And in this job I do have to try to please a lot of people. I try and appeal to a lot of people to do fund raising, and to try and keep the membership happy and try and keep the staff happy, but also try and be challenging. And I do get patronised by various people. Of course I do, you know. I am youngish – although people say that I look younger than I am and that doesn’t help – a few grey hairs won’t hurt.

—Sayeeda Khan (Senior leader in a UK charitable organisation)

Our focus in this chapter is to draw on the analyses we presented in previous chapters and consider the implications these raise for women’s leadership identity. We explore why women are not readily identified as leaders particularly when, as the quote from Sayeeda Khan above illustrates, your appearance contrasts with received understandings of what leaders look like and can elicit negative responses. Drawing on Ashcraft and Mumby’s (2004) framework the chapter’s objective is to consider how discourse organises identity. That is, we will examine the relationship between broader societal narratives of gender and dominant discourses in organisations and work towards making sense of how certain discourses of leadership identity come to be privileged. We recognise that the topic of identity is a much contested and debated field. Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas (2008) note that within organisation studies identity can be associated with a range of organisational processes and intervention, from company mergers and project teams through to motivation and politics. Collinson (2003) examines the influence of organisations
on self-identity arguing that this is now more significant than religious or family influences. Kempster (2009) too observes the large volume of literature on identity but suggests that research examining processes that influence identity construction is more limited; his focus therefore is to study the becoming of leadership identity and how this is shaped within particular situations. Our concern in this chapter is to understand how certain leadership discourses are mobilised and come to be privileged. Our focus therefore is not in making sense of the development of individual's leadership identity per se, rather our aim is to work towards revealing dominant leadership identity discourses through leading women’s narratives of their experience. In common with Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas (2008) we view a focus on leadership identity as one way to revitalise understandings of leadership. The women’s narratives of their leadership presented in previous chapters have, for example, alerted us to the possibilities for women’s leadership, particularly the significance of the individual in resisting and shaping conceptions of leadership. To support our exploration we turn to Ashcraft and Mumby’s (2004) approach as it assumes that subjectivity is ‘unstable, fragmented, and constructed in an ongoing and dynamic manner through various communicative practices’ (p. 117). While recognising that identity regulation can be a significant form of organisational control (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), our aim is to illustrate identity as a ‘temporary, context-sensitive and evolving set of constructions, rather than a fixed and abiding essence’ (Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas, 2008: 6) thus allowing for possibilities of resistance to taken-for-granted leadership identities.

This chapter therefore builds on discussions in previous chapters. In Chapter 4 we used the contextual approaches to gender identified by Wharton (2005) to explore whether the gender of the leaders we have been studying is significant in their experience of practising leadership. To deepen this analysis we drew on previous studies which together led to a number of observations including awareness of the ways in which gender positions women leaders. We argued that holding a concept of gender that sees it as fundamental to organising, managing and leading alerts us to the ways in which gender influences at many levels. For example, gender influences through various processes including organisational processes and activities, relationships and social practices more generally.