in the study, and the Research Content Form, which participants had to sign before the interview took place.





## **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

### **PhD Research: Women, Festival Leaders, and Social Transformations: the Case of Edinburgh, the World's Leading Festival City**

This information sheet provides you with an overview of the PhD research study *Women, Festival Leaders, and social transformations: the case of Edinburgh, the world's leading festival city*, which is currently undertaken by Benedetta Piccio, PhD candidate within the Business School of Edinburgh Napier University. The following summary will give you, as a participant of this study, information about the research objectives, and your involvement. Please take time to read this information sheet carefully as this document allows you to be aware how your participation is contributing to this research. Feel free to ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

#### **The Project**

This research project aims to investigate the work situation of women working in arts festival in Edinburgh; what impact society and culture have on women's working conditions; whether there are any gender inequalities; and what arts festival leadership is.

#### **Your participation**

Your involvement will be in the form of semi-structured interviews and visual methods. Interviews will take place on Microsoft Teams, which will be recorded and transcribed. The recordings will be safely saved on Edinburgh Napier's V: Drive, only the audio and transcription will be kept and will be anonymised so that no linkage to you or your workplace can be made. The photos/images that you will decide to share with the researcher will only be shared on your screen during the interview and not sent to the researcher. No further use (e.g. for publication) will be undertaken unless consented by the participant.

Semi-structured interviews are a form of asking questions. Benedetta, the researcher, has some topics/themes that she would like to cover with you. The structure, however, is not fixed or rigid, but rather flexible. It allows the participants to tell their own stories in a sort of conversational way. The questions Benedetta will ask you concern your experience working in arts festivals in Edinburgh, for how long you have





been working in festivals and with what roles. A general overview of the arts festival working environment for women will be asked. Then, you are asked to share images and/or photos during the interviews. These images/photos should cover two topics. First, photos/images that represent positive and challenging situations for women working in arts festival. Second, photos/images that represent what leadership in festival is for the participant. These visuals can be images/photos taken specifically for the interview, or images/photos taken previously in past festivals in Edinburgh. Through these visuals, a question on the working environment will be asked to the participant. Gender inequalities, stereotypes and/or issues women might face when working in festivals might be discussed. Then, starting with a conversation around the visuals, you will help provide a model of a good leadership style in arts festival. What it means to you to be an effective leader in arts festival will be discussed.

The results of this study will help the literature in the leadership and event management to fill a gap on women in leadership in arts festivals. Moreover, the hope is to be able to provide a model of leadership style for women working in arts festivals. Finally, an analysis of the working environment for women working in festivals in Edinburgh will be provided.

Your participation is completely voluntary, you have the right to refuse participation, refuse to share images/photos, refuse to answer any question, and withdraw at any time without any consequence whatsoever.

#### **Research contact**

For any issues or questions regarding your participation in the study or to request a brief report of the research findings please contact:

**Researcher:** Benedetta Piccio - Contact Details:

**Supervisor:** Dr Louise Todd, Associate Professor in Festival and Event Management, Edinburgh Napier University - Contact Details:

Thank you for taking part in this study, your involvement is highly appreciated as part of the success of this study! Don't hesitate to get in touch with me for any further information or requests.



**Edinburgh Napier University Research Consent Form**  
**PhD Research: Women, Festival Leaders, and Social Transformations:**  
**the Case of Edinburgh, the World's Leading Festival City**

Edinburgh Napier University requires that all persons who participate in research studies give their written consent to do so. Please read the following and sign it if you agree with what it says.

1. I freely and voluntarily consent to be a participant in the research project on the topic of women and leadership in arts festivals in Edinburgh to be conducted by Benedetta Piccio, who is an PhD candidate at Edinburgh Napier University's Business School.
2. The broad goal of this research study is to investigate what the work situation for women leaders in arts festival in Edinburgh is and what leadership in festival is. Specifically, I have been asked to take part into an online interview and to either take some photos/images or to use some photos/images I already have. The interview should take no longer than one hour to complete, while the photos/images should take around 30 mins to choose and/or gather.
3. I have been told that the transcript of my responses be anonymised. My name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in any report subsequently produced by the researcher.
4. I also understand that if at any time during the interview or while selecting/supplying previous/or taking new photos/images I feel unable or unwilling to continue, I am free to leave. That is, my participation in this study is completely voluntary, and I may withdraw from it without negative consequences. However, after data has been anonymised or after publication of results it will not be possible for my data to be removed as it would be untraceable at this point.
5. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
6. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the interviews and the photos/images and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
7. I have read and understand the above and consent to participate in this study. My signature is not a waiver of any legal rights. Furthermore, I understand that I will be able to keep a copy of the informed consent form for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

I have explained and defined in detail the research procedure in which the respondent has consented to participate. Furthermore, I will retain one copy of the informed consent form for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date



In terms of confidentiality issues, accessing rights to material were also taken into consideration (Padgett, 2008). They were greatly discussed with Edinburgh Napier University's Business School Research Integrity Committee and Governance Department in detail, so that all collected data met the university's Research Data Management Policy (Edinburgh Napier University, 2015). The interview took place and were recorded on Teams and Zoom, and photos and images were only shared on the participants' screens. As soon as they were finished, the researcher downloaded the transcript, which was checked against the recording. All names of venues, festival organisations, colleagues, and any other data that could refer to the Edinburgh festivals and be associated to the participants were deleted. The video was deleted right after, while the transcripts were securely stored on the Edinburgh Napier's V.Drive.

## Appendix 2

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- Q1. Could you introduce yourself, tell me a bit about your work, your role in Edinburgh festivals? Do you have caring responsibilities?
- Q2. Thinking of the picture/image you are sharing with me, what positive experiences can you tell me about being a woman in the festival industry in Edinburgh?
- Q3. Would you say women who work in festival in Edinburgh experience difficulties in the workplace? Could you tell me what are these difficulties for women working in festivals? Do you have examples of gender inequalities you would feel comfortable to share with me and any picture/image you would like to share?
- Q4. These are the six skills considered as essential for event managers in a study conducted by Abson (2017). What do you think the skills required for leadership in festivals are? Do you think these skills are adaptable in festivals as well? Think of the image you have chosen.
- Q5. Does feminism have a role in your life? Would you consider yourself a feminist?
- Q6. Time has changed: we have experienced turbulences, difficult situations, changes, and instability. How do you think the festival industry has been adapting and transforming? How has this time and these changes affected you?
- Q7. What do you think the future for women working in arts festival look like?
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