ORIGINAL ARTICLE `OPEN ACCESS`

The Emergence and Effects of Sponsors for Women Leaders

Stefan Gröschl[1] 🆔 | Patricia Gabaldon[2] 🆔 | Tobias Hahn[3] 🆔 | Elisabeth K. Kelan[4] 🆔

[1]ESSEC Business School, Cergy-Pontoise, France | [2]IE Business School, Madrid, Spain | [3]Esade Business School, Barcelona, Spain | [4]King's Business School, King's College London, London, UK

Correspondence: Stefan Gröschl (groschl@essec.edu)

ABSTRACT

Sponsoring activities are crucial for women leaders' career advancement. We explore who the sponsors of women are, the nature of their sponsoring activities, and how these activities have influenced women careers' advancement. Based on semi-structured interviews with women leaders in France and Spain, we show the importance of combined assistive and appreciative support in sponsoring activities by superiors and by informal networks inside and outside the organization for women leaders in their early- and mid-careers. We show that women in leadership positions are predominantly sponsored by men, which differs from existing literature that advocates for homophilous propensities and the establishment of same-sex sponsoring relationships. We argue for a more structured approach to offering challenging assignments to women at every stage of their careers, and to move toward a constellation of sponsors both within and outside the organization, who can offer diverse sponsoring opportunities to women leaders at various career stages.

1 | Introduction

Scholars have suggested that career sponsoring plays a crucial role in the progression of women toward executive leadership positions within corporations (Bhide and Tootell 2018). Sponsoring has been defined as the process by which "senior, powerful people use their personal clout to talk up, advocate for and place a more junior person in a key role" (Ibarra 2019, 2). In the case of women managers, the tendency to form same-sex network relationships (i.e., homophily), means that the more senior women become, the less accessible sponsors appear since there are more men in senior positions and they seem to have a preference for sponsoring other men, women are initially less likely to profit from sponsorship (Ibarra 2019). At the same time, the limited presence of women in upper-tier roles results in a reduced accessibility of homophilous relationships for women employees.

This homophilous tendency raises questions regarding the extent to which women in senior leadership positions have benefited from sponsoring relationships and not (only) from other organizational practices or policies such as affirmative action programs or promotion quotas. If sponsoring is indeed a facilitating factor in the careers of women leaders, it becomes imperative to identify who their sponsors were and how these sponsors contributed to their career advancements. Currently, there is limited knowledge available about the sponsors and their sponsoring activities in relation to women leaders. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to understand the sponsoring dynamics in women's careers.

More specifically, we explore who the sponsors of women are, the nature of their sponsoring activities, and how these activities have helped advance the careers of women. By gaining insight into the experiences of women leaders and the sponsorship activities in their careers, we build on the call for a greater understanding about "the stories individuals tell of important career transitions" (Gustafsson and Swart 2020, 1200). Encouraged by the suggestions of several scholars of women's career development that social support plays an important role in their career progression (see Fernando, Cohen, and Duberley 2018; Fouad et al. 2016; Schmitt 2021), we employ four key typologies of social support to classify sponsoring activities in our study: informational, instrumental, emotional, and appraisal support (Jolly, Kong, and Kim 2021). Informational and instrumental support are more tangible and can be characterized as assistive support. Emotional and appraisal support, more intangible, can be defined as appreciative support (Da Costa et al. 2018; Tucker, Jimmieson, and Bordia 2018).

Based on semi-structured interviews with women in leadership positions in three multinational companies in male-dominant industries in France and Spain, we contribute to the sponsorship literature by showing how sponsoring activities are predominantly based on a mix of assistive and appreciating support by superiors and by members of informal networks inside and outside the organization during women leaders' early- and mid-careers. We offer two main findings that advance the literature. First, we show that women in leadership positions are predominantly sponsored by men, which differs from existing literature that advocates for homophiles tendencies and/or the establishment of same-sex network relationships in the context of sponsoring relationships. Second, our findings highlight the importance of combined assistive and appreciative support in sponsoring activities targeted at women.

We start our paper by firstly reviewing the literature of career sponsoring and the concept of homophily, and their significance in facilitating the career progression of women, before providing an overview of the key works of social support.

2 | Theoretical Background

2.1 | The Concept of Career Sponsorship

Career sponsoring is defined as the process by which a powerful individual uses his/her influence to support and campaign for a more junior person to progress upwards in his/her career (Ibarra 2019). Sponsors provide the sponsored person with assignments that increase their visibility at the top of the organization, and broker introductions that enable greater accessibility for the person sponsored to executive management levels (Bono et al. 2017). According to Kennedy and Jain-Link (2019), sponsors' key responsibilities include using "their organizational capital, both publicly and behind closed doors"; pushing "for their protégé's promotion"; and protecting them "from critics and naysayers as they explore out-of-the box ideas" (3).

Often the terms sponsor and sponsorship are used synonymously with the terms mentor and mentorship (Helms, Arfken, and Bellar 2016). However, according to Friday, Friday, and Green (2004), the concepts of mentoring and sponsoring clearly differ from each other. Mentoring focuses predominantly on the organizational socialization of newcomers and on helping high potentials with aligning to the organizational culture (Ostroff and Kozlowski 1993). Mentors focus on counseling and advising their protégés by providing them with encouragement, feedback, and advice rather than advocating and promoting them (Fowler and O'Gorman 2005). Mentors can be found at different levels of the organization and are not necessarily in a position of power or great authority. Mentoring is fairly limited in relation to active support and levels of public commitment (Ibarra 2019). Supporting Information S1: Appendix 1 summarizes the key characteristics of sponsorship and mentorship.

In the past, women managers have frequently been excluded from strong support and public commitment in their career advancement (Allemand et al. 2022). Instead, women managers have engaged in activities such as mentoring, where advice is imparted and role modeling can provide inspiration (Adamson and Kelan 2019), and networking with other women which is used for "social support and to overcome macho cultures" (Broadbridge 2010, 815). While these activities provide senior women managers with community building, friendships, and social support (Mavin 2008), they do not produce the career opportunities to advance them into top management positions (Broadbridge 2010).

2.2 | Sponsors' Backgrounds

Scholars have argued that at a top management level, the stakes are higher than at entry levels, and people tend "to gravitate to those who are like them on salient dimensions such as gender" (Ibarra 2019, 3). In other words, "powerful men will sponsor and advocate for other men when leadership opportunities arise" (Ibarra 2019, 3). These homophilous tendencies amongst men are amplified by the fact that "there are simply more men around in organizations for other men to form network ties with" (Benschop 2009, 220). Moreover, like with mentoring relationships (see Morgan and Davidson 2008), having men to sponsor women might lead to assumptions of a sexual relationship. In turn, sponsoring relationships between women are fewer as they are constrained by the availability of women in powerful leadership positions (Ibarra 1992). Within men dominated contexts such as the ones in our study, low numbers of women sponsors are also explained by their fear that sponsoring other women could be perceived as being motivated by favoritism or by their support for greater gender diversity rather than merit (Snellman and Solal 2023). Because of these perceptions and the homophilous tendencies amongst men, women seem to rarely benefit from sponsoring opportunities at senior management levels (Benschop 2009). Nonetheless, because of homophilous tendencies among men and the limited presence of women in their immediate professional surroundings, research has demonstrated that women often develop networks

beyond their organization (Groysberg 2008), which suggests that women's sponsors might stem from more varied sources beyond the focal organization.

2.3 | Social Support

Scholars of women's career progression have argued that social support in form of emotional and appreciative support is important for their professional advancement (Fernando, Cohen, and Duberley 2018; Schmitt 2021). Social support as appreciation from colleagues and superiors is crucial for women's perseverance and career advancement in professions with marked gender imbalances such as engineering (Fouad et al. 2016). Social support provided by partners and women's networks as emotional support also appears to be a significant factor in shaping women's professional trajectories (Schmitt 2021).

Social support has been defined as the "psychological or material resources that are provided to a focal individual by partners in some form of social relationship" (Jolly, Kong, and Kim 2021, 229). Within the workplace context, the presence of social support has been associated with positive outcomes such as job satisfaction, either directly or through buffering negative effects on such outcomes (Harris, Winskowski, and Engdahl 2007), and job autonomy and flexibility (Allen et al. 2013). Key types of social support include informational, instrumental, emotional, and appraisal support (Jolly, Kong, and Kim 2021). Informational support is providing someone with information or advice to solve problems during a time of stress. Instrumental support includes the provision of concrete assistance and resources such as time and money (French et al. 2018). Informational and instrumental support are of a tangible nature and can be characterized as assistive support. Emotional support consists of feelings of trust, empathy, care, and love (French et al. 2018). Appraisal support focuses on the provision of evaluative feedback by others, and the communication of information relevant to self-evaluation (Malecki and Demaray 2003). Emotional and appraisal support are of an intangible nature and can be characterized as appreciative support.

Based on these categorizations of social support, we explore the sponsoring dynamics in women's careers, in particular, who the sponsors of women are and the nature of their sponsoring activities, and how these have helped advance the careers of women. As most discussions on sponsoring and gender focus on homophilous relationships and sponsor effectiveness (see Ertug et al. 2022), extant studies on the topic of career sponsors for women leaders offer limited insights on the identities of sponsors and the nature of the support women receive through sponsorship. We focus on women who made it into senior positions and explore if and how women in senior leadership positions have profited from career sponsorship.

3 | Methodology

Considering the exploratory and inductive nature of our study, with the aim to understand rather than measure and test, we decided to apply a qualitative research design. Using a qualitative research approach allowed us to provide rich descriptions of the experiences, perspectives, and interpretations from the standpoint of our participants (Denzin and Lincoln 2008).

3.1 | Data Collection

We conducted 57 semi-structured in-depth interviews with women leaders in three multinational companies. Two of the multinational companies were in France and one multinational company was based in Spain. One of the companies was an auditing firm, while the other two companies operated in the oil and gas sector. Both sectors have been described as being traditionally man-dominated industries (Bergman and Hallberg 2002). Using semi-structured in-depth interviews allowed us to explore deeply personal and often sensitive issues, and generate the richness of data critical for the study's overall aim of better understanding the factors that enabled our participants to achieve leadership positions (De Jonckheere and Vaughn 2019; Pratt 2009). We recruited participants by contacting the top management teams of the three companies, who then compiled (and offered us) the lists of all senior female executives we could contact and interview. All our respondents held executive positions such as division heads, directors, partners, (senior) vice presidents, and executive board members from across different areas such as marketing, operations, finance, human resources, or auditing. Supporting Information S1: Appendix 2 provides an overview of the demographics in our sample of participants.

The interview protocol included open-ended questions about the enabling factors that participating women leaders encountered in their careers and that played a crucial role for achieving the leadership position that they held at the time of the interviews. Key questions covered the role of the interviewees' families, education and training, career experiences, mentors, sponsors, and networks. Each interviewee was asked the same open-ended questions in the same order. At the same time, the interviewees were encouraged with probing questions to elaborate on their responses and introduce ideas and relevant aspects not covered in the interview protocol. The interview protocol is included in Supporting Information S1: Appendix 3. Fifteen interviews were conducted at the French auditing firm, 20 at the French oil and gas firm, and 22 at the Spanish oil and gas firm. Interviews were conducted by phone in French and English by three of the four coauthors individually. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 min.

3.2 | Data Analysis

Interviews in French were translated into English using professional translation services. The translated interviews and all other interviews were transcribed using professional transcribing services. The interviews were inductively coded with NVivo 12 software by two of the authors simultaneously, to identify the success factors that women leaders mentioned in the interviews. The data were analyzed multiple times by two of the authors individually. In keeping the data analysis inductive, we developed a deeper understanding of participants'

experiences in terms of their sponsoring activities. Such an interpretative approach toward analyzing data has been advocated in qualitative research that focuses on the "behaviour of humans [...] from the point of view of those being studied" (Bryman and Bell 2003, 46). Interpretations are considered an integral part in exploratory studies such as ours that "live" from the opinions and views of their participants (Denzin 1989).

Since most of the interviewees were unfamiliar with the academic distinction between sponsor, mentor, and role model, the interviewees used these terms interchangeably. In the analysis, we therefore looked for the *quality* of sponsoring as defined above rather than the actual word used in the interviews. The reason for looking for meaning rather than words was to address any variances of how participants understood and described sponsors and sponsoring relationships and activities. By expanding the categories and subcategories, participants′ sponsoring relationships could be captured and analyzed even though the participant used a different terminology to describe this relationship. The categories and subcategories also reflect the emphasis on developments, relationships, and their dynamics.

In every interview, the analysis captured all references and indications to factors that enabled the women leaders to move up in their careers. By doing so, we identified a set of initial codes in the interviews. The quotes categorized under these initial codes were narrowed down into 12 first order themes before abstracting them further into four principal second order themes (Dacin, Dacin, and Matear 2010). The four second order themes focus on sources of relationships from which sponsoring opportunities emerged and developed, profiles of sponsors, categories of social support types and their influence on sponsorship, and outcomes and consequences of the sponsoring relationships for women leaders. Supporting Information S1: Appendix 4 summarizes the first and second order themes and provides illustrates quotes for each theme.

3.3 | Trustworthiness

All our data (audio recordings and transcripts) as well as the analysis (NVivo and Excel files) were kept in a shared cloud space ensuring consistency during the data collection phase and throughout the analysis. Samples of the data were systematically coded by two of the authors in parallel to ensure consistency and cases of inconsistency were resolved in discussions between these two coauthors. At later stages of the analysis, we also used Microsoft Excel to facilitate the identification of patterns in the data. Finally, we also presented preliminary findings at workshops in the case companies to get feedback from the field and to confirm the patterns and trends found in the data collection.

4 | Findings

The different second and first order themes form the structure for presenting the key findings of this study. We use quotes to illustrate our participants′ views in their own words and to demonstrate how the findings and interpretations have emerged from the data. We paraphrased and simplified some quotes for greater clarity. In a few instances, some verbatim quotes contained significant stumbling and disjointedness. In those cases, we paraphrased some wordings of the quote to smoothen the readability without affecting the content, meaning, message, or argument of the quote. We selected quotes based on their illustrative nature, brevity, and their representativeness of the patterns in the data (Eldh, Årestedt, and Berterö 2020). The interview extracts illustrate how interviewees talked about their careers.

4.1 | Sources of Sponsoring Relationships

4.1.1 | Programs, Networks, Friendships, and Other Relationships

Many of the participants highlighted informal and loose networks and relationships inside and outside of their companies from which their sponsoring opportunities emerged. As for Participant 38T: "The whole mentor, sponsor network thing has always been totally informal, totally undefined, totally loose." It seems that the women leaders did not develop their informal networks and contacts for the purpose, or with the objective of creating sponsoring relationships and opportunities.

It was rare that the women leaders mentioned the existence of in-house sponsoring programs. While such initiatives existed, none of the interviewed women leaders named formal sponsoring programs as sources of their sponsoring. In the case of the *Women Initiative* described by Participant 11D, the latter explained that "it remained an initiative with wonderful values [...] but in practice, it is still a very men-driven environment" (Participant 11D). This statement indicates that institutionalized sponsoring programs and formalized career advancement initiatives might not be able to substitute personalized sponsoring efforts by individuals in positions of power and influence. Even though programs such as the above *Women Initiative* create pools of high-profile women candidates, they might not provide these women the necessary visibility amongst decision makers, or as indicated by Participant 11D, homophilous tendencies hinder their advancement to the very top.

Equally unsuccessful as sponsoring sources seem to be institutionalized support structures such as company-wide women networks and associations. Most women leaders agreed that such company driven women networks and associations provided a sense of solidarity, and were useful for comforting purposes, and for sharing and exchanging advice amongst each other regarding personal well-being and other career nonspecific aspects. Yet, participants acknowledged that such formal women networks did not serve as a source of sponsoring or provide career-enabling factors such as visibility with which they could make it to the top. As outlined further in the subsequent sections, sponsoring opportunities that emerged from informal networks seem to have happened rather ad hoc, unplanned, and unexpected.

4.1.2 | Supervisors and Superiors

Participants also named bosses, managers, and direct supervisors as sponsors for the women leader:

> This boss was completely my sponsor [...]. He worked a lot to give me visibility in the organization.
>
> (Participant 34R)

Participant 34R not only named the boss her sponsor, but also supports this labeling with a characteristic (i.e., visibility) that is aligned with the scholarly definition of a sponsor. As will be discussed later, the participant's explanation that her boss worked a lot to give her visibility indicates further, how the social support of her boss seemed to be of an assistive nature.

Amongst the participants, several women leaders named at least one or two of their bosses as having played an important role in their career advancement and development: "The last one has been my direct boss for a few years" (Participant 49T) "The last one" indicates that there were other sponsors in the past who had supported her in her career advancement. The quote also shows that sponsoring is not a singular activity that can take place only at a certain point in the career of the protégée as another participant explained:

> So, I had the chance, first, to be head of a production plant when I was thirty years old, which is quite young. Then, several times, I was proposed roles [...] and I took the challenge.
>
> (Participant 52T)

The quote illustrates how sponsoring happened multiple times throughout a protégée's career with sponsoring opportunities often presenting themselves early and later in the participants' careers.

4.2 | Sponsors' Profiles

4.2.1 | Men and Women Sponsors

No discernible patterns were found in the profiles or backgrounds of the sponsors mentioned by the women leaders, with the exception that all but two of the sponsors identified were men.

> When I became partner, it was a man that helped me with that [...] I became partner the year that CEO promoted eight other women to be partners. He strongly believed in women.
>
> (Participant 3D)

Several women leaders explained the reason for their sponsors being a man with the fact that "in like 20 years of working, I've never had up to very recently a female boss" (Participant 38T). Participant 38T's experience reflects Benschop's (2009) observation that top management teams have numerically been dominated by men; or as other scholars have stated more recently, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions (Huston et al. 2019).

According to our participants, none of the bosses, managers, and direct supervisors who sponsored them were part of a formal company-sponsoring program that pressured them to engage in sponsoring activities.

> Our former managing partner had this [...] capability of identifying the best in you, and it was irrespective of whether you were a woman or a man. To him, it was completely indifferent. If you are the best person to do something, he would assign it to you [...] without any differentiation, or even thoughts like, "no, I'm not going to do this because she is a woman" or [...] "I need to give it to her because she's a woman."
>
> (Participant 11D)

The quote suggests that many of the bosses who acted as sponsors successfully for the women leaders in our research did so at their own will. This suggestion is indirectly in line with Ibarra's (2019, 4) observation that company enforced sponsorship programs do not work because "you cannot mandate that they [senior executives] spend their personal capital advocating for people they don't know well or may not be bullish about." In other words, sponsoring seems more likely to be successful when being intrinsically driven than externally forced. Ibarra's (2019) observation implies further that sponsors know their protégés, and are familiar with, and close to their work—which is likely to be the case when being a direct supervisors, manager, or boss—as seen with many of the women leaders in our sample.

4.2.2 | Sponsors From Outside and Inside the Organization

While the titles of sponsors such as "boss" and "direct manager" indicate that they are at the inside of their protégées' organization, several sponsors came from informal networks outside of the women leaders' companies. These sponsors included former coworkers and colleagues, managers from competitors within the same industry, and like in the case of Participant 44T, a former student peer "with whom I went to law school 25 years ago," and who became a recruiter introducing her to a new professional opportunity. These findings extend the standard description of sponsors, that is, they are higher ranked, powerful, and in the same organization to being at similar hierarchical levels and outside of the protégé's organization. Engaging with outside sponsors might create a wider palette of career opportunities for women leaders that sponsors within the same organization might not be able to provide due to the lack or narrowness of internal growth opportunities. Lastly, sponsors from informal networks outside the organization of the women leaders were likely to engage voluntarily in their sponsoring activities, as there was no pressure or obligation from the protégé's organization to act as a sponsor.

4.3 | Role of Social Support in the Development of Sponsoring Relationships and Activities

Quotes above such as Participant 15R's description of how her boss worked toward providing her with greater visibility indicates how the social support of her boss is of an assistive nature. However, similar to some other participants' responses about the role of social support in their sponsorships, of what this work consisted of remains assumptive. It could have been the sharing of critical information, concrete assistance, and resources such as time and money, or a combination of assistive social supports. We, therefore, decided to present and discuss our findings by differentiating them by their assistive and appreciative nature rather than by their subcategorizations (i.e., informational, instrumental, emotional, and appraisal).

4.3.1 | Assistive Support

Assistive support combines forms of information and instrumental support. Both support forms are of a tangible nature and provide information or advice to solve problems, and concrete assistance and resources such as time and money. Many of the assisting sponsoring activities included assignments that either stretched or challenged participants' original jobs—as described by Participant 49T:

> Working these 3 years with you [boss], you've stretching me all the time, you've been asking for more and more, [...] there was no limit and he was really stretching me hard, and I achieved things that I would never have achieved. So, he stretched me hard, and that really helped, I think.
>
> (Participant 49T)

As the quote illustrates, stretch assignments focus on tasks that confront managers with continuously increasing levels of challenges. Often, they grow in scope and reach, provide high visibility, and are of strategic importance (Macke et al. 2022). Stretch assignments provide the experiential learning to develop the skills and competencies needed for career advancement and leadership development (Macke et al. 2022), and "put managers out of their comfort zone" (Macaux 2010, 49)—as described by one of the participants:

> The two bosses that I had during those two periods were very key in my career because they really helped me to grow as a professional, they trusted me, they asked me for doing things in a different way. They put me in some difficult positions. Sometimes they asked to do work in different ways to be out of my comfort zone.
>
> (Participant 23R)

Sponsors put their protégées out of their comfort zones not only by stretching the in their current assignments but also by providing and assisting them with new roles and positions. Another form of assistance amongst sponsors was the provision of fallback options. As it was the case of a woman leader who talked about how they experienced a lack of ambition and self-confidence when transitioning to a role in sales and marketing after working for 4 years in engineering. It was the assistive support of her sponsor in form of a fallback option that encouraged her to take on a change of career:

> So, when it came to looking at career options, when this one came up, that you had an environment of trust and openness to say, "Well, go and try. If you like it, then you stay, if you don't, you come back."
>
> (Participant 40T)

By providing various stretch assignments, new roles and positions in their protégés' careers, sponsors assisted participants to be strategic in their career planning and advancement. Such strategic and proactive career planning was not a priority amongst many of the participants prior to having met and been pushed by their sponsors. Asked about if she ever experienced planned sponsorship opportunities, Participant 38T responded:

> Never ever really actively and proactively and in a structured manner [...] However, I would say in a very loose, informal and undefined manner, probably from time to time just by affinities with this group or knowing this person. [...] I've never [planned sponsorship opportunities] in a structured, proactive or conscious manner, no.
>
> (Participant 38T)

The quote suggests that women leaders enter sponsoring relationships in an ad hoc and unstructured way—which could be the result, or a reflection of the informal nature of the networks from which many of the sponsoring opportunities emerged. Furthermore, participants' reactive approach toward seeking sponsoring relationships and opportunities could be due to an expectation that their work and achievements should speak for themselves "rather than actively going around and promote myself" (Participant 43T) or a limited confidence in their capabilities and potential. The latter is why sponsors did not only provide assistive support, but also appreciative support in form of encouragement and reassurance, and a showing of belief in their protégée—as the following subsection shows.

4.3.2 | Appreciative Support

Appreciative support is intangible and includes forms of emotional and appraisal support. They provide feelings of trust, empathy, care, and love, and focus on the provision of evaluative feedback by others, and the communication of information relevant to self-evaluation. In the case of Participant 23R, the sponsors provided the opportunities to work in different ways; while at the same time, their belief in their protégée and her potential reassured and encouraged the latter to take on the challenges that came with these opportunities. For many women leaders their sponsors' beliefs in their potential and talent was critical in their career advancement and helped them to "achieve things that I would never have achieved" (Participant 49T). This appreciating support was critical for the

protégées when feeling pushed by their stretch assignments to cope with "the anxiety induced by uncertainty and risk taking" (Macaux 2010, 49). The following example illustrates the importance of appreciating support in stretch assignments. One of the woman leaders was asked by her supervisor to work on an oil field in Libya:

> I was the first female taking a leadership position in that country [...]. [In] the country and the culture no women are at work [...] it was to prove myself how was I dealing with men within a country [where] normally, there work men with men and no women [are] involved in leadership positions; so, I was really doubting myself.
>
> (Participant 36R)

For navigating through the self-doubts and anxiety that was triggered by a situation of change (new country) and plurality (divergent demands from different contexts and actors), she benefited from the appreciative support of her supervisor:

> the key point [...] was the support of my boss [...] at that moment. [...]. In Libya, he introduced me in the country as a very capable [and] smart person, and I think it was very key. After my work there, I [had] really achieved respect from all the teams.
>
> (Participant 36R)

What stands out in this quote is the simultaneous interplay of appreciative and assistive support: The boss helped to alleviate his protegee's self-doubts (appreciative support) by introducing her in the country as very capable (assistive support). The reputation boosting introduction is instrumental because it credentializes the protégée in the eyes of key players in that context.

Appreciative support also came through the provision of trust and empathy that women leaders received from their sponsors. Numerous participants described how in the early stages of their careers they had limited confidence in their capabilities and potential. As one participant explained, it never crossed her mind to be a director in the company one day. For her "that was very far away from my capabilities, and so I never thought of all that" (Participant 23R). In these situations, sponsors provided appreciative support in form of "putting a lot of confidence" in their protégées (Participant 23R). Other appreciative support for women leaders included sponsors' affirmation of the appropriateness of their protégées' decisions to accept and thrive through challenging assignments:

> I had a strong support from one of my previous bosses, who really convinced me that it was a good decision to take this job. So, I was also helped to take my decision because I had a boss who supported me and who convinced me that it was a good decision.
>
> (Participant 42T)

As indicated above, many women leaders received assistive and appreciative support simultaneously during a sponsoring activity. In the case of a woman director of an engineering division, for example, her first boss "was very confident of" her and gave her repeatedly professional opportunities to grow and develop professionally. Later, she had several other bosses who had equally great confidence in her abilities, and as a result "supported my technical development and all my career" (Participant 37R). For stretch assignments, many women leaders recalled how assistive support in form of a new position, a move into a different country, and/or additional responsibilities was often provided simultaneously with appreciative support—as illustrated by one participant who held various managing director and CEO positions in different countries:

> At many points in my career, when people entrust you with such responsibilities, where you have to stretch out - those have been key, have had the greatest impact really' [...]. People deciding to trust you even though you don't tick all the boxes; when they actually give you the opportunity to do a job that makes you stretch and grow, like giving you the opportunity to run out a site, or the opportunity to change completely from one type of job to another type which you haven't done before.
>
> (Participant 38T)

This combination of assistive and appreciative support seems critical to many women leaders when engaging in sponsored activities.

4.4 | Outcomes of the Sponsoring Relationship

4.4.1 | Professional Development and Promotions/New Career Opportunities

According to many of the women leaders, their sponsoring activities resulted in concrete and tangible results such as promotions and their current leadership positions—like in the case of Participant 17R:

> When I came to [City X] I had a boss who acted as my mentor during different stages in my career [...] he had the highest impact by appointing me as a Director.
>
> (Participant 17R)

While in their career advancement women increasingly move from line positions into supporting and assistive roles without strategic relevance, our findings did not confirm these observations. The titles and positions of many of the women leaders indicated roles of strategic importance and profit and loss responsibilities. Examples of the positions of the women leaders at the time of this study included "partner in risk management," "partner in international tax law" and "partner in complex cross-border M&A transactions at the auditing firm," VP marketing (regional), projects management director, VP crisis management, managing director, country CEO, and director of technical and engineering division at the oil and gas companies. The strategic importance of our participants' roles confirms

their sponsors' trust and confidence in their abilities and competencies, and the sponsors' willingness to take risks with their protégées by not pushing the women leaders into auxiliary positions that had not strategic relevance.

Sponsoring activities also led to intangible benefits that could be considered a precondition for women leaders' career advancement into their current leadership roles. Several of these benefits have been highlighted by scholars in the past (see Bono et al. 2017), and include greater visibility and accessibility to key decision makers and company leaders—as described by Participants 34R:

> This boss was a completely my sponsor, yes. He worked a lot to give me visibility in the organization by sending me to important meetings to show to the organization what were my commitments in the organization, my projects, my way to work.
>
> (Participant 34R)

Besides naming greater visibility as a key sponsoring outcome, Participant 34R's quote provides another indication of how sponsoring activities were of an assistive nature. As the following quote illustrates, such assistive support was often of a continuous nature, leading to longer-term sponsoring relationships.

> When I started working with him [the CEO], he entered in my office, and said "can you help me maybe for the afternoon"; 300 hours later, I was still working with him, it was really a jump for my career.
>
> (Participant 3D)

Some of these longer-term relationships transformed into friendships and long-term amity:

> So I had those references not in my direct division but outside my division and in the high positions, but it's not just the professional relation, it was a little further; I mean not only professional but also like a kind of friendship within the company and I think it's very important to have those mentor or sponsors and I have one or two people inside the company.
>
> (Participant 33R)

While we do not know whether all the friendship-turned-relationships were of a continuous sponsoring nature, we might argue that sponsorships are not necessarily exclusive short-term activities as suggested by in the literature (see Hewlett 2013).

4.4.2 | Self-Confidence and Self-Efficacy

Another key outcome in the development of our participants' sponsoring relationships was described as self-confidence and self-efficacy. These two terms were mentioned on numerous occasions by the women leaders as having been critical elements and outcomes in their relationships with their sponsoring bosses

and managers. The sponsoring partners' trust, confidence, and encouragement pushed several of the women leaders beyond their perceived limits in their stretch assignments gave them greater self-confidence and self-efficacy:

> It was a surprise that anyone told me about my leadership skills and my energy. I was 25 years old, and I was not aware of the impact I could create on the outside. So I think it was an important development in my career because after that I felt much more confident about me and my career.
>
> (Participant 57T)

The quote illustrates the importance of emotional and appraisal support Participant 57T received from her sponsor(s). Combined these two forms of appreciative support provided the woman leader with the emotional and evaluative stability and resilience needed to handle stretch assignments or new career opportunities. We will discuss the different findings further as part of our contributions to the sponsoring literature in the following section.

5 | Discussion

With this study, we contribute to the understanding of the identity of sponsors for women, the nature of their sponsoring activities, and the impact of sponsorship on women's careers. Through interviews with women leaders in male-dominated industries, we found that their participation in sponsoring activities was facilitated by a combination of assistive and appreciative support from superiors and members of informal networks both within and outside the organization. Our results indicate that sponsors of women are predominantly men who provide sponsorship activities to women leaders in the early- and mid-stages of their careers, offering them opportunities to develop competencies and advance professionally.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the key elements of the sponsoring process.

In Figure 1, we include the different sponsor profiles, sponsoring activities categorized by the nature of their social support, and the key outcomes of the sponsoring activities. The sponsoring activities are framed in arrow shapes underpinning their continuous rather than ad hoc nature. As our findings indicate, sponsoring is a long-term process in which trust and confidence building are critical social support mechanism that take time to develop, and that can happen on multiple occasions throughout a protégée's career.

We contribute to the literature on career sponsorship by providing a deeper understanding of the specific activities that sponsors engage in to support their women protégées, and the ways in which these activities have an impact on the protégées' career advancement. Sponsors have provided their women protégées with stretch assignments with different tasks and more responsibilities, with new roles of greater scope and strategic importance, opportunities for experiential learning, and fallback options. We categorized these activities as assistive
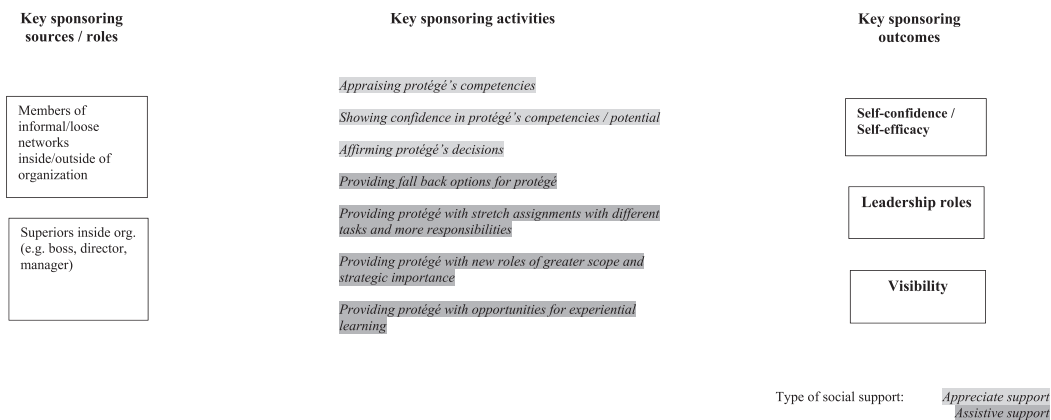
FIGURE 1 | Overview of key elements in the sponsoring process.

support. In many cases, assistive support was accompanied by sponsors appraising and showing confidence and trust in their protégées' competencies and potential and affirming their protégés' decisions of taking on stretch assignments or other sponsorship opportunities. We categorized these activities as appreciative support. Based on our findings, we suggest that assistive and appreciative support are both equally critical elements in the sponsoring process of women. In contrast to scholars such as Broadbridge (2010), who have posited that activities of an appreciative nature do not contribute to the career advancement of women, we found evidence that such activities, in combination with assistive support, can indeed be beneficial for women's career progression.

Sponsoring activities that are of an assistive and appreciative nature provide women with greater visibility, recognition by decision makers, and greater trust and self-confidence. Although building self-confidence and trust cannot only be traced to sponsoring relationships, sponsoring relationships fostered self-confidence and trust in our study. For sponsors to propose challenging assignments, they develop trust and confidence in their protégées' potential by appraising and evaluating their competencies and abilities—in our study by either working closely with them as their boss or supervisor inside the company, or by having accompanied them for some time (e.g., since university) outside the organization. This trust might be returned by protégées when realizing how their sponsors' public commitment and proposed sponsoring opportunities put the sponsor's reputation and (potentially) career at risk. The build-up of such mutual trust takes time, and challenges scholars' suggestions about the short-term nature of sponsorships (see Hewlett 2013). Thus, company-run sponsorship programs might not only fail because sponsors risk damaging their reputation but also because not enough time is given to the development of mutual trust and confidence between sponsors and protégés. Our reasoning is supported by Ibarra's (2019) observation of companies discontinuing formal sponsorship programs because executives felt uncomfortable when being asked to advocate for others who they might not know well or were not convinced about.

Mutual trust is particularly critical when it comes to sponsors' assistive support in form of stretch assignments and new career opportunities, and protégées accepting them through their

sponsors' appraisal support. While we have highlighted earlier that stretch assignments are an important element in the career progression process, scholars have criticized their restricted accessibility to women managers. According to Macke et al. (2022), in the few companies that measure access to significant assignments, the percentage of women managers being assigned business-critical missions and tasks lies between 1 and 10%. One can only speculate if this limited access to stretch assignments is due to the limited availability of sponsors, or if there are other structural or procedural barriers that prevent women from access. According to de Pater et al. (2009) the limited propositions of stretch assignments to women managers reduce their ability to be promoted and sets up a vicious cycle in which women managers often fail to advance into leadership positions.

The development of trusting and close working relationships between men bosses and women subordinates seems equally important when it comes to weakening men's homophilous tendencies in organizations. As we have illustrated in Figure 1, using diversified networks inside and outside their organizations as sponsor pools could have also been one reason as to why so many of the women leaders had men as their sponsors. It has been suggested that a possibility to bypass any men's homophilous networking relationships and their restrictive or exclusive access to sponsors within companies is the diversification of networks (Ragins and Sundstrom 1989). In the words of Ibarra (1993), broadening the range of networking relationships across various organizational levels and beyond organizational boundaries can provide "greater access to instrumental resources than drawing contacts from a restricted group" (61). As we outline in the following concluding section, more empirical research will be needed to explore further some of these suggestions about weakening homophilous tendencies in the sponsoring process.

6 | Conclusion and Future Research Directions

Despite the growing recognition that career sponsorship is essential for women to advance into corporate leadership positions, there is limited knowledge on who sponsors women, how they provide support, and the impact of this support on women's career progression. With this study we contribute empirical

evidence to the literature, demonstrating that women leaders' sponsorship relationships evolve through a combination of assistive and appreciative support. With our findings we suggest that these two categories of social support are complementary and most effective when provided together to protégées during the sponsoring process.

In our study, we observed that men superiors and informal networks both inside and outside the organization were the main sponsors of women leaders during their early- and mid-careers. These findings differ from the notion of homophily in sponsoring relationships and reveal the potential for sponsors outside of the organization to play a role in women's career advancement. Based on our findings, we imply that institutionalized sponsoring programs and standardized sponsoring processes that focus on short-term interventions by individual sponsors are limited in their impact. Instead, a focus should be on developing long-term and personal relationships that span different networks. The long-term and personal nature of such relationships mean that simply introducing or imposing a sponsoring program is unlikely to have the intended effects. Instead, we suggest that a supporting organizational culture that includes elements fostering trust and provides fallback options for when stretch assignments do not work out is more beneficial. Equally it is important to ensure that everyone but particularly women get access to stretch assignments, and that this is monitored (see Macke et al. 2022). Transparency concerning stretch assignments will mean that women could develop their leadership through them. It is also advisable to have more than one sponsor, particularly in more dynamic workplaces where people regularly shift positions or work in project teams.

Although it has been suggested that sponsors and sponsorship opportunities are or ought to be actively sought by women managers (Ibarra 2019), we suggest that it is the sponsor who more often seek and initiate the sponsoring relationships with their protégées. Underpinning the role of appreciative support, our findings indicate that it is doubts in their capabilities and potential that prevents some women managers from proactively seeking sponsors. Without understanding and addressing these doubts, sponsors who focus solely on providing assistive support for their protégées will most likely fail in their sponsoring efforts. Researchers could explore if and how sponsoring outcomes such as promotions build women managers' beliefs in themselves and encourage them to seek more proactively subsequent sponsorship opportunities.

More research is needed to explore if sponsors benefit from their sponsoring activities (e.g., in terms of their reputation). While the fact that sponsors in our study have been predominantly men differs from reported homophilous tendencies in sponsoring relationships, more research is needed to explore the motives and reasons for men sponsoring women. Scholars could also explore how women in senior positions can sponsor other women or indeed men, and how those dynamics differ from what we found. These researchers could also highlight the motivations, risks, and opportunities that women sponsors experience in this relationship. Understanding these elements would be of great relevance for leadership and executive leadership development. Future research could focus on what happens when sponsoring fails. Additionally, more research is

also needed to develop further the categorization of sponsoring activities beyond informational support, instrumental support, emotional support, and appraisal support. Lastly, empirical research about sponsoring relationships could provide insights as to whether mutual trust between sponsors and their protégées and the ensuing self-confidence and self-efficacy amongst protégées can create a virtuous circle.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

References

Adamson, M., and E. K. Kelan. 2019. "Female Heroes: Celebrity Executives as Postfeminist Role Models." *British Journal of Management* 30, no. 4: 981–996. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12320.

Allemand, I., J. Bédard, B. Brullebaut, and J. Deschênes. 2022. "Role of Old Boys' Networks and Regulatory Approaches in Selection Processes for Female Directors." *British Journal of Management* 33, no. 2: 784–805. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12485.

Allen, T. D., R. C. Johnson, K. M. Kiburz, and K. M. Shockley. 2013. "Work–family Conflict and Flexible Work Arrangements: Deconstructing Flexibility." *Personnel Psychology* 66, no. 2: 345–376. https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12012.

Benschop, Y. 2009. "The Micro-Politics of Gendering in Networking." *Gender, Work and Organization* 16, no. 2: 217–237. https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1468-0432.2009.00438.X.

Bergman, B., and L. R.-M. Hallberg. 2002. "Women in a Male-Dominated Industry: Factor Analysis of a Women Workplace Culture Questionnaire Based on a Grounded Theory Model." *Sex Roles* 46, no. 9/10: 311–322. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1020276529726.

Bhide, V., and B. Tootell. 2018. "Perceptions of Sponsoring as a Career Advancement Tool for Women: Are They Different in Europe?" *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring* 16, no. 1: 123–147. https://doi.org/10.24384/000467.

Bono, J. E., P. W. Braddy, Y. Liu, et al. 2017. "Dropped on the Way to the Top: Gender and Managerial Derailment." *Personnel Psychology* 70, no. 4: 729–768. https://doi.org/10.1111/PEPS.12184.

Broadbridge, A. 2010. "Social Capital, Gender and Careers: Evidence From Retail Senior Managers." *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 29, no. 8: 815–834. https://doi.org/10.1108/02610151011089546/FULL/PDF.

Bryman, A., and E. Bell. 2003. *Business Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dacin, P. A., M. T. Dacin, and M. Matear. 2010. "Social Entrepreneurship: Why We Don't Need a New Theory and How We Move Forward From Here." *Academy of Management Perspectives* 24, no. 3: 37–57. https://doi.org/10.5465/AMP.24.3.37.

Da Costa, C. G., Q. Zhou, and A. I. Ferreira. 2018. "The Impact of Anger on Creative Process Engagement: The Role of Social Contexts." *Journal*

of Organizational Behavior 39, no. 4: 495–506. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2249.

De Jonckheere, M., and L. Vaughn. 2019. "Semi Structured Interviewing in Primary Care Research: A Balance of Relationship and Rigour." *Family Medicine Community Health* 8, no. 2: 56–78.

Denzin, N. 1989. *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods.* Oxford: Prentice Hall.

Denzin, N., and Y. Lincoln. 2008. *The Landscape of Qualitative Research.* 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.

De Pater, I. E., A. E. M. Van Vianen, M. N. Bechtoldt, and U.-C. Klehe. 2009. "Employees' Challenging Job Experiences and Supervisors' Evaluations of Promotability." *Personnel Psychology* 62, no. 2: 297–325. https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1744-6570.2009.01139.X.

Eldh, A. C., L. Årestedt, and C. Berterö. 2020. "Quotations in Qualitative Studies: Reflections on Constituents, Custom, and Purpose." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19: 1609406920969268. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920969268.

Ertug, G., J. Brennecke, B. Kovács, and T. Zou. 2022. "What Does Homophily Do? A Review of the Consequences of Homophily." *Academy of Management Annals* 16, no. 1: 38–69. https://doi.org/10.5465/ANNALS.2020.0230.

Fernando, D., L. Cohen, and J. Duberley. 2018. "What Helps? Women Engineers' Accounts of Staying on." *Human Resource Management Journal* 28, no. 3: 479–495. https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12192.

Fouad, N. A., R. Singh, K. Cappaert, W.-hsin Chang, and M. Wan. 2016. "Comparison of Women Engineers Who Persist in or Depart From Engineering." *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 92: 79–93. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JVB.2015.11.002.

Fowler, J. L., and J. G. O'Gorman. 2005. "Mentoring Functions: A Contemporary View of the Perceptions of Mentees and Mentors." *British Journal of Management* 16, no. 1: 51–57. https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1467-8551.2005.00439.X.

French, K. A., S. Dumani, T. D. Allen, and K. M. Shockley. 2018. "A Meta-Analysis of Work–Family Conflict and Social Support." *Psychological Bulletin* 144, no. 3: 284–314. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000120.

Friday, E., S. S. Friday, and A. L. Green. 2004. "A Reconceptualization of Mentoring and Sponsoring." *Management Decision* 42, no. 5: 628–644. https://doi.org/10.1108/00251740410538488/FULL/PDF.

Groysberg, B. 2008. "How Star Women Build Portable Skills." *Harvard Business Review* 86, no. 2: 74–81.

Gustafsson, S., and J. Swart. 2020. "'It's Not All It's Cracked up to be': Narratives of Promotions in Elite Professional Careers." *Human Relations* 73, no. 9: 1199–1225. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726719859404/ASSET/IMAGES/LARGE/10.1177_0018726719859404-FIG5.JPEG.

Harris, J. I., A. M. Winskowski, and B. E. Engdahl. 2007. "Types of Workplace Social Support in the Prediction of Job Satisfaction." *Career Development Quarterly* 56, no. 2: 150–156. https://doi.org/10.1002/J.2161-0045.2007.TB00027.X.

Helms, M., D. Arfken, and S. Bellar. 2016. "The Importance of Mentoring and Sponsorship in Women's Career Development." *Advanced Management Journal* Summer: 4–16.

Hewlett, S. 2013. "Mentors Are Good. Sponsors Are Better." *New York Times*, April 14, BU7.

Huston, W. M., C. G. Cranfield, S. L. Forbes, and A. Leigh. 2019. "A Sponsorship Action Plan for Increasing Diversity in STEMM." *Ecology and Evolution* 9, no. 5: 2340–2345. https://doi.org/10.1002/ECE3.4962.

Ibarra, H. 1992. "Homophily and Differential Returns: Sex Differences in Network Structure and Access in an Advertising." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 37, no. 3: 422–447. https://doi.org/10.2307/2393451.

Ibarra, H. 1993. "Personal Networks of Women and Minorities in Management: A Conceptual Framework." *Academy of Management Review* 18, no. 1: 56–87. https://doi.org/10.5465/AMR.1993.3997507.

Ibarra, H. 2019. "A Lack of Sponsorship Is Keeping Women From Advancing Into Leadership." *Harvard Business Review Digital Articles*: 2–7. http://search.ebscohost.com.uplib.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=138408642&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Jolly, P. M., D. T. Kong, and K. Y. Kim. 2021. "Social Support at Work: An Integrative Review." *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 42, no. 2: 229–251. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2485.

Kennedy, J., and P. Jain-Link. 2019. "Sponsors Need to Stop Acting Like Mentors." https://hbr.org/2019/02/sponsors-need-to-stop-acting-like-mentors.

Macaux, W. 2010. "Making the Most of Stretch Assignments." *T and D* 64, no. 6: 48–53.

Macke, E., G. G. Rosa, G. Shannon, and C. Simard. 2022. "Assignments Are Critical Tools to Achieve Workplace Gender Equity." *MIT Sloan Management Review.* https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/assignments-are-critical-tools-to-achieve-workplace-gender-equity/.

Malecki, C. K., and M. K. Demaray. 2003. "What Type of Support Do They Need? Investigating Student Adjustment as Related to Emotional, Informational, Appraisal, and Instrumental Support." *School Psychology Quarterly* 18, no. 3: 231–252. https://doi.org/10.1521/SCPQ.18.3.231.22576.

Mavin, S. 2008. "Queen Bees, Wannabees and Afraid to Bees: No More 'Best Enemies' for Women in Management?" *British Journal of Management* 19, no. S1: 75–84. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2008.00573.x.

Morgan, L. M., and M. J. Davidson. 2008. "Sexual Dynamics in Mentoring Relationships – A Critical Review." *British Journal of Management* 19, no. S1: 120–129. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2008.00577.x.

Ostroff, C., and S. W. J. Kozlowski. 1993. "The Role of Mentoring in the Information Gathering Processes of Newcomers During Early Organizational Socialization." *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 42, no. 2: 170–183. https://doi.org/10.1006/JVBE.1993.1012.

Pratt, M. G. 2009. "Tips on Writing up (And Reviewing) Qualitative Research." *Academy of Management Journal* 52, no. 5: 856–862. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2009.44632557.

Ragins, B. R., and E. Sundstrom. 1989. "Gender and Power in Organizations: A Longitudinal Perspective." *Psychological Bulletin* 105, no. 1: 51–88. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.105.1.51.

Schmitt, M. 2021. "Women Engineers on Their Way to Leadership: The Role of Social Support Within Engineering Work Cultures." *Engineering Studies* 13, no. 1: 30–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/19378629.2021.1882471.

Snellman, K., and I. Solal. 2023. "Does Investor Gender Matter for the Success of Female Entrepreneurs? Gender Homophily and the Stigma of Incompetence in Entrepreneurial Finance." *Organization Science* 34, no. 2: 680–699. https://doi.org/10.1287/ORSC.2022.1594/ASSET/IMAGES/LARGE/ORSC.2022.1594F3.JPEG.

Tucker, M. K., N. L. Jimmieson, and P. Bordia. 2018. "Supervisor Support as a Double-Edged Sword: Supervisor Emotion Management Accounts for the Buffering and Reverse-Buffering Effects of Supervisor Support." *International Journal of Stress Management* 25, no. 1: 14–34. https://doi.org/10.1037/str0000046.

Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.