CLEAR AS MUD: HOW BUREAUCRATIC DISCRETION AND ORGANIZATIONAL

CULTURE IMPACT THE RETURN TO OFFICE POLICY IMPLEMENTATION FOR

WOMEN LEADERS IN CALIFORNIA STATE SERVICE

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Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 Pandemic caused the State of California to transition to telework for most employees, shifting the working structure and location in an historically bureaucratic system for the first time in history. In the spring of 2024, four years after the initial pandemic shutdown in 2020, state agencies are beginning to formalize and release their mandatory Return to Office policies, once again shifting the workplace structure for the majority of its 218,000 employees. Women employed by the State of California hold leadership roles at higher rates than their male counterparts, a unique difference from the private sector. Therefore, female leaders will now take charge in both creating and implementing Return to Office policies throughout the State. This study explores the impact of bureaucratic discretion and organizational culture on the implementation of Return to Office (RTO) policies focusing on women leaders within the California State service in a post-COVID 19 pandemic era. Women, holding leadership roles at higher rates compared to their male counterparts in the state, play crucial roles in the formulation and execution of these policies, and this study reiterates the need for clear, supportive policies that recognize the unique challenges faced by diverse groups within the workforce, particularly in public sector settings where bureaucratic discretion plays a pivotal role.

This research employed qualitative methods, specifically interviews with five women in leadership positions across various state agencies, to gather insights into their experiences with RTO policy implementation. Through inductive qualitative analysis, this research explored how these leaders use bureaucratic discretion to navigate policy requirements and the effects of these policies on organizational culture and employee well-being.

Key Findings:

This research finds four key themes in female leaders' experiences: a need for clarity and transparency on policy guidance, the use of discretion and flexibility in policy implementation, the impact RTO and telework have on organizational culture, and the implications of RTO policy on racial, socio-economic and health equity. These findings both support fundings from previous literature on some themes, and also present a divergence from existing literature, particularly around the use of discretion in internal policy implementation.

Bureaucratic Discretion: Female leaders use their discretion to adapt RTO policies creatively to fit the needs of their teams, promoting flexibility while balancing formal guidelines and the diverse needs of their staff.

Organizational Culture: The findings highlight the importance of in-person interactions in reinforcing organizational culture. Leaders recognize the value of occasional in-office work in fostering team dynamics and improving communication.

Equity and Inclusion: The study identifies significant equity concerns related to the RTO policies, particularly affecting racial minorities, women, and individuals with disabilities. There is a noted need for policies that accommodate the diverse needs of the workforce without compromising the well-being of any group.

The research underscores the need for clear, supportive, and flexible RTO policies that recognize the challenges faced by leaders and their teams, particularly in a diverse state workforce. Women leaders in California's state service are pivotal in shaping these policies, advocating for approaches that balance organizational objectives with employee well-being. This study contributes to ongoing discussions about the future of work in public administration, particularly in the context of gender dynamics and leadership.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic caused the State of California to transition to telework for most employees, shifting the working structure and location in an historically bureaucratic system for the first time in history. In spring 2024, four years after the initial pandemic shut down in 2020, state agencies are beginning to formalize and release their mandatory Return to Office policies, once again shifting the workplace structure for the majority of its 218,000 employees. Women employed by the State of California hold leadership roles at higher rates than their male counterparts, a unique difference from the private sector. Therefore, female leaders will now take charge in both creating and implementing Return to Office policies throughout the State. This qualitative research explores how female leaders experience Return to Office policy implementation, focusing on themes of bureaucratic discretion and workplace culture, particularly exploring if and how women use discretion when implementing RTO policies. Through interviews and inductive qualitative analysis, this research shows that women leaders do use their discretion in their implementation, particularly to support flexibility for their staff. Additionally, the research supports existing literature around the importance of in-person connection to improve organizational culture.

I. INTRODUCTION:

In early January 2024, several state agencies and departments in California announced a plan that would require state employees to return to office part time after nearly four years of telework. The reaction to this, according to the 38,000 member State Worker Reddit page, was immediate and clear: many state employees did not see the need and did not have interest in being required to return to office, even part time. State leadership has been tight lipped on specifics as to how and why they are requiring the return to office. Additionally, other department staff report receiving broad guidance from leadership, and conflicting guidance from their direct managers, as reported by the Sacramento Bee (Miller, 2024). On February 4th, 2024, an anonymous petition was posted online by a state employee, and within 20 days it had nearly 4,500 signatories all urging the same request: *"maintain the 5-day per week remote work option for state employees. The RTO Mandate Initiatives disregards the well-being of state employees and the demonstrated success and benefits of telework in order to prioritize commercial real estate interests and outdated ideas"* (Maintain Remote Work for California State Employees, 2024).

Prior research has shown that there are clear benefits to telework, including increased job satisfaction, decreased psychological strain (including burnout and life satisfaction) and increased flexibility (Beckel, 2022), as well as significant benefits to equity, including reduced microaggressions, improved accessibility, and increased inclusion (Miller & Miller, 2021). Yet there are numerous benefits to in-person work that have been documented, including increased knowledge transfer, fewer siloes and increased collaboration, and strengthened communication (Yang, 2022), as well as stronger employee recognition and increased sense of organizational value (Maurer, 2021).

This current landscape provides an ideal window of opportunity to explore how return to office (RTO) policies shape state employees' experiences working for the state. In particular, women hold leadership positions in the State of California at higher rates than seen in the private sector (CalHR, 2023), and therefore will be key players in how the RTO policy is both implemented and communicated to staff. Early reporting suggests that there are discrepancies in the broad guidance given by agency leadership, and in detailed guidance given by direct managers. This gives a clear opportunity to look into how bureaucratic discretion, or how bureaucratic leaders are able to use their personal discretion to carry out policy guidance, may or may not impact RTO policy implementation. In this paper, I will explore two research questions:

1. *How are female leaders using bureaucratic discretion in RTO policy implementation?*

2. *How do female leaders perceive the impact of RTO policy on organizational culture?*

By interviewing female leaders within state agencies and departments, I hope to gather initial data on how RTO policies impact the female leadership experience, particularly looking at elements of organizational culture such as workplace flexibility, trust, and communication, as well as how bureaucratic discretion may impact policy implementation.

While the terms "telework" and "remote work" are often used interchangeably, they have distinct definitions in the public sector. According to the federal government, "Telework refers to a work flexibility arrangement, approved in advance by a supervisor, that allows an employee to work from an approved alternative worksite other than the employee's official duty location for an approved number of days each pay period. Remote work is a permanent duty station designation (usually the employee's residence)" (Office of Personnel Management (OPM), 2022,). The State of California has a similar definition: "The terms 'telework,' 'teleworking,' and 'telecommuting' refer to work flexibility arrangements established between the department

management and the employee where the employee performs the duties and responsibilities of their position from a location other than the office" (California Department of General Services, 2021). Following this distinction, these terms are not used interchangeably in this paper.

I find four key themes in female leaders' experiences: a need for clarity and transparency on policy guidance, the use of discretion and flexibility in policy implementation, the impact RTO and telework have on organizational culture, and the implications of RTO policy on racial, socio-economic and health equity. These findings both support fundings from previous literature on some themes, and also present a divergence from existing literature, particularly around the use of discretion in internal policy implementation. Collectively, my findings suggest that female leaders in California want flexibility in how they implement RTO policy, and they also overwhelmingly recognize the cultural and organizational benefits of occasional in-person work. This research lays the groundwork for further research to further explore how bureaucratic discretion is used in internal policy implementation, as well as a timely opportunity to continue research on how the State of California implements Return to Office.

The remainder of the paper unfolds as follows: in Section II I explore an overview on existing literature related to bureaucratic discretion, female leadership, and organizational culture in the public sector. In Section III I introduce the research methodology and participant recruitment. Following this, I share my findings in depth, followed by a discussion on the implications of this research in Section V. Finally, I conclude with a summary on the research findings and opportunities for future study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are four prominent themes intersecting this research discussion: the role of women's leadership in the public sector, the application of remote/telework in the public sector,

the impact of telework on organizational culture, and the role of bureaucratic discretion in policy decision making.

Women's Leadership in the Public Sector

Private Sector Leadership

Over the past 50 years, the rate of women in leadership roles across the United States has risen steadily. The wage gap, while still significant, has narrowed considerably, and the percentage of women in management roles across most sectors has consistently increased ("The Women's Leadership Gap," 2018). Nevertheless, McKinsey's Women in the Workplace 2023 report indicates that women are still underrepresented in all management categories compared to their male counterparts. Women represent 42% of management in the private sector, compared to 58% men (McKinsey, 2023). At the C-Suite level, women reflect an even smaller share representing just 28% of top executives (Fields et al 2023). While these numbers are shifting upwards for women, there is still substantial gender inequity in top leadership.

The COVID-19 pandemic did little to reverse these trends and drastically impacted how and where women work, with many leaving the workforce entirely. In California, over 12% of the female workforce left due to the impacts of the pandemic (Roosevelt, 2021), with female workforce participation at its lowest rate in more than 30 years between 2020 and 2021. A December, 2021 survey of public workers found that more than half considered leaving their job due to the impacts of the pandemic, and over 40% considered leaving the workforce or retiring early (Mission Square Research Institute, 2022). Across the country, early retirements did occur, with the 'Silver Tsunami' causing many baby-boomer aged lifelong public sector workers to permanently leave the workforce (Kelly, 2021).

Public Sector Leadership

Women's representation in California's executive branch (or "the State") reflects a very different landscape than private sector leadership. Mid-level management within the State of California is approximately 44% women, a slight edge on the private sector. The greatest divergence from the private sector comes at higher management levels: chief executives, also known as senior managers, are 55.5% women, with executive managers reflecting 54% of California's top leadership (CalHR, 2023).

Interestingly, women in California's public sector reflect a different dynamic than what data on the private sector show, with women leading executive level representation in California, and close to equal representation with male counterparts at the lower and middle management levels.   The women in California's public sector leadership positions are simultaneously leading the next generation of civil servants, while also still recovering from the detrimental impacts of the pandemic. A 2022 survey of 13,000 civil service workers provided clear insight into how the priorities of this workforce are changing: in a post-pandemic public workforce, meaningful work, workplace flexibility, and compensation were at the top of the list (Athanasakopoulos et. al, 2022).

Barriers to Equitable Leadership

Previous research on gender inequality and management has largely been focused on women's ascension to managerial jobs and the glass ceiling, or how women struggle to reach the top level of management. However, women face unique differences in advancing to leadership positions in the public sector. The Glass Cliff theory suggests that women are most likely to obtain leadership positions in the public sector when organizations are in a period of crisis and the risk of failure is higher (Cohen & Huffman, 2007). Smith (2015) also found that the Glass

Cliff theory supports the idea that women tend to hold higher ranking administrative leadership positions when agencies are larger, when they are in elected positions, and when they are in lower-ranking areas. As a result, the leadership roles women attain may be more precarious than those occupied by men (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

There is some evidence to suggest that leadership styles and experiences in the public sector between men and women differ. A 2015 study found that the values of women and men in leadership differed significantly, and that women differed particularly with the values of equity, long term outlook, sense of community, and representation, as well as efficiency, effectiveness, and expertise (Hamidullah, Riccucci, & Pandey, 2015). Additional related research looked at how the expectations of women, but not men, in public administration often require "emotive work thought natural for women, such as caring, negotiating, empathizing, smoothing troubled relationships, and working behind the scenes to enable cooperation" (Guy & Newman, 2004, p. 289).

Gender Stereotypes may also play a significant role during both the hiring and promotional process for women. Social Role Theory posits that there is an expectation for women to be more compassionate, sympathetic, nurturing, and sensitive than their male counterparts, while men are expected to behave in ways that are assertive, ambitious, controlling, confident, and independent (Eagly, 1987). Because stereotypical characteristics of strong leaders are similar to the stereotypical characteristics of men, selection bias could disproportionately benefit men in leadership ascension compared to women (Ryan et, al., 2016).

When discussing equity in female leadership, it is important also to note the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on women in the workforce, particularly on mothers. Female workforce participation from 2020 to early 2021 was at its lowest rate in more than 30 years. In

California, over 12% of the female workforce left due to the impacts of the pandemic (Roosevelt, 2021). Petts, Carlson & Pepin (2020) found that working mothers in particular faced a higher risk of job loss when they lost access to child care during the pandemic, making them more likely than men to sacrifice their employment due to child care challenges. There is also evidence that the pandemic exacerbated existing care inequities within a household, with assumptions made that mothers commonly had the more flexible job (Martucci, 2023).

The US Census reported that 3.5 million mothers had to scale back their workforce participation during the pandemic, leaving an enormous void in the national workforce (Heggeness et al., n.d.). There are significant equity implications as well: a 2023 report of the post-pandemic workforce found that Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) women had little to no improvement since 2020, with many women of color struggling to return to the workforce, and many organizations not prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion in post-pandemic hiring practices (*State of Inequity 2023: Envisioning a Post-Pandemic Workplace - Harris Poll*, 2023).

Telework in the Public Sector

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 3% of federal employees had telework options. At the height of the pandemic, that number jumped up to over 90%, and has since settled back down to about 60% (Schweitzer, 2021). California reflected similar numbers. Between 2020 and 2023, up to 90% of those eligible for telework within the State of California spent the majority of time working from home (Miller & Reese, 2023). In California, each state department has the ability to set its own telework policy. Some departments allowed employees full-time telework, while others required employees to come into the office each week, often citing workplace culture as a reason to come in (Venteicher, 2022).

Much of the literature related to telework in the public sector was conducted before the COVID19 pandemic. One study published after the onset of the pandemic notes that particularly in the public sector, when "technology is doing the heavy lifting, we must focus on the role of people and organizations in the future when technology does all the heavy lifting" (Edelman & Albrecht, 2021). The same study suggests that public sector employers will need to welcome a post-pandemic world with widespread systems evaluation, embracing not only the potential for increased telework to attract a future workforce, but also examining digital collaboration alongside it to modernize the workforce. While there are many benefits to remote work for employees, the problems associated with it can be serious and may include isolation, job performance, and reduced collaboration (Nyberg et al., 2021).

There are perceived gender differences in telework as well. While some research has found that women may benefit more from telework compared to their male counterparts due to work-life flexibility and autonomy (Gonzalez, 2022), these same benefits can then exacerbate the increased emotional labor that women and mothers carry in the workplace, trying to balance both professional and personal expectations of them in ways their male counterparts do not. A study that examined telework work-life balance in dual-working family households found that increased flexibility in telework policies lead to more equitable telework experiences for both men and women (Hu et al., 2023).

Organizational Culture in Telework

As noted previously, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically shifted how and where people work, with many individuals shifting to telework for the first time in 2020, particularly in the public sector. Telework and remote workplaces provide unique challenges to ensuring a strong organizational culture. Strong organizational culture can include themes such as strong

interpersonal communication, personal interactions, how organizations implement policies, and the organizational atmosphere, which can be very challenging to create when work is remote (Society for Human Resources Management, n.d.). There has not been an abundance of literature on this particular intersection or organizational culture in telework, and close to none related to the public sector, but there are elements that can be pulled from. The COVID-19 pandemic elevated the importance of clear, authentic communication channels in telework, a component that directly relates to organizational culture. A central question to this research then becomes, *How do organizations build trust among a virtual workforce?* (Nyberg et al, 2021). The topic of trust ties into the organizational culture components of clear communication channels as well as strong interpersonal relationships in the workplace. A pre-pandemic study by de Vries et al., 2019 reinforced this, affirming that in public sector remote work environments, hierarchical models of leadership are not as effective as relationship-oriented leadership, and that when employees trust each other, there are decreased rates of isolation and unhappiness in the workplace. This same study found that occasionally, organizational commitment can decrease in a public sector remote workforce, and considering that mission and organizational values are one of the leading reasons people enter public service.

Another pandemic-related study identified four key challenges employees face in telework that employers should note: work-home interference, ineffective communication, procrastination, and loneliness. Social supports and job autonomy helped employees manage these challenges (Wang et al.; 2021). Additional contemporary pandemic research observed differences in how supervisors respond and communicate to in-person staff compared with remote staff, and found that communicational nuance was less defined when using platforms such as text and chat, compared to in-person communication. This same study found a decrease

in transparency when working in remote settings, all of which contributed directly to perception of poor organizational culture (Eriksson & Santesson, 2021). A 2022 study that focused on the technology sector, not the public sector, noted no link between remote work, organizational culture, and decreased innovation (Raj et al, 2023). Nearly all of the pandemic era research noted that more research needs to be done in this space, and that very little has been done to look at the intersection of remote work and organizational culture, and very little focused on the public sector. To effectively bring employers into the next generation of telework/remote work, additional attention must be paid to identifying strategies to support workers and strengthen culture.

Bureaucratic Discretion

Bureaucratic discretion is an important and essential component of public sector leadership. The term "bureaucratic discretion" refers to the ability of bureaucrats to influence how policy is implemented. Carrington (2005) defines discretion in two ways: 1. The freedom the decision maker has to choose between different actions; and 2. The decision to act or not act through the rules and judgment of the decision maker. Bureaucratic discretion can be explored at both a macro level (public agency) and micro level (street-level bureaucrats). This research will exclusively look at the micro level of bureaucratic discretion.

Michael Lipsky (1980) explored the idea of bureaucratic discretion in his book, *Street Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. In it, Lipsky enforces the idea that street-level, or front-line, bureaucrats are a necessary link between government and those that they serve. Additionally, Lipsky argues that street-level bureaucrats use discretion in their work because in social services, human judgment cannot be replaced by technology. Street-level bureaucrats can then use their discretion to make decisions that are appropriate for both their

clients and their situations (Lipsky, 1980). Many factors have been identified that influence how discretion may be used in public organizations. Scott (1997) pointed to elements such as "the task at hand, decisional context, workload pressures, an organization's internal culture, rules and constraints, and an organization's external environment" as some of the most common influences on discretion (Scott, 1997, p.37).

It is worth exploring the role bureaucratic administration plays in policy implementation. Tummers & Bekker (2014) found that in policy implementation, discretion gives street-level bureaucrats the ability to apply their own judgments and opinions when dealing with unique needs and wishes of citizens. Most of the existing literature, however, focuses on bureaucratic discretion and policy implementation at the external and macro level. For example, a 2004 study explored the racial equity impact of bureaucratic discretion on welfare reform, and found that people of color faced increased discrimination receiving social services compared to their white counterparts, due to the discretionary actions of those implementing the policy (Mueser, Peter & Keiser, Lael & Choi, Seung-Whan, 2004). Another study looked at the statewide implementation of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) policy in Michigan, and found that " the discretionary power of street-level bureaucrats is an important determinant in the implementation of public policy and that state and agency officials may have little influence over the practices of street-level workers" (Riccucci, 2005). Mazaman and Zabatier (1999) found that, with regards to policy implementation, "when legislators fail to communicate clear goals, to give priority to a new mandate, and to provide adequate funding for their directives, they create openings for unsuccessful and inequitable implementation", signifying the role discretion can play. Little previous research has addressed the impact of bureaucratic discretion on *internal* policy implementation.

Also worthy of consideration are the benefits of bureaucratic discretion, which broadly allows decision-makers to "stretch the law" to serve an organization or client's needs more effectively (Keiser, 1999). This can lead to better outcomes for those most impacted by policies, and has also been identified as contributing to more equitable outcomes, and positively impact social justice (Handler, 1992).

Although little previous research has addressed the impact of bureaucratic discretion on *internal* policy implementation, discretion may play a significant role in management style as well. Balloch et al. (1999) argues that managers' identities and loyalties are not defined by their organizational identity, and therefore leave room for discretion to play a strong role in how the act and lead. Additionally, policy guidance itself is often unclear, leaving room for discretion in implementation: "as politicians know only too well, but social scientists too often forget, public policy is made of language. Whether in written or oral form, argumentation is central to all stages of the policy process"' (Majone, quoted in Pawson et al., 2003, p. 53). By the time policy reaches the level of street-level bureaucrat to implement, it has also gone through various channels in the implementation and communication process already, and it may no longer be at its purest original form (Evans, 2011).

Research by Yuan (2022) looked at how discretion can impact "Taking Charge Behavior", or TCB. TCB refers to "a type of voluntary and constructive behavior of individual employees to promote organizationally functional change within the contexts of their jobs, work units, or organizations" (Morrison & Phelps, 1999). In the context of this research, TCB relates to how the intentional efforts of managers play a role in organizational change, in this context, the return to office (RTO) policy implementation. Recent research suggests that public sectors that want to encourage street-level bureaucrats' TCB should both value the significance of

discretion, and also enable bureaucrats some level of discretion in their policy implementation (Yuan, 2022). This reiterates the thought that increasing a bureaucrat's discretion could be more conducive to policy implementation than curbing policy (Lipsky, 2010). Similarly, in a study of how managers implement sick leave policy, Jaye (2021) found that the managers' "willingness to exercise discretion in their management of sick leave suggests that managers understand what is at stake for a sick worker, and are aware of the positive impact a sympathetic manager can have on a worker who is sick."

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research uses inductive qualitative content analysis to explore how women leaders in Californai's public sector experience the Return to Office (RTO) shift from telework to an in-person or hybrid workplace setting. I am most interested in exploring how their experiences, including elements such as work-life balance and interpersonal communication, shape their approach to RTO policy implementation, and how they may use their bureaucratic discretion to implement these policies.

Ethical Approval

Because personal interviews are the base of my research and analysis, I had to receive clearance from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure I adhered to ethical guidelines for human research. After the standard consideration process, the IRB granted this research project an exempt designation, and I have taken intentional steps to ensure the privacy of my study participants throughout the process.

Participant Selection

The primary source of information for this research came from interviews with five women who are currently in management or executive positions within the State of California. Participants were eligible to participate if they fulfilled all of the following criteria:

- Identify as female

- Work for the State of California

- Be in a managerial or executive level role, and must be a people-manager.

- Must have worked for at least five years and have experienced both telework and in-person workplace settings.

Participant Recruitment

I reached out to both my personal and professional networks to find women willing to participate in these interviews. I posted a public request for participants on multiple Sacramento-based social-media sites, and had over twenty women interested in participating in this study. From there, I narrowed down my list to ensure the following, also summarized in Table 1:

- **Diversity in career background:** My hope was to interview women who are at various points in their career.

- **Diversity in tenure:** The requirements for participation are that the respondents have worked for the state for at least five years, and have worked in both in-person and telework environments. I did not have a formal minimum for the number of years in management, but the tenure of my participants ranges from three to 12 years in management.

- **Diversity in race:** Diversity in responses was important to me, as the state workforce is very racially diverse.

- **Diversity in leadership position:** I sought out women both at the executive and civil servant levels of management. Two of the women I interviewed were Governor appointees, and the other three rose up through state service in a traditional civil servant structure.

- **Diversity in workplace:** I intentionally did not interview any two people who worked for the same state agency or department. To protect the identity of my interview participants, I will not identify the five agencies that they work for in my analysis.

The women I interviewed reflected the following demographics:

Table 1: *Participant Demographics*

Participant	Years with State	Race/Ethnicity	Current State Classification
Participant 1	16 years	White	SSM III
Participant 2	7 years	Black	Deputy Director (Appointee)
Participant 3	13 years	Hispanic/Latino	SSM III
Participant 4	15 years	White	Chief Deputy (appointee)
Participant 5	6 years	Middle Eastern/North African	Deputy Director (appointee)

Interview Structure & Data Collection

The interviews occurred between February 28 and March 8, 2024. All interviews were scheduled, administered, and recorded via Zoom, and transcribed in real time using Otter.ai. Participants received the 10 interview questions ahead of their scheduled time (see Appendix A), and were informed that they could skip or answer any question based on their experience and/or comfort level. All interviews began with the participants being read an informed consent form

(see Appendix B), and their verbal agreement to participate in the study. All participants were asked the same 10 questions, yet their responses could lead into unique follow up questions. Additionally, if a question was answered as part of a previous response, the question was skipped. Following the interviews, the raw data was edited to eliminate any identifying information, and after which the original zoom recordings were also deleted. Per the IRB's protocol, all deidentified data will be kept on hand for three years following the culmination of research.

Data Analysis

I used qualitative content analysis methods to explore common themes and findings from these interviews. Using an inductive content analysis process, the transcript data was culled and coded for common themes (Elo & Kingas, 2008). First, I used Otter.AI software to transcribe my five Zoom interview recordings. Once the interviews were in text form, I read through all transcripts in their entirety, and corrected any errors the transcription service may have incorporated by comparing the text to the video recordings if there was a question or incorrect transcription. Next, I read through the transcripts for a second time, this time adding notations in the margins of the topics discussed in each answer (for example: "benefits of in-person work, use of discretion, need for flexibility, importance of communication"). After annotating each transcript, I then went through the text and previous notations again, this time adding new notations, finding common codes and organizing them into themes. Ultimately, I came up with five broad categories that I will discuss in the following section. Additionally, each theme contained additional codes incorporated within them. These five themes are:

1. Need for Clarity on Policy

2. Use of Discretion and Need for Flexibility

3. Organizational Culture

4. Equity

5. Women in Leadership

Table 2: *Findings Themes and Codes*

Themes	Codes
Need for Clarity on Policy	- Importance of the "why" - Lack of Enforcement - Concern for perceived insubordination
Use of Discretion and Need for Flexibility	- Flexibility for policy implementation / days in the office - Use of discretion in policy flexibility - Flexibility constraints within state bureaucracy - Risks of Flexibility
Organizational Culture	- Benefits of hybrid/in person work - Improved Communication - Importance of in-person time usage
Equity: "Telework has been a way to stay safe"	- Impact of Telework/RTO on Equity - Racial - Economic - People with Disabilities - Reasonable Accommodation
Women in Leadership	- Double standards - Lack of infrastructure to support

IV. FINDINGS

The five survey respondents spoke to multiple aspects of their experience as leaders within the State of California. The findings are summarized below, and explored in depth in this section.

Need for Clarity/Transparency on Policy

> *"It's hard because you want direction, because then you can be clear to your*
>
> *employees. But also, you need flexibility in order to accommodate everyone. So it*
>
> *puts you in the middle where you're trying to explain, and if there isn't clear*
>
> *direction, it's really hard to explain to people why we need this change"*
>
> - Participant #4, a Chief Deputy at a mid-sized agency

The guidance given to state agencies has been unified but not prescriptive: all offices of those interviewed have been told that they needed to bring staff back into the office at a minimum of two days per week, yet they were not given guidance on what that looks like. During the pandemic, each agency was able to create and execute their own telework policy, and there was significant variation across departments. This lack of clarity and structure, while perhaps meant to enable the discretion of each individual agency, has instead caused anxiety and confusion on what leaders are supposed to do. All interview participants shared that some are waiting for clearer guidance to come down, and in the meantime are working on how they can be flexible within the constraints of the existing policy. Others are implementing the two day per week policy as official guidance, but are being intentional around the reasons for bringing people back. Another shared that they have been told to come back on certain days per week.

Respondent # 4 is a Chief Deputy in her agency, making her one of the most senior decision makers in her office. Her office has been told that there was interest in returning to the office two days a week since last November, with an anticipated goal of everyone returning two days per week after January 1st. The ambiguity of the directive made it increasingly challenging to implement. In her words **"***It wasn't a clear directive. But it was clear that it WAS a directive"***.** As the directive began to be implemented, additional confusion and ambiguity reigned. One key

source of confusion for her staff was that the policy was communicated down prior to the staff union approving the change. She shared: *"The policy had to be rewritten, and then we need to notify the union. And I can tell you, we can't bring people back in until after the unions confirm, so that will likely be next month- and even then, we're told that there will be additional conversations about the need for flexibility"*

Participants also spoke to a lack of clarity around enforcement. Two participants mentioned that they were worried about the potential risk of insubordination if they were perceived to not be following the policy, yet the policy directive has been so vague that they don't know what to do. Participant #5 pointed to a lack of enforcement saying *"we haven't been given clear direction on what enforcement looks like, and I don't want to ask because there are a lot of risks there, for both my staff and myself"*.

Using Discretion & Flexibility for Policy Implementation

"The flexibility piece is that everyone's different, every office, every agency is different, and there is not a one size fits all approach to making people come back in the office"

- *Participant 3*

The lack of clarity around timeline, implementation, and enforcement has created a landscape that enables these staff to attempt to use discretion and flexibility in how they roll out the policy. The primary theme of this research was to see how, if at all, female state leaders were using their bureaucratic discretion to implement the Return to Office policy directive. The guidance given to state agencies was unified but not prescriptive. The theme of discretion commonly intersected with the respondent's reported need for flexibility within policy implementation. Within these themes, respondents spoke to three angles: a wish for flexibility

around when people needed to be in the office, a willingness to use their own discretion to be flexible within the structure of the state bureaucracy, and the need to use discretion to address equity within the office.

Implementation Flexibility: Days in Office

Participants identified the need for flexibility as one of the most prevalent themes in this research, and for this paper, flexibility is defined as the need for flexibility in policy implementation with respect to when staff are required to come into the office. Though there is significant ambiguity in the Return to Office policy mandate, all five interview participants pointed to the need for customized options, without a "one size fits all" solution. Every woman interviewed was given the same guidance from the state: all employees must be in the office two days per week. However, different agencies have given different levels of prescriptive guidance to this mandate. One interview participant shared that her office is asking everyone to come on Mondays and Wednesdays, with another saying Tuesdays and Thursdays. Yet another office is leaving the two days up to the guidance of different teams and their top manager. Participant 1, a Deputy Director/ SSMIII was responsible for creating the Return to Office policy for her agency. She shared, *"Our two days a week looks like this: one day you have to come in because the branch has chosen that day. But you have flexibility on the other day - just tell us what you're going to do and we'll record that. We recognize it changes from week to week. I had the privilege of being a little bit more flexible, because I work for a smaller scale department, so we didn't have the layers of bureaucracy other departments might have"*.

Participant 2, a deputy director at a midsize agency, was given the guidance that all of her staff needed to be in the office six days per month. With regards to flexibility she shared, *"The department's policy is at the minimum six days per month people have to be in the office, but*

across the department it has been incredibly disparate in its implementation of the policy. Again, it really depends on the manager or team leader".

Without clear guidance and transparency in policy, this research found that managers felt their hands were tied. They needed to act within the vague guidance of the directive, yet the guidance wasn't prescriptive enough to make them feel supported and that they could give a good reason to their staff as to why they needed to come back.

Universally, there was a recognized need for having the ability to adjust the policy based on what their staff needs, pointing to health concerns, child care challenges, travel time, or simply staff preference. Participant 2 elaborated: *"Understanding individual needs may not always align with our policies, and allowing that flexibility is critical, quite frankly, to having a happy workforce or having a robust workforce that actually wants to work for state organizations"*

It's worth noting that one participant also shared her fears as a manager with regards to flexibility. Participant 5 shared, *"they have given us some flexibility, but with that is a lot of risk....like, I'm opening myself up to all kinds of discrimination, and it's scary what people throw at you as a manager in the state"*. While she didn't go deep into this response, she shared a concern that if she provides flexibility to one staff and not all, she could be perceived as discriminating and open herself up to threats and complaints from her staff.

Discretion

Discretion was a frequent theme across all five interviews, with four out of five participants linking their need for flexibility with their willingness to use discretion, as long as decisions did not explicitly go against the guidance given. Participant 1 said, *"I'm just trying to figure out just how much I can do within the directive",* sharing that she feels the need to be

flexible and promote alternatives to her staff, but feels she can't explicitly do anything outside of the vague boundaries of the directive. Participant #3 had similar thoughts, reiterating that while she felt obligated to follow the guidance brought down from higher managers, she was willing to use discretion and find flexibility within those constraints. For example, she referenced her own manager who she gave the term "micromanager" to, who would prefer to have everyone come in on the same days so that she can see them in person and know that they are following the directive. She shared that she won't make them come in on those prescribed days *"because I give a shit about equity. If they don't want to, I'm not going to make them. I don't care when they come in, as long as they're doing their work and getting things done"*. She also shared that the stringent and rigid guidance was *"bad for morale and not building any culture",* and in her eyes, was worthy of maintaining her flexibility with her own staff.

Participant #1 shared that while her staff has a clear policy that requires staff to be in two days a week, as a manager she both encourages flexibility and uses her own discretion with how flexible she needs to be, based on her staff's needs. She shared, *"I encourage flexibility with our managers, so a staff can get the flexibility to stay home with a sick kid, or change around their [in office] days if they need to, for whatever reason"*. Participant #5 reiterated that she feels her office is trying to provide guidance based on flexibility, but said she *"doesn't ask questions she doesn't want to know the answer to"*, and that she uses the lack of clarity to increase her own use of discretion to accommodate her staff.

Participant #2 was the only respondent who shared that she explicitly uses her discretion against existing policy guidance in order to increase the flexibility of the policy implementation. She shared: *"I'm really trying to just be as flexible as possible and I'm fine working outside of the system. And without anyone knowing, because I understand people have different*

circumstances in their lives, and I don't want to lose people because of a baseless policy". This participant also shared her frustrations with both the communication of the directive, and lack of guidance that went with it, and felt that it was within her purview to do what was needed to meet the needs of her staff. She shared, *"I am very much like, as long as you get your work done, I don't really care. Don't give me a reason to require you to be in the office",* noting that as long as work performance is strong, she won't make her staff come in consistently. This particular participant also mentioned significant equity concerns which will be addressed more in depth in another section, but acknowledges that she uses discretion to create a safer environment for her staff, all of whom are people of color like herself. She mentions a prevalence of racially aggravated microaggressions and and unsupportive work environment for both herself and her staff based on the dynamics from her executive team, and gives her own guidance to staff on the weeks they are expected to be in, saying *"no one is normally in the office on Thursdays and Fridays, so I've recommended that they come in on those days, when those executives are not there, just so they don't have to engage with them".*

Culture: The benefits of being in person and hybrid work

There has been significant media attention in California pointing to the broad wish to continue telework permanently in the public sector, with thousands of state workers taking to the 38,000 member State Worker Reddit daily to share their discontent. However, all participants in this research recognize the value and importance of in-person time and are not resistant to Return to Office as a concept. Instead, they all wish for clarity, transparency, and above all, intentionality with how and when office in-office time is scheduled. As mentioned previously, all five respondents ultimately wish for flexibility in the roll-out so that they can meet the individual

needs of their employees, and not have a blanket one-size-fits all policy. The value of being in person is clear to all of these managers.

Participant #3 shared that prior to coming back to the office, her actions with her staff started to feel transactional. In her words *"...Sometimes the work was just honestly really boring. I started doing report outs with them [her staff] every morning asking them 'how much did you do yesterday' because things just weren't getting done. And we all realized that being in the office might just be more interesting."* Her staff shared with her that the menial work was hard to focus on from home, and that it tended to drone on and in turn wasn't getting done. Once people were brought back to the office twice a week, she shared that *"everyone sort of came back to themselves"* and started collaborating and reengaging in their work in more intentional ways.

The research also recognized the importance and value of in-person connection that comes from in-person work. Four participants shared that communication was improved after being in-person together, and that the improved communication positively impacted team dynamics. Participant #1 shared *"It's funny because you don't really see it until you're experiencing it and you realize you've been missing it. The human connection: I feel like I'm developing friendships and rapport with my staff to where I can more easily have a difficult conversation, and when it's face to face it's not so threatening to them"*. This same person shared an anecdote of a staff member she was struggling to connect with in a virtual setting and that their performance was not satisfactory and was heading towards disciplinary action. She proposed that they began working together in person once per week. She shares *"within a month of just seeing each other one day per week, all issues were resolved. We were able to connect better in person, and have better heart-to-heart constructive conversations than we were ever*

able to have over zoom. And we just have a solid communication channel now that we weren't able to have previously".

Participant #2 was the most vocal about a preference for staying remote, largely due to equity implications that are discussed in the following section. Nevertheless even she acknowledged the benefits, particularly as a manager, of having face-to-face time. She says: *"my analyst is not very analytical - she struggles with writing. I think maybe I would have been able to help her develop those skills more if we were in person, to sit down with a piece of paper and make a plan. Our day to day would have been easier".*

The benefits of in-person work that these respondents discussed also reflect aspects of organizational culture, including improved communication channels and interpersonal connections, and one respondent also discussed intentional efforts her agency is making to support employees and improve wellbeing and culture as staff return to work. This agency has held in-person trainings to address the trauma and lingering impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic had on staff, which this participant shared has worked towards creating safe and trusting work environments for her staff that have been improving culture post pandemic. She shared, *"my team has voluntarily shared that this real connection for them has been incredible. Healing trauma, sharing stories, and understanding and normalizing what we have all been through. It does something for people, it creates connections and we can tell".* This effort was unique to her agency, but she shared she wishes it would be widespread across the state in order to address the challenges of the past 4 years and rebuild the trust and connections within staff.

Similarly, participant #5 shared that having intentional team building activities worked into in-person office days could greatly benefit team culture. Instead of bringing people back in the office to have "butts in chairs", her office is trying to have one day of working in person as a

team, and the other day *"out in a park doing team building, or doing something fun like an escape room"*. She shared that the more intentionality and transparency around why people have to come back in the office, the more her staff trusted and were willing to do it. Participant 3 strongly preferred telework for herself, yet saw the value of being back in the office as a manager, particularly around the topic of culture. She shared that when done intentionally, time in person was so important for building connections and trust as a team. From her experience, *"it was really effective to have a team day where we all came together. We learned what everyone else was doing. And had coffee, played games, and got to know each other again. It was such a good use of time."*

Equity: "Telework has been a way to stay safe"

> *"Return to office will be a huge disservice to increasing equity, not only within my agency but the entire state. It's incredibly problematic, and not just the policy but the way it's being communicated. And the lack of flexibility in implementation, unless a manager is really willing to risk getting in trouble for providing that flexibility."* - Participant 3

While the topic of equity was not one of my guiding research questions, it became a prevalent theme in my findings. Nearly all participants addressed the equity implications of both telework and return to office, including racial, economic, gender, and disability equity.

Racial Equity

Participant #2 was the most vocal around the racial inequities related to forcing a return to office. This participant identifies as a Black woman, and her direct staff is entirely people of color in a majority white office. She shares, *"in my department, there are going to be disparate impacts [of an RTO policy] from a racial and ethnic perspective. We are a super heavy majority*

white organization, and there are certain places in our organization that just do not feel safe for people of color. I'll give you an example: in the last month we have lost six high level managers because of office culture and discrimination, exacerbated by return to work." This same participant shared that her staff face microaggressions from higher management nearly every day, and that keeping her staff safe has given her a cause for using discretion in policy implementation regularly. She continues *"I do not want to subject them to that kind of hostility, and I'm using that word very intentionally. It is a hostile work environment. And so I've encouraged them to come in on the days when the [problematic] executives are not there, so they don't have to engage with them."* Participant #3 gave similar insight, saying *"people experienced a lot of microaggressions in the office experience, like a lot of challenges. If you're teleworking, you don't have to deal with certain people".* While respondents all recognized the value of in-person time, the research found unique challenges, barriers and threats to racial equity in the reasoning for a return to office policy. As Participant 2 shared, and others concurred: *"telework has been a way to stay safe."*

Economic Equity

The theme of economic equity was addressed by two participants. Both shared that in their respective offices, the Return to Office directive disproportionately impacted those with lower paying jobs, particularly those who were hired during the COVID-19 pandemic. They reiterated that many staff were hired as permanent telework hires during the pandemic, yet now the policy has changed and they are being asked to come back to the office. Participant 1 shared, *"imagine this: you're hired during the pandemic. You live in Humboldt, your office is headquartered in Fresno, but you're told it's fine, we're remote forever. Now it's 2024, and everyone is asked to return to office: what, as managers, are we supposed to do?".* In this

scenario, the manager was referring to the increased cost of gas and travel associated with returning to the headquartered office: with the new directive, this staff would be financially responsible for driving from Humboldt to Fresno on every in-office day.

With the return to office, these lower paying staff faced additional economic burdens. Participant #2 shared *"a lot of the people who were asked to come back first were administrative staff, executive assistants, and office technicians- the lowest paid in our office. They make little money and now have to pay for travel to the office, gas, and parking. It's a big financial burden when they could easily do their job from home"*.

Participant 1 shared an interesting solution to this challenge, that was unique to all of the interviews. Her office hired staff across the state during the pandemic, with significant geographic diversity. Once the Return to Office conversations began, they proactively addressed this challenge. She shared, *"we had to develop some sort of office exemption. If you were hired during the pandemic under emergency telework and you lived more than 50 miles outside of the headquarters area, you are allowed to be 100% telework…We created this exemption, and then brought it to CalHR and said 'we're going to do this because we have created an impossible situation for our staff. And they approved it."* Participant 1's office was the only one in my research who proactively addressed the conflicting guidance to accommodate those who were hired as remote employees during the pandemic, and then were told they had to be in a headquartered office.

Equity for People with Disabilities

Interview participants also shared the equity implications on their staff with disabilities, and the benefits of telework for these staff in particular. Participant 3, for example, felt frustrated by her lack of flexibility to be able to accommodate the needs of a good employee, resulting in

their departure: *"I supervised someone with a physical illness, and it would come up unexpectedly. It was really convenient for her to be able to telework, but once we were back in the office, she would sometimes just miss her in-office days due to this. But she was a great employee. The majority of her work was typing, which she could do from home…this staff left because the telework policy wasn't going to change and the requirement to come back wasn't going to either. It's unfortunate."*

Participant 5 reiterated this concern, also including people with both physical and mental disabilities, particularly coming out of the pandemic. She shared, *"a lot of people don't want to leave their houses, they're anxious and scared for their health to be around a lot of people in the office. Or there are individuals who don't want to be judged for their appearance. We need to address the anxiety people are facing coming out of the pandemic before making them come back to work".*

The topic of reasonable accommodation was brought up in multiple conversations, adjacent to the conversations about equity, particularly related to the needs of those with physical and mental disabilities. The State's Reasonable Accommodation policy requires employers with five or more employees "to provide reasonable accommodation for individuals with a physical or mental disability to apply for jobs and to perform the essential functions of their jobs unless it would cause an undue hardship" (State of California, Civil Rights Department, n.d.) , which can include approving an alternative work location. Three respondents mentioned that they have encouraged their staff to pursue reasonable accommodations in order to have a legitimate reason to provide them with flexibility, working within the constraints of the state bureaucracy. Participant 4 shared that her agency is seeing increased anxiety and mental health, and as a response, a huge uptick in requests for reasonable accommodations, and her managers are

struggling to balance meeting the expectations of the directive, while also meeting reasonable accommodation standards. Participant 5 is also encouraging her staff to pursue reasonable accommodations to provide legitimacy in flexibility, saying *"for anyone on my team, I say go take care of yourself. Use your right to file so that this request is on the record and you are protecting yourself and your safety."*

Female Leadership Experience

Participants both implicitly and explicitly addressed how being a female leader has impacted both their experience in the role, as well as how they experience the RTO mandate. Participant 3 spoke directly to the financial benefits of telework to women in the State. She shared, *"telework is what helps make it [public sector work] more attractive to women. Yes, we have good benefits and stability, but with telework you're spending less money on clothes, parking, less time away from your families. There are so many equity concerns with women, and no one cares how much time and energy women are spending going into the office right now".* Participant 1 had similar reflections on why women are drawn to state work, saying *"I do see how it appeals to women. I think the job security and economic security are an excellent choice for women, and the benefits and retirement are so important to keeping women financially secure."*

Each participant connected their experience to the inequitable gender expectations and double standards that they experience being a woman in these roles. Participant 4 shared, *"yes, there are benefits to telework. But that's because we're expected to do everything as women, and that's really hard to do, whether it's telework or at the office."* Employee 5 pointed to how women in management are held to different expectations and standards from their male counterparts, and how women, particularly mothers, are expected to do the caregiving while

simultaneously being held to office policies, saying *"the pressures on us are different. Men never have to take a break in their careers to figure out how to do it all. They don't take a step back like we often have to. I want to see more women leaders doing it all. Like, give us a frickin break here".* Participant 2 shared similar thoughts, saying *"Women are caretakers of their families and kids, and do all the things, and often bear the brunt of that responsibility for the whole family. I'm not saying men don't do that, but generally it's more than men, and they're gonna have to figure out how to do it all and navigate these [return to office] challenges that our male colleagues don't have to".* Participant 3 felt strongly about how women were disproportionately impacted by RTO policies, and closed by sharing *"it's ironic right? That we're given this instruction by a man. Our governor has given us instructions not understanding the full impact of what that has on women."*

Lack of Infrastructure to Support Women

All five of the research participants addressed the lack of infrastructure, both within State bureaucracy and society, to support women and their growth, with childcare and mentorship emerging as the prevalent themes.

All five participants mentioned how telework helped either themselves or women on their team meet child care demands, and that a lack of child care infrastructure broadly was holding women back in their careers. Participant #1 shared, *"a lot of the anxiety I saw in my staff returning to work revolved around child care, and how they were going to be able to do it, both financially and even just finding child care".* Participants mentioned the societal need to address child care access and availability, and that, as women trying to do it all, they felt held back. Participant 4 mentioned *"[telework] let me pretend I can do all the things at the same time.*

Childcare, school hours, kids activities. But it's really, incredibly hard to do. So while being back in the office can be hard, telework is particularly hard on women because the lines are blurred".

Finally, the research identified the need for strong women's mentorship in two interviews. Participant 2 shared a challenge with her own supervisor, who is also a woman, and is the only woman on her office's executive team. She feels that she is held to more rigid and stringent standards by how she supervises her own staff, and that *"she asks to see my staff's telework policies frequently, to ensure that I'm implementing them appropriately. She wants to know what days my staff are coming to the office, what they're doing and where they'll be",* while the males on the executive team do not hold their directors to the same level of scrutiny and observation. This illustrated Participant 1's observation on how important female mentors are to other female leaders and aspiring leaders in the State. She said, *"one thing I'd like to change is the mentorship piece, because for so long I was fortunate to have a women mentor who believed in me, guided me, and cheered me on…after she retired, I never found another woman who was kind to me in this way again. Women who come up in positions of power in the State have a tendency to be mean to other women…maybe because they had to be tough to deal with the sexism from their male peers".*

V. DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

This research sought to explore how female leaders experience RTO policy implementation, both through their use of bureaucratic discretion, and the impact RTO may have on organizational culture in their departments. Through interviewing female leaders at the state and listening to their experiences, the data clearly shows unique and interesting findings related to both research questions.

Research Question #1: How are female leaders using bureaucratic discretion in RTO policy implementation?

This research illustrates the complexities that come with bureaucratic discretion, and that it is often a double edged sword. While leaders want to be able to maintain flexibility for their staff, they similarly struggle with ambiguity and a lack of clear guidance within bureaucratic directives. Prior research has explored whether bureaucratic discretion is good or bad, but this research also looks into whether discretion is *wanted* by bureaucrats, or if they would prefer clearer, narrower guidance for consistency and transparency. The women interviewed unanimously shared that they wanted clarity in guidance, and that they wanted to maintain transparency with their staff, and built trust by communicating the 'why' behind the guidance.

Prior research explored how discretion can benefit those on the receiving end of a policy or services, and how Street Level Bureaucrats can use discretion to streamline or improve their work, looking at discretion as benefit. Yet, this research also illustrates how discretion can be a challenge, and whether discretion is actually wanted in leadership. Looking at the experiences of women leaders in particular, this research suggests that at times discretion and flexibility may create more of a challenge for them, and that by not using discretion it protects them from potential equity threats (such as why would they treat one person one way and another differently).

The data in this research also shows that discretion can be used for both flexibility and protest. Overwhelmingly, female leaders shared their wish to be able to use discretion to maintain flexibility in policy implementation, yet on the reverse, they also used it as a form of protest. If leaders do not agree with a policy, or feel that their staff are being treated inequitably

or unjustly, this research shows that managers can use discretion to both protect their staff, and have it serve as their way to protest the policy they don't believe in.

This research also found clear differences at using discretion at the micro level versus macro level. Much of the prior literature on the micro-level of bureaucratic discretion focuses on the role of Street Level Bureaucrats, which are public sector bureaucrats who engage directly with the public through the administration of services, including teachers, social service providers, and police officers. While much of the previous literature on bureaucratic discretion has focused on either direct services implementation or external policy implementation, this research suggests that bureaucratic discretion is widely used in internal policy implementation as well, specifically in instances of supporting their staff with flexibility.

Research Question # 2: How do female leaders perceive the impact of RTO policy on organizational culture?

Notably, all women in this research pointed to the value of in-person time with their teams to improve organizational culture, trust, and communication internally.

Prior literature also has explored the benefits and challenges to telework, particularly as it relates to organizational culture. This research upheld much of the previous literature with regards to challenges individuals face with telework, including poor communication between teams, feelings of loneliness and isolation, poor work-life balance, and a lack of connection with their team. All five survey participants shared anecdotal examples of how all of these issues were addressed with occasional face-to-face time in the office: communication was increased, team connections were improved, interpersonal connections were made, and people felt a clear line between work and home. While my prior literature did not explicitly look at how policy

implementation should be communicated, my research quite clearly spoke to the need for clarity and transparency when statewide directives are handed down from top executives.

These findings lay clear additional implications of the intersection of telework and gender equity. While prior research has shown the benefits associated with telework and women, particularly mothers, this research also illustrates how telework can exacerbate existing gender roles and stereotypes, and that in fact, RTO can have positive equity implications by making certain gender inequities clearer. The women in this research shared that telework makes the lines blurred in the multiple roles they play both professionally and personally, and that RTO helps provide additional boundaries for them.

This research also reinforced that women face inequitable work-life balance standards as they are often held to double standards and unrealistic expectations, and compounded the scores of existing literature that have called for increased societal supports for women in the workforce, particularly around access and availability to child care.

Limitations in Research

This research has four notable limitations. First, as with many initial studies on a smaller scale, this research had a small sample size of five participants. While the data gleaned from these interviews was significant, future research would benefit from an increased sample size for broader results. Second, this research did not limit participation based on level of state classification and/or management level, so both middle and senior managers are reflected in these responses. It is likely that these two sub-populations of female management may have different perspectives on a broader scale, and future research may want to consider dividing the sample population by level of management/classification. Third, this research intentionally focused on responses from five different state agencies to get disparate responses to policy

implementation. However, on a larger scale, it could be valuable to focus the entirety of research on one individual agency to adequately gauge the impact of RTO policy implementation on organizational structure and culture for one agency. Finally, the data collection method (interviews) allowed for customized follow-up questions when participants veered from the planned questions. Thus, each interview contributed slightly different answers, though continually on the overarching theme. This could be a limitation for future research, as while all participants started with the same ten questions, the responses were not cohesively based on these alone.

Opportunities for Future Research

These results presented clear opportunities for future research. This research was done in March, 2024, when there were inconsistencies across the State of California around dissemination and implementation of a Return to Office directive. While the rumored directive was statewide, each agency had a different reaction and interpretation of the perceived directive. Future research should continue to explore the impact of female leadership on bureaucratic discretion in RTO policy implementation at a broader scale, and after clear policy guidance is laid down. Additionally, existing literature shows a gap in research that explores how bureaucratic discretion is used for internal policy implementation, and there is a strong opportunity to explore this beyond RTO policy. Finally, the equity implications on RTO policy were notable, and there is importance in future research into how RTO policies impact different salary levels, communities of color, and people with physical and mental disabilities.

VI. CONCLUSION

This research sought to explore how female leaders within the State of California experience the Return to Office policy directive and/or implementation through the framework of

bureaucratic discretion and organizational culture. I was interested in looking at if and how women leaders shifted the policy to accommodate the needs of their staff, while simultaneously looking at how they perceived both telework and the resulting return to office to impact organizational culture.

My findings suggest that women leaders do use bureaucratic discretion in their policy implementation efforts, particularly around how they can increase flexibility within existing constraints. These leaders recognize the challenges their staff face with the inconsistent guidance and lack of clarity over the past 4 years, and want to have the formal flexibility to accommodate the unique needs of individuals, not a blanket policy for an agency.

Additionally, this research clearly showed that all of these women recognize the benefits of having face-to-face interaction in the office, and that flexibility should include the opportunity to bond with their team, spend intentional time together, and improve camaraderie and culture. While none of these leaders wish to see a full time return to office, they all value the benefits that come with having intentionally planned time in-person with their staff.

These findings also suggest significant room for future research to expand on this topic, and the need to address existing literature gaps around how bureaucratic discretion is used on internal policy implementation at the managerial level. Importantly, this research also illustrated significant equity concerns. The return to office policies disproportionately impact communities of color, people with physical and mental disabilities, and those with lower paying roles, and future research will want to explore how to better support these populations through future directives.

On April 10th, 2024, while I was finalizing the findings and implications for this research, Governor Newsom formally announced a government wide directive requiring all state

workers back in the office two days a week beginning in June, 2024. Governor Newsom's Cabinet Secretary Ann Patterson sent the memo, in which she acknowledged the confusion and lack of clarity around previous efforts, saying *"Unfortunately, the varied approaches have created confusion around expectations and are likely to exacerbate inconsistencies across agencies and departments,"* (Venteicher, 2024). She also cited "enhanced collaboration, cohesion, and communication, better opportunities for mentorship, particularly for workers newer to the workforce, and improved supervision and accountability" as benefits of returning to the office. This updated guidance addresses many of the themes in this research, and provides an interesting window to look into this next phase of Return to Office.

Understanding the female leadership experience in California's public sector is essential to creating longevity and sustainability in this workforce, and as gender demographics continue to shift within State Agencies, women leaders will continue to be the majority. These findings suggest the need for flexible, people-centered workplace policies, and intentional infrastructure to support women and their growth.

> *"We can really have the diverse workforce we want and be an employer of choice,*
>
> *and have so many capable and smart people who are willing to work for the state,*
>
> *if we can just leverage some flexibility in this area"*
>
> *- Participant 3*

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Can you introduce yourself? Tell me about your current role and your tenure within the State of California. Please include information about your role as a manager, and how many people you currently supervise.
2. Can you share a bit about your office's telework policy? What was the expectation of both yourself and the staff you supervise?
3. Did you find that telework impacted (either positively or negatively) your interactions with your staff? How was communication between you, and how did you, as a manager, try to keep your staff engaged and unified? What worked and what didn't?
4. What were the greatest benefits of telework for you as a supervisor and leader in your office? What were the challenges?
5. What is the proposed Return to Office policy for your office? How are you feeling about it?
6. Do you think the RTO policy will broadly be a benefit or disservice to your staff? How do you think RTO policy could shape or change your team dynamics?
7. Do you know what your role will be as manager in implementing the RTO policy? How much discretion do you feel like you have?
8. As a leader in the public sector, do you have any suggestions on how top level bureaucrats can better support women in leadership and management positions within the state?
9. What are the biggest barriers for you and your career right now?
10. Thank you so much for your time. Is there anything else you'd like to share in advance of the upcoming RTO effort?

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

How Return to Office Policies Impact the Female Leadership Experience Within the State of California

My name is Donna Cullinan, and I am a Master's candidate within California State University, Sacramento's Public Policy & Administration program. You are invited to participate in a research study about the experience of female leaders within the State of California, and how they experience policies related to both telework, as well as the upcoming Return to Work mandate.

If you volunteer, you will be asked to participate in one interview via Zoom, which will take approximately 30-60 minutes. If you agree to participate, you can stop at any time.

Risk Statement:
This study may expose you to minor risks, but they are not expected to be any greater than risks you experience in daily life.

The potential benefits to this research are that you will have the opportunity to provide real-time experiences during a time of significant policy change within State work. While this research will not be shared with any State agency or office, it will create a landscape for future research on a broader scale.

Confidentiality:
I intend to publish or present my results. **You will not be identified in my results**. I will protect your identity by: (1) grouping responses/using pseudonyms, (2) storing collected information in a protected location, and (3) removing identifiers as early as possible. Information that can identify you will be deleted or removed from the data after the interviews have been transcribed, approximately 2 weeks post interview.. The de-identified data will be kept in a secure location and may be used for other research studies. I will destroy the de-identified data 3 years after the study ends.

Consent:
Your verbal consent indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you stop participation at any time without penalty.

You will receive a copy of this form to take with you.