



Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales
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**THE OBSTACLES WOMEN FACE ON
THE PATH TO LEADERSHIP AND
HOW MEN PERCEIVE THEM
DIFFERENTLY**

Author: Nadine Stichs
Director: Maria Eugenia Fabra Florit

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the barriers to women's career advancement and how these barriers are perceived differently by men and women. The primary objective is to analyze whether and to what extent the perceptions of barriers to women's career advancement differ between men and women, focusing on the three main barriers lack of visibility, internal barriers put up by companies and insufficient networking or relationships.

To this end, a quantitative survey was conducted among Spanish board members and executives to collect data on their perceptions of these barriers. The survey aimed to test the hypothesis that perceptions of barriers differ significantly between genders.

The results show that women perceive all three barriers to be more important than men. Specifically, women rated lack of visibility and internal company barriers significantly higher, suggesting that they are more aware of these barriers due to their direct experience. Men, on the other hand, rated these barriers lower, possibly due to a lack of direct experience and awareness of the subtle and pervasive nature of these barriers.

These findings highlight the need for greater awareness and action to address gender barriers in the workplace. Recommendations include implementing targeted interventions such as mentoring programs, creating more inclusive networking opportunities, and fostering work environments that identify and mitigate internal barriers to women's career advancement.

Key Words: Gender Equality, Female Leadership, Gender Perceptions, Career Advancement Barriers

Resumen Ejecutivo

Esta tesis examina las barreras a la promoción profesional de las mujeres y cómo las perciben de forma diferente los hombres y las mujeres. El objetivo principal es analizar si, y en qué medida, las percepciones de las barreras a la promoción profesional de las mujeres difieren entre hombres y mujeres, centrándose en las tres barreras principales: la falta de visibilidad, las barreras internas impuestas por las empresas y la insuficiencia de redes o relaciones.

Con este fin, se llevó a cabo una encuesta cuantitativa entre miembros de consejos de administración y ejecutivos españoles para recoger datos sobre sus percepciones de estas barreras. La encuesta pretendía comprobar la hipótesis de que las percepciones de las barreras difieren significativamente entre géneros.

Los resultados muestran que las mujeres perciben las tres barreras como más importantes que los hombres. En concreto, las mujeres valoraron mucho más la falta de visibilidad y las barreras internas de la empresa, lo que sugiere que son más conscientes de estas barreras debido a su experiencia directa. Los hombres, en cambio, las valoran menos, posiblemente por falta de experiencia directa y de conciencia de la naturaleza sutil y omnipresente de estas barreras.

Estos resultados ponen de relieve la necesidad de una mayor concienciación y acción para abordar las barreras de género en el lugar de trabajo. Entre las recomendaciones se incluye la puesta en marcha de intervenciones específicas, como los programas de mentores, la creación de oportunidades de creación de redes más inclusivas y el fomento de entornos de trabajo que identifiquen y mitiguen las barreras internas a la promoción profesional de las mujeres.

Palabras Clave: Igualdad de género, liderazgo femenino, percepción de género, Obstáculos para la promoción profesional

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1 Introduction

Despite significant progress towards achieving gender equality in the workplace in recent decades, barriers persist that hinder women's advancement. Since the inception of the women's rights movement in the late 19th century, numerous milestones have been achieved globally, paving the way for social, political, and legal equality for women. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed intensified feminist activities, leading to substantial advancements in career opportunities and education. As a result, there has been a consistent increase in the proportions of women and men successfully completing university studies in Europe, with women now outnumbering men in terms of academic attainment (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2019).

However, disparities persist in leadership roles. Despite the increase in the proportion of women in academic professions, the rise in women's representation in leadership positions has been considerably slower. Women continue to face underrepresentation in senior leadership roles across various industries, indicating the existence of barriers that impede their career progression (McKinsey & Company, 2023; Schwanke, 2013; World Economic Forum, 2023).

Significant academic research has been dedicated to identifying and understanding these barriers, their origins, and their impacts. While literature such as Schein (2001) and McWhirter (1997) has extensively described barriers such as educational and psychological factors, the most analyzed and impactful barriers are those generated within organizations themselves, known as corporate barriers. Academic findings by authors such as Heilman et al. (1989), Eagly and Wood (2012, 2016), Ibarra (1992) or Brass (1985) show that corporate barriers, such as lack of visibility, internal barriers within companies, and insufficient networking and relations, significantly hinder women's advancement in their careers.

Research conducted by Sherf et al. (2017) demonstrated that men play a pivotal role in achieving gender equality in the workplace, making it important to understand their perceptions of these barriers.

While academic research has shed light on these barriers, there remains a notable gap concerning the differing perceptions of these barriers between men and women. This paper seeks to address the gap in research concerning the differing perceptions of corporate barriers between men and women. By examining how men and women perceive these barriers differ-

ently, focusing primarily on lack of visibility, internal barriers within companies, and insufficient networking and relations, this study aims to analyze how various corporate barriers arise and how they present a disadvantage for women in their careers. Furthermore, through methodological analysis, possible explanations for the differences in perception between women and men will be explored.

This paper consists of five sections. After the introduction, the second section reviews literature concerning the main barriers and how they are perceived by both genders, which forms the basis of our hypotheses. The third section outlines the methodology, including the survey framework and data analysis process. The fourth and fifth sections discuss the survey findings and provide an interpretation of the gender-specific differences in perceived career barriers. The final section concludes with a summary of the outcomes, their implications, and recommendations for future research.

2 State of the Art

Since about the second half of the 20th century, several authors have examined the reasons why women are disadvantaged on their way to leadership positions. The authors Eagly and Karau (2002) shed light on the issue from the perspective of stereotypes and gender bias, introducing the concept of the Role Congruity Theory in their work "Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice Towards Female Leaders". Other authors such as Heilman (1995, 2001), Heilman et al. (1989), Eagly and Wood (2012, 2016) and Burgess and Burgida (1999) have also researched gender stereotypes and their impact on women in the workplace. These stereotypes have different effects on women and are the reason, for example, why women receive less recognition for their work or are even punished for their successes.

Other authors, such as Ibarra (1992), Brass (1985) and Lincoln and Miller (1979) point out in their work that it is more difficult for women to network effectively, which is a key element for career advancement. Ibarra et al. (2010), Scandura (1992) and Ragins and Cotton (1991) also emphasize that women are much less likely to receive effective mentoring or sponsorship, which is necessary to reach high positions and be promoted.

Authors such as Gutek and Morasch (1982), Deaux (1985, 1995) or Gutek et al. (1990) explore the issue of gender stereotypes and how these gender roles can translate into work roles, arguing that this shapes social sexual behavior in the workplace, which can lead to sexual harassment and a sexualized work environment. Similarly, several authors such as Baker (2016) and Gutek et al. (1990) examine how these factors contribute to, among other things, the development of hostile work environments. These harmful and intimidating work environments have various negative effects on women's mental health, but also on other career factors, such as higher intentions to change companies.

Many studies, such as Coleman's (2020) do not include a concrete analysis of whether there are significant differences between men and women, but consist, for example, of interviews with either women and men or only women. Although important insights can be gained from this, it is not possible to draw a representative conclusion about the differences between the sexes. There are only a few specific analyses with representative results on this topic, such as Villarroja and Barrios (2022).

3 Theoretical Framework: Barriers to Women's Career Advancement

The term 'glass ceiling' is used to describe the barriers that prevent women and minorities from advancing to the top of management hierarchies (Pai & Vaidya, 2009; Powell & Butterfield, 2015). "Glass ceiling" serves as a metaphor for the cumulative effect of the various obstacles women encounter as they climb the professional ladder. Some of these barriers are often not immediately visible. However, they are reflected in the underrepresentation of these groups in leadership roles across sectors. The objective of the subsequent section is to provide a detailed examination of the corporate barriers women face.

3.1 Lack of Visibility

A major obstacle for women in their professional career is that they receive less recognition for their work and achievements. Even when they achieve the same results as men, their success is rarely acknowledged. We refer to this phenomenon as "lack of visibility". Lack of visibility results from several processes, such as the devaluation of performance and lack of recognition, as well as the dismissal of leadership styles that deviate from traditional masculine standards. These mostly unconscious processes originate in stereotypes.

Gender stereotypes encompass not only perceptions of how men and women are perceived to behave, but also societal norms dictating what behaviors are considered appropriate for each gender. This results in the classification into descriptive and prescriptive components. Descriptive stereotypes involve beliefs about the characteristics and attributes that individuals of a particular gender typically possess, while prescriptive stereotypes encompass beliefs about the characteristics and attributes that individuals of that gender ought to possess (Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Cota et al., 1991). Burgess and Borgida (1999) argue that although there may be some similarity in the content of these two components, as suggested by e.g. Stoppard and Kalin (1978), the processes by which the descriptive and prescriptive elements of gender stereotypes theoretically lead to discrimination differ. Discrimination caused by descriptive gender stereotypes arises from the belief that women inherently lack the necessary skills for a job simply because of their gender. With prescriptive gender stereotypes, discrimination occurs when women are penalized for not conforming to the stereotypical expectations of female behavior (Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Cota et al., 1991).

To analyze the lack of visibility barrier in more detail, only descriptive stereotypes and their repercussions are of relevance. The effects of prescriptive stereotypes will be discussed in Section X, Internal Barriers Created by companies.

3.1.1 Devaluation of Performance and Lack of Recognition

The two core dimensions used to characterize gender stereotypes are communion and agency, originating from the pioneering studies by Broverman et al. (1972) and supported by other authors such as Rucker et al. (2018). While communion directs attention towards the well-being of others, agency focuses on self-directed ambition (Eagly et al., 2019). Numerous research found that qualities traditionally valued in men were grouped together under a theme of “competence,” which includes traits like independence, instrumentality, assertiveness, and leadership (Eagly et al., 2019; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Wood, 2016; Fiske et al., 1991; Heilman et al., 1989, 1995). Conversely, the qualities traditionally associated with women were grouped under “warmth and expressiveness”, encompassing traits like empathy and gentleness (Broverman et al., 1972; Haines et al., 2016). Heilman (2001, p. 658) concludes that men are therefore described “as aggressive, forceful, independent, and decisive”, while women on the other hand “are characterized as kind, helpful, sympathetic, and concerned about others.”

Furthermore, men are often seen as highly agentic and less communal, whereas women are viewed as notably communal yet less agentic (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Heilman, 2001). This categorization contributes to the social modeling of gender specific behaviors, as individuals are socialized to develop traits that conform to traditional gender roles. The division of labor is reinforced through this socialization, directing women towards caregiving roles and occupations, while men are steered to be primary financial supporters of their families, typically occupying jobs that require attributes like “physical strength, assertiveness, or leadership skills” (Eagly & Wood, 2016, p. 1). The social role theory is based on these prepositions and goes even further and posits that gender distinctions primarily emerge from the assignment of different societal and occupational roles based on gender (Eagly, 1997; Eagly & Wood, 2016).

Based on these academic findings on gender stereotypes, it becomes apparent that discrimination in the workplace often arises from a mismatch between the qualifications typically associated with traditionally male-dominated occupations and the stereotypical attributes ascribed to women. According to Eagly et al. (1992), females encounter negative bias and discrimination when entering male-dominated career sectors, as their acquired and anticipated abilities differ from those that are stereotypically associated with such occupations. This phenomenon is described in the role congruity theory, which posits that bias and negative evaluations can

arise when there is a discrepancy between social perceivers' expectations of two social roles concurrently held by an individual (Triana et al., 2024). The theory explains that women are unfairly disadvantaged through negative bias, when they are perceived as not conforming to the expectations of these roles. Consequently, this incongruity lessens the perceived appropriateness of the individual for the role (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Accordingly, studies have found that even when women produce work identical to their male counterparts, their contributions are often seen as less valuable because of their gender (Heilman, 1995; Nieva & Gutek, 1980). The undervaluation of women's performance can partly be attributed to the bias in interpreting identical behaviors differently based on the gender of the individual, as shown in research conducted by Taylor et al. (1978). For instance, in professional environments, a woman's choice to deliberate before making a decision might be perceived as indecision, while a man's similar approach might be viewed as cautious and wise (Heilman, 2001).

Another repercussion of descriptive gender stereotypes is denying credit to women for their successes. Research conducted in 1969 by Feather indicated that women are more likely than men to attribute their success or failure to external factors such as luck. Building on this, Deaux and Emswiller (1974) explored gender biases in attributing success on tasks stereotypically associated with masculinity. The results of their study confirmed their hypothesis that when men and women perform equally well on a masculine task, the man's performance would be attributed to skill, whereas the women's would be seen as luck-driven. However, this bias did not extend to tasks considered feminine, where male and female performances were rated similarly. These results point to the general prejudice that men are generally perceived as more qualified than women, regardless of the task in question.

It is important to highlight that discriminatory practices rooted in descriptive gender stereotypes do not necessarily stem from a deliberate intent to discriminate towards women. Instead, this type of discrimination is rooted in subconscious cognitive patterns. Therefore, both men and women are likely to engage in this type of discrimination (Burgess & Borgida, 1999).

Villaroya and Barrios (2022) reveal with their study on men's and women's perception of the barriers to women's professional development in the cultural sector that perceptions between men and women concerning the impact of social stereotypes on the visibility of women's artwork differ. Results show that women are more likely to recognize and emphasize that social stereotypes significantly hinder their visibility. Conversely, men acknowledge the impact of

social stereotypes but tend to place less emphasis on them as a critical barrier. This suggests a discrepancy in awareness between the genders regarding how deeply social stereotypes affect women's professional visibility.

3.1.2 Gender Differences in Leadership

To fully comprehend the scope at which gender stereotypes impede women's progression to leadership roles, it is essential to recognize that with few exceptions, top level management positions are commonly aligned with attributes traditionally viewed as male, including assertive behavior and a strong orientation towards achievement (Heilman, 2001). In 1973, Schein revealed a substantial correlation between the qualities commonly attributed to men and those associated with managers. Conversely, the traits linked to women had little to no significant correlation with those of managers, supporting the concept that leadership qualities are more commonly associated with men than women. Expanding on Schein's work, Heilmann et al. (1989) conducted a follow-up study and observed that, over a decade later, the typical traits assigned to women still differed significantly from those attributed to successful managers.

Modern discussions about leadership often revolve around the distinction between heroic and post-heroic leadership styles (Prowse et al., 2022). Heroic leadership models are influenced by masculine traits and focus on task completion in the workplace. Accordingly, this traditional type of leadership is often associated with the agentic, controlling, competitive and individualistic male (Ford, 2010). In contrast, post-heroic leadership is associated with feminine qualities and emphasizes the nurturing and development of people, similar to roles found in the home (Fletcher, 2004). It is important to emphasize that the attributes commonly ascribed to the sexes do not represent masculinity or femininity per se, and often do not correspond to the behaviors of many individuals. However, these conventional images persistently shape societal expectations and pressure people to conform to these norms (Fletcher, 2004). Fletcher (2004) claims that modern leadership models have shifted from the heroic leadership of a few leaders to collaborative leadership practices. The post-heroic leadership approach challenges the traditional, individual-centered view of leadership. Instead, it advocates a model in which leadership roles and influence are distributed among group members (Pearce & Conger, 2003).

Since post-heroic leaders are often portrayed as gender-neutral, it is presumed that this leadership style is free of male dominance. Fletcher (2004) argues that the reality is quite the oppo-

site, leading him to describe post-heroic leadership as merely an "old model with new language" (Fletcher, 2004, p. 658). This would indicate that women continue to be disadvantaged in the post-heroic leadership system. There are various approaches to establishing that women are not necessarily advantaged and may even be disadvantaged by the post-heroic leadership model. On the other hand, several scholars, including Fondas (1997), have explored the concept of a "female advantage" (Fondas, 1997, p. 259) within the modern working environment, based on the alignment of traditionally feminine traits and behaviors with contemporary post-heroic leadership models. Fletcher (2004) challenges this thesis by arguing that since the post-heroic model corresponds more to female characteristics and behaviors, the exercise of post-heroic leadership models by women is seen as natural and expected, while post-heroic leadership is recognized and praised when exercised by men (Fletcher, 2004). Furthermore, women in leadership roles face multiple expectations. They are often encouraged to embody communal characteristics associated with their gender, while at the same time being expected to show agentic qualities essential to their leadership roles (Eagly & Sczesny, 2009).

Prowse et al. (2022) conducted a detailed investigation into the topic of post-heroic and heroic leadership styles to assess if there is a general preference for post-heroic leadership among both men and women. Additionally, they explored the potential of this preference to promote greater representation of women in leadership positions, with a specific focus on lay union representatives. The study they conducted examined the attributes valued by lay representatives (reps) that could increase women's representation and participation in union leadership within the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union. They used 18 attributes, each of which fell into one of two categories: heroic (collaborative) or post-heroic (agentic). The top five traits were "good people skills," "good listener," "belief in the cause," "empathy," and "empowering followers. The agentic traits of "strength of character," "foresight and vision," and "decisiveness" ranked sixth, seventh, and eighth, respectively. A clear majority, 88%, of lay leaders ranked collaborative traits such as "good interpersonal skills," "belief in the cause," "involvement in decision making," and "good listener" as most important. These traits are typically associated with post-heroic leadership qualities and are therefore more commonly associated with women.

The study also examined whether women and men prioritize different leadership traits. A significant difference was found for four traits. Significantly more women than men considered

the leadership traits of "empowering followers" and "shared decision making" to be more important to being a "good leader". Conversely, men considered the agentic traits of "self-sacrifice" and "foresight and vision" more important to being a good leader than did women. Interestingly, these findings are consistent with similar research by Kirton and Healy (2012), which suggests that the continued reliance on stereotypically masculine attributes to define union leadership roles is unlikely to encourage women's participation or increase their representation.

The disadvantages stemming from the barrier lack of visibility are primarily rooted in gender-specific biases and stereotypes. Women often fall victim to discrimination in many instances, resulting in setbacks in their professional careers, while men are less frequently affected. This incongruity suggests that men may be less consciously aware of the impacts of these barriers compared to women.

Furthermore, while the transition from heroic to post-heroic leadership models might suggest that women are less disadvantaged today and that the trend is shifting towards female leadership, the academic findings indicate that women actually face greater challenges in ascending to leadership positions. Specifically, the fact that the exercise of post-heroic leadership models by women is seen as natural and expected, while post-heroic leadership, when exercised by men, is recognized and praised, as demonstrated by Fletcher (2004), suggests that women are still disadvantaged even in newer leadership models. Thus, there is a significant discrepancy between the perceived equality-promoting nature of these new post-heroic leadership styles and the reality where women continue to face obstacles. Given that these processes are based on stereotypes and occur unconsciously, we assume that men are less aware of these barriers and therefore perceive them as less influential.

To test this hypothesis, we propose the following Hypothesis 1 (H1): There is a significant difference in the perception of the barrier lack of visibility between males and females.

3.2 Ineffective Networking and Relations

Other documented barriers to women entering top leadership positions include women's exclusion from informal networks and their lack of effective networking.

3.2.1 Women's Reticence in Effective Networking

Research in social networking has recognized two primary categories of social ties: instrumental networks and expressive networks (Ibarra & Andrews, 1993; Lincoln & Miller, 1979; Morris et al., 2008; Tichy et al., 1979). Instrumental ties are created through the performance of assigned professional roles and provide concrete resources related to work, as well as knowledge and information. Conversely, expressive ties refer to social connections that primarily involve social support contributing to a sense of identity, often seen in friendships (Blau, 1963; Gouldner, 1954; Kim & Rhee, 2010; Lincoln & Miller, 1979). When a relationship between two individuals at work has both instrumental and expressive components, meaning that both professional and personal resources are exchanged, it can be referred to as a multiplex relationship. Multiplexity occurs when there is more than one form of relationship between two individuals. These different types of relationships could potentially be interdependent and therefore influence each other (Rank et al., 2010).

Men tend to establish a greater number of instrumental relationships, using their connections strategically for personal gain, while women tend to cultivate more expressive relationships, resulting in more intimate, though numerically smaller, networks. Men often view their networks as a means to professional advancement, prioritizing the benefits they can acquire, while women place a higher value on maintaining harmonious relationships. In addition, men generally prefer to network with other men for both support and professional leverage. Women, on the other hand, tend to seek emotional support from other women, but turn to men for professional resources. This dynamic makes it harder for women to form a great number of multiplex relationships (Abbasi et al., 2014; Burt, 1992, 1997; Hall & Wellman, 1985; Ibarra, 1992).

Additionally, it has been found that women tend to build a less gender-diverse circle of friends in the workplace compared to men, which can be attributed to several factors (Brass, 1985; Ibarra, 1992; Rose, 1989). One explanation for this phenomenon is that gender homophily is more common among women. The term refers to "the tendency of individuals to interact preferentially with similar others" (Laniado et al., 2016, p. 1). Since more men are in

leadership positions, women are more likely to form friendships with women that are on the same professional level, instead of networking upward with men (Brass, 1985; Ibarra, 1992).

However, research has shown that women can gain significant career benefits by forming expressive connections with male colleagues in higher organizational roles. Establishing such relationships is correlated with a range of professional advancements, including more opportunities for promotions, higher compensation, and increased organizational power (Brass, 1985; Markiewicz et al., 2000; O'Brien et al., 2010). In addition to the preference for forming bonds with those of the same gender, workplace friendships between men and women might also be impacted by stereotypes suggesting such relationships could turn romantic or sexual, or by concerns over perceived favoritism playing a role (Horan & Chory, 2009; Kram, 1988; McBride & Bergen, 2015; Sias et al., 2003).

In addition, it is important to emphasize that not only women contribute to their exclusion from effective networks. Research conducted by Kanter (1977) showed that dominant work groups, in this instance men, have a tendency to heighten cultural boundaries by excluding women from informal interactions where critical information is circulated. The trend of exclusion is echoed in subsequent studies by Davies-Netzley (1998) and Moore (1988), which also demonstrate that women are excluded from informal networks with male peers.

This also gave rise to the phenomenon of the so-called old boy network, which has been taken up by various authors such as McDonald (2011) and Oakley (2000). An "Old Boys' Network" (McDonald, 2011, p. 317) refers to informal networks composed of high-status male individuals who share common educational, social, and professional backgrounds. These networks are characterized by mutual assistance, providing members with access to information, resources, and opportunities (Simon & Warner, 1992). Members of these networks often support each other's careers by facilitating access to job leads, referrals, and opportunities not available to those outside the network. McDonald (2011) demonstrated with the study he conducted that individuals in predominantly white male networks receive more job leads than those in female or minority networks. The exclusion from such networks can significantly hinder women's career advancement. It can be concluded that these networks perpetuate a cycle of male dominance in certain industries or sectors.

A study on the perception of the barriers to women's professional development in the cultural sector conducted by Villaroya and Barrios in 2022 demonstrated that women perceive their

exclusion from networks of influence as a more significant barrier in their careers compared to men.

3.2.2 Lack of Sponsoring

Furthermore, some scholars (Clawson & Kram, 1984; Ragins, 1989) argue that women face more barriers when forming relationships with mentors and sponsors. One reason for this is that women face more barriers to establishing cross-gender relationships. Due to the lack of women in leadership positions, and therefore the lack of potential female mentors, this decreases women's possibilities of finding a mentor or sponsor.

Mentoring is a crucial tool in career advancement (Helms et al., 2016; Ragins & Cotton, 1991). While mentoring can involve sponsorship, there are some important differences between the two terms. Based on a 2008 study conducted by Ibarra et al. (2010) explain why mentoring does not provide sufficient career support for women. They claim that one disadvantage for women is that their mentors are less senior and have less power in the organization. The 2008 study found that 78% of men were mentored by a CEO or other senior executive, compared to 69% of women. This puts them at a disadvantage, since the study showed that the more senior the mentor, the faster the mentee's career advancement. Consequently, the study showed that although a higher number of women than men were mentored, they were less likely to advance in their careers through mentoring. For example, their mentoring relationships do not lead to as many promotions as males mentoring relationships.

To understand the difference of the impact mentoring has on men and women, it is important to differentiate between mentoring and sponsorship. The authors Hezlett and Gibson (2007) describe the term mentoring as traditionally being considered "an intense, dyadic relationship in which a more senior, experienced person, called a mentor, provides support and assistance to a more junior, less experienced colleague, referred to as a protégé or mentee" (Hezlett & Gibson, 2007, p. 385). According to Ragins and Cotton (1991), mentors provide their mentees with support and mobility, contributing to personal growth and professional development. This can be done, for example, through counseling and vocational coaching (Scandura, 1992). Ibarra et al. (2010) strongly support the thesis that in order to advance in their careers, solely mentoring does not suffice, and instead, sponsoring is crucial. Downing et al. (2005, p. 422) define a sponsor as a senior person in an organization that provides the junior individual with "instrumental help such as sharing information with the junior person, giving practical advice, showcasing the junior person, and providing protection to the junior person". As opposed to

mentoring, there is no emotional attachment involved according to this definition. In addition to providing feedback and advice, sponsors actively help their mentees increase their visibility within the company and reach the next level by getting promoted (Ibarra et al., 2010). A survey in their study proved this claim. While women were advised by their mentors on how to change their behaviors and work styles to advance in their careers, men were not only mentored but even sponsored, meaning that their bosses and mentors helped them advance to a higher role and publicly validate their potential. On top of that, some women reported having to fight to persuade their mentors they were prepared for the higher position. Additionally, there have been instances where women had to assert themselves vigorously to persuade their mentors that they were prepared for a more advanced role (Ibarra et al., 2010).

Villaroya and Barrios (2022) found that women ranked the absence of visible female role models as a significant barrier to their career progression, whereas men acknowledged this issue but assigned it a lower priority, reflecting a divergence in the perceived impact of this barrier on women's professional advancement.

The results of previous scientific research indicate that there are serious differences in the way women and men network. On the one hand, men tend to build more instrumental relationships that are used strategically for personal gain, while women tend to have more expressive relationships that are more intimate but less numerous. These differences in network structure could result in women forming fewer multiple relationships, which in turn limits their career advancement opportunities. In addition, research shows that women often form fewer gender-specific friendships in the workplace, which can be partly explained by the phenomenon of gender homophily, i.e. the tendency to associate with people of the same gender. This is reinforced by the dominance of men in managerial positions, which means that women tend to form relationships with other women at a similar professional level rather than networking upwards. Because women network differently than men, it is possible that men are unaware of the disadvantage women face in networking. As a result, it might be assumed that men perceive the barrier of insufficient networks and relationships as less influential for women.

To test this, we hypothesize the following Hypothesis 2 (H2): There is a significant difference in the perception of the barrier of insufficient networking or relations between men and women.

3.3 Internal Barriers put up by Companies

The third major barrier to women's advancement to be analyzed in this paper are internal barriers that consist of adverse treatment of women's successes, lack of equal opportunity policies in companies, and harmful working environments.

3.3.1 Penalization for Women's Success

The previous section provided an overview of descriptive stereotypes and how they contribute to women's lack of visibility. Prescriptive stereotypes also contribute to discrimination against women on the path to leadership positions, but the way of doing so differs. Because prescriptive discrimination, unlike descriptive discrimination, is not a purely unconscious process and has been shown to be intentional (Burgess & Borgida, 1999), it can be attributed to the barriers that are put up by companies.

Prescriptive discrimination shows how women are disadvantaged even when they are seen as competent, meaning that their work is neither undervalued nor their success attributed to other factors. Heilman (2001) posits that women displaying competence in traditionally male-dominated areas may face adverse repercussions. These women risk being punished for pursuing professional roles traditionally held by men. Society's disapproval of such behavior that deviates from the norm usually results in broader unpopularity among their peers. Research about the discrimination against competent women done by Hagen and Kahn in 1975 indicates that, although competent individuals are generally preferred over incompetent ones, competent women are paradoxically less desired as group members compared to their male colleagues. This preference holds true across different interactions, with both men and women showing a tendency to exclude a competent woman from the group when given the choice.

Heilman et al. (1989) carried out a study about the differences in characterizations about men, women and managers and found that instead of being praised for their competencies and achievements, female leaders are more likely to be described using negatively connoted attributes such as "bitter", "quarrelsome", and "selfish" (Heilman et al., 1989, p. 939). A subsequent study conducted by Heilman et al. in 1995 suggests that the perception of women's empathy, often regarded as one of their main strengths, is compromised when they assume managerial roles. It was observed that female managers were perceived to display greater hostility in comparison to their male equivalents. When women are portrayed as managers, the traditionally favorable interpersonal reputation of women is significantly undermined. In contrast, male managers not only received more favorable evaluations compared to their male non-

managerial peers but were also attributed with enhanced masculine traits deemed essential for workplace effectiveness. Moreover, they were seen as more altruistic and less prone to hostility. Heilman et al. (1995) found the managerial label acts to diminish perceptions for women's concern for other, which is typically considered a strength in women. Furthermore, successful women managers were seen as being more hostile toward others than were their male counterparts. When they are depicted as managers, the traditionally favorable interpersonal image of women is weakened. Consequently, successful women in leadership were seen less positively than the average woman. In contrast, successful male leaders were rated more highly than the average man. Male managers were perceived as embodying traits conducive to job success, as well as being more compassionate and less aggressive towards other (Heilman, 1995). Such characterizations bear a strong negative connotation and evoke a perception of hostility, reinforcing the derogatory 'bitch' stereotype often aimed at career-driven women. Thus, it appears women who find success in traditionally male-dominated sectors like management face repercussions for defying gender norms. These portrayals can be detrimental to women's professional advancement, positioning them as less desirable candidates for collaboration and leadership roles within a firm (Heilman, 1995; Heilman et al., 1989).

While the descriptive discrimination discussed in the previous section is unintentional, prescriptive discrimination is driven by gender bias and hostility that perpetuates the social power gap. Consequently, men are more likely to exhibit prescriptive norm-fed discrimination (Burgess & Borgida, 1999).

The case of *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins*, 490 U.S. 228 (1989), serves as a pivotal example of penalization against women's success in the workplace. It illustrates how women who do not conform with conventional expectations of femininity are more likely to be denied certain job positions and promotions, regardless of their qualifications and competence. Working as a senior manager accountant in her fourth year at Price Waterhouse and nominated for partnership that year, Ann Hopkins was recognized for being competent, committed, and hardworking. Moreover, she secured more business than any of her peers also nominated for partnership. Despite her qualifications, Ann Hopkins was denied partnership, attributed to a supposed „lack of interpersonal skills” and absence of "social grace" (Chamallas, 1990, p. 93), with some partners critiquing her for not conforming to the “traditional female image” (Chamallas, 1990, p. 94). This case was presented to court where Ann Hopkins successfully argued that her denial of partnership by Price Waterhouse was not due to her performance, but

rather because she failed to meet the partners' stereotypical expectations of femininity. Ultimately, she won the case. This U.S. Supreme Court ruling established legal precedent for sex discrimination and employer liability under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Chamallas, 1990).

3.3.2 Hostile and Sexualized Work Environments

When it comes to barriers imposed by companies, gender stereotypes do not only lead to the penalization of women's success. They are also at the root of other phenomena that impede women's careers, such as the sex-role spillover effect, which contributes to sexualized work environments. Amongst other factors, a sexualized work environment contributes to so-called harmful or hostile work environments.

A theoretical framework with implications for comprehending the social-psychological dynamics of sexual harassment in the workplace is the power differential theory, which asserts that men use their higher organizational status to coax out sexual favors from women "that might range from tolerating sexual comments to engaging in sexual activity" (Gutek & Morasch, 1982, p. 57). Gutek and Morasch (1982), however, could not confirm this theory, as they found in their research that harassers often are not supervisors. Instead, they researched alternative mechanisms outside of the organizational power difference perspective. They developed the sex-role spillover theory, an approach based on work roles, defining these as "a set of expectations associated with the tasks to be accomplished in a job" (Gutek & Morasch, 1982, p. 58). The term sex-role spillover can be defined as the extension of gender-based behavioral expectations from outside the workplace into professional environments. Accordingly, their theory posits that flirtatious behavior, dating, and sexual coercion would be less prevalent if individuals adhered strictly to their designated work roles within the workplace.

In professions where men hold the majority, traits such as aggressiveness, assertiveness, and rationality are often spotlighted, contrasting with fields traditionally associated with women, where traits like passivity and nurturance are emphasized (Deaux, 1985). These attributes align with the stereotypical traits associated with the gender roles of men and women. Consequently, women in traditional roles often find their work and gender roles blended, while those in male-dominated or non-traditional roles, struggle with a dissonance between their work and gender identities. According to sex-role spillover theory, when a female employee's gender role is more dominant than her professional identity, she is typically perceived primarily as a woman rather than as a competent professional (Gutek & Cohen, 1987). It is theorized

that the sex-role spillover effect tends to manifest in workplace scenarios where the gender composition is disproportionately skewed, with either gender significantly outnumbering the other. This imbalance in the sex ratio can impact both performance assessments and advancement opportunities. Women working in male-dominated groups or professions, where the sex ratio is substantially unbalanced, encounter sexual harassment more frequently. This is contrasted with environments where the workforce is more gender-integrated, the incidents of harassment are notably lower, possibly due to a lack of overlap between gender and occupational roles (Burgess & Borgida, 1997).

Gutek and Morasch (1982) suggest that sex-role spillover plays a significant role in shaping social-sexual behaviors, including instances of sexual harassment in the workplace (Gutek & Cohen, 1987; Gutek & Morasch, 1982). Social-sexual behavior is any non-work-related behavior having a sexual component and includes sexual harassment, initiating dating, flirting, and the like (Gutek et al., 1990). In her examination of gender stereotypes within the workplace, Deaux (1995) illuminates the intricate ways in which prevailing gender roles contribute to a sexualized work environment. She suggests that societal notions of women's sexual availability often bleed into professional settings, leading to a workplace where female employees may be wrongly perceived as sexual entities rather than professional individuals. As a result of these gender stereotypes, women's actions and behaviors are at risk of being misinterpreted with a sexual connotation, potentially contributing to the occurrence of unsolicited sexual advances and harassment. Deaux's (1995) analysis underscores the impact of such stereotypes, especially when accentuated by skewed gender ratios or the presence of sexualized imagery, in fostering a work atmosphere that permits or even encourages sexual harassment (Burgess & Borgida, 1997; Deaux, 1995).

The scope of research on sexual harassment in the workplace has extended from individual-centric events, where specific persons are subjected to harmful interactions such as unwanted sexual advances or coercion, to more generalized actions that contribute to a sexualized work environment without targeting anyone directly (Demoulin et al., 2023; Gutek et al., 1990). These broader environmental experiences reflect the overall climate within an organization, characterized by common attitudes and behaviors (Demoulin et al., 2023).

A particularly detrimental form of such harassment is the hostile work environment, a concept discussed by scholars such as Cortina and Areguin (2021). This type of harassment is defined by pervasive behaviors that, while not aimed at individuals, create a universally intimidating

or unfriendly atmosphere. Actions contributing to this atmosphere include the display of sexually explicit materials or the telling of sexual jokes to groups (Gutek et al., 1990). This more comprehensive understanding of workplace sexualization is acknowledged by scholars such as Gutek et al. (1990) or Baker (2016) and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) as inclusive of both direct interpersonal actions and the creation of a broader, sexually charged work atmosphere, thus expanding the definition of social-sexual workplace behavior to cover a variety of actions that culminate in a hostile or offensive environment (Gutek et al., 1990).

Empirical studies (Abbas et al., 2017; Baker, 2016; Cortina & Areguin, 2021) have demonstrated that such hostile environments have profound impacts on an organization's economic well-being and the psychological health of its employees. Sexual harassment is one factor that contributes to a harmful atmosphere characterized by increased anxiety, stress, and emotional turmoil. This in turn can lead to psychological distress among employees, manifesting as exhaustion, diminished self-esteem, and heightened feelings of hostility and aggression (Abbas et al., 2017). Additionally, such environments are correlated with significant adverse effects on employees' professional lives, including decreased job satisfaction, heightened intentions to leave the organization, and greater instances of emotional exhaustion (Baker, 2016). The recognition of these impacts underscores the importance of addressing sexual harassment not just at the individual level but also at the environmental level to protect and employees' well-being.

3.3.3 Men's Role in Gender Parity

The last factor to be discussed in this paper that contributes to internal barriers is the lack of commitment of men to gender equality. Support from men is an important cultural factor that impacts women's ability to ascend to the top Sherf et al. (2017). Evidence indicates that about three-quarters of men believe that teams with a high proportion of women are more successful (McKinsey & Company, 2014). Research conducted by McKinsey & Company in 2007 and 2008 confirms that companies with more women in senior management perform better, both in terms of organizational efficiency and financial profitability (McKinsey & Company, 2007, 2008). There is a consensus among both genders that women have the ability to lead just as competently as men, although men are slightly less convinced of this belief. Moreover, a mere 19% of men strongly acknowledge the heightened challenges faced by women in reaching leadership roles, often overlooking the systemic obstacles that hinder their progression. As a

result, they are much less likely than women to see the value of diversity initiatives and sometimes even perceive them as unfair to men. McKinsey & Company (2014) conclude that there remains a need for greater engagement of male executives in promoting inclusivity.

The scientific literature also states that gender parity initiatives are more effective when not only women but also men participate in initiatives to improve gender parity in the workplace (Sherf et al., 2017). Sherf et al. (2017) examine in detail which factors cause this passive behavior of men in relation to gender parity initiatives and focus on the aspect psychological standing. The term psychological standing is defined by Miller et al. (2011, p. 6) as "the subjective feeling of entitlement or legitimacy to perform a particular action". It is important to distinguish between psychological standing and a favorable or unfavorable attitude towards a topic. The term psychological standing refers to how entitled someone feels to take a position on or participate in an issue. A favorable or unfavorable attitude, on the other hand, describes whether someone has a positive or negative opinion on a topic. An individual's psychological status may, to some extent, explain the observed divergence between their attitudes and actions. While a variety of individuals may hold strong beliefs about various issues, it is primarily those who perceive a sense of legitimacy in their own participation who actively engage with these concerns (Miller & Efron, 2010; Sherf et al., 2017). Consequently, a lack of action rooted in an individual's psychological stance should not necessarily be interpreted as an aversion to the action itself, but rather as a reluctance to get involved due to an internalized belief that public involvement or advocacy is not within their personal purview (Ratner & Miller, 2001).

Research conducted by Sherf et al. (2017) confirms that men exhibit a lower psychological standing than women on matters of gender parity, which correlates with their reduced involvement in gender parity initiatives. The findings indicate that men are less likely to offer ideas and thoughts or to volunteer for roles in such initiatives. A key takeaway from the study was that men showed greater engagement in gender parity initiatives when these programs were explicitly communicated in a way that provides psychological standing to men. Moreover, it is noteworthy that psychological standing is uniquely influential in how gender affects engagement, particularly regarding gender parity matters. Men felt a reduced sense of psychological standing primarily in gender parity conversations, where their male identity was prominent, rather than in discussions on unrelated issues.

The research on internal barriers within organizations sheds light on challenges rooted in gender bias and societal norms. These barriers encompass a range of phenomena, including penalization for women's success and the perpetuation of hostile work environments. A thorough examination reveals how these barriers impede women's advancement and reinforce gender inequalities within the workplace.

The discussion on penalization for women's success underscores the prevalence of prescriptive discrimination, where women face adverse repercussions for challenging traditional gender roles. Despite demonstrating competence, women in leadership roles often encounter negative characterizations and are subjected to harsher scrutiny compared to their male counterparts. This differential treatment not only undermines women's professional accomplishments but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes, hindering their career progression within organizations. Moreover, the analysis of hostile and sexualized work environments reveals the pervasive influence of gender stereotypes on workplace dynamics. The sex-role spillover effect contributes to the creation of environments where women are objectified and subjected to sexual harassment. This phenomenon not only erodes the psychological well-being of employees but also poses significant challenges to organizational effectiveness and financial stability.

Furthermore, the lack of commitment from men to gender parity initiatives emerges as a critical barrier to promote inclusive workplaces. Despite recognizing the benefits of gender diversity, men's engagement in promoting gender equality remains limited. This reluctance stems from a lower sense of psychological standing on matters of gender parity. The lack of engagement with the issue could be a reason why men perceive this barrier as less influential. Therefore, strategies that explicitly provide legitimacy for men's involvement in these initiatives are needed.

The academic findings on various factors contributing to the barrier internal barriers put up by companies such as discrimination against women or sexist and hostile work environments show that men are less likely to be affected by these phenomena. This suggests that they may be less aware of it, which could lead to a lower rating of the barrier's impact.

While the previous section provided an overview of the numerous academic papers on the theoretical foundations of this topic, there is scant research on the differential perception of these barriers. Given our understanding that gender equality can only be achieved if men are

fully aware of the issue, and that initiatives need to involve men to reach their full potential, we aim to examine the extent to which these perceptions differ between genders.

Therefore, we propose Hypothesis 3 (H3): There is a significant difference in the perception of the barrier of Internal Barriers by Companies between men and women.

4 Method and Findings

An empirical research methodology was used to answer the research question of whether women and men have different perceptions of the barriers that women face in their professional careers, particularly when advancing to management positions. A quantitative survey was conducted to obtain significant and representative results. Spanish board members and executives were interviewed to test our hypothesis that the differences in perceptions vary by gender. The survey, sample group, measures, and context are detailed below.

4.1 Sample and Research Process

The data was extracted from a project conducted by the Woman Forward Association, which aimed to analyze men's perceptions of the barriers women face in reaching senior management positions. Data was collected from a sample of male middle managers, top managers and directors working in Spain in small, medium, large and multinational companies. Data collection was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Universidad Pontificia Comillas in Madrid, Spain.

Information on perceptions of barriers to women's career development was collected using a structured questionnaire distributed to 1,000 Spanish executives from different sectors between October 1 and December 31, 2016. The questionnaire was accompanied by an invitation letter explaining the purpose of the study and emphasizing that participation was voluntary and that all data would remain confidential and accessible only to the researchers, who would use it in an aggregated form.

The survey includes several questions about the factors that affect gender equality and women's chances of advancing to managerial positions.

In addition to binary (yes/no) questions regarding participants' positions on increasing women's participation across companies in general and the implementation of gender quotas, the survey also requests participants to assess the importance and relevance of barriers to gender equality using a Likert scale from 1 (least important) to 7 (most important). Participants were asked to evaluate the impact of reconciliation challenges, insufficient training, lack of experience, lack of visibility, lack of networking and relations, internal company barriers, psychological barriers, and family barriers on gender equality efforts.

4.2 Variables and Measures

Of particular relevance to our analysis is the last section that asks respondents to indicate the extent to which they consider the various barriers faced by women to be an obstacle on the path to leadership. This part of the survey is the focus of the analysis. Therefore, the following analysis in this academic work uses only survey responses that rated all three barriers in question, being lack of visibility, lack of networking and relations and internal company barriers, which limited the number of answers used. After thorough data cleaning, the final dataset included responses from 177 participants across both genders, with males comprising 28% of the total. All participants were highly educated and held positions as board members/CEOs or executives in their respective companies.

To ensure meaningful results regarding how participants of both genders perceive various barriers, the survey initially recorded the gender of the respondents. Responses that did not specify gender were excluded to maintain clarity and focus in analyzing gender-based differences. Age data was categorized into four groups: under 35 years old, 35 to 44 years old, 45 to 54 years old, and 55 years or older. Information on work experience was also collected, grouping responses into categories of less than 10 years, 10 to 14 years, 15 to 19 years, and 20 years or more. Additionally, details about respondents' current roles within their organizations were recorded, covering positions from executive to middle management levels.

4.3 Demographic Background of Participants

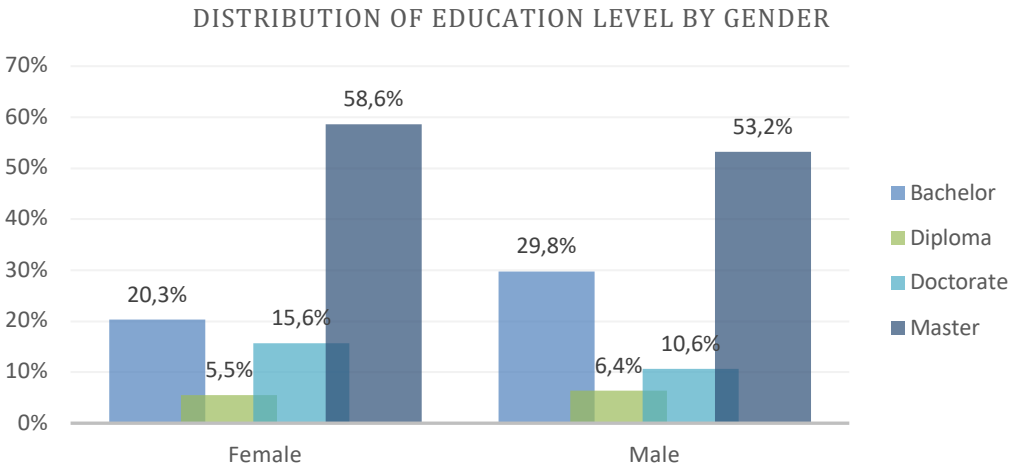
4.3.1 Educational background

The distribution of education levels by gender reveals distinct trends in educational attainment within each gender category. Graph 1 highlights not only the overall percentages of degrees held by males and females but also allows us to examine the type of educational qualifications each gender tends to pursue.

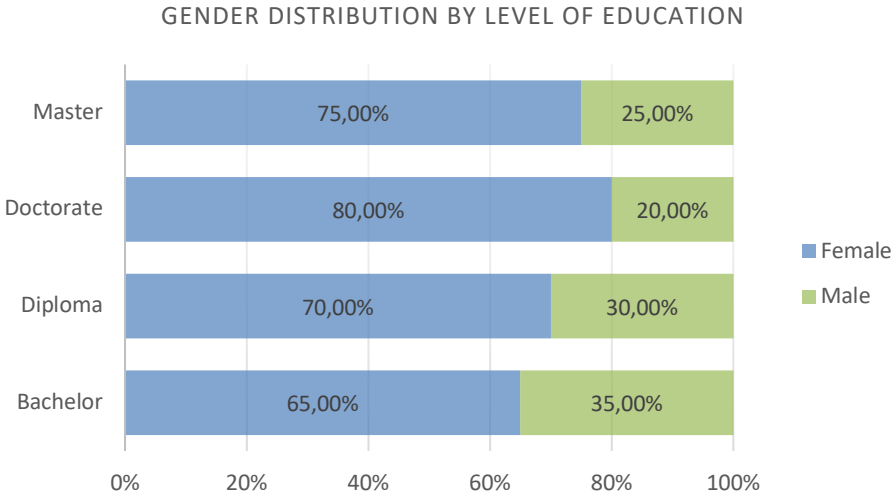
Among female participants, a significant majority, 58.6%, have earned master's degrees. This compares to 53.2% of males who have attained the same level of education. This suggests that females are more likely to pursue higher education, particularly at the master's level, compared to their male counterparts. In contrast, males exhibit a stronger tendency to holding a bachelor's degree as their highest level of education, with 29.8% of male participants listing it as their highest qualification. This is notably higher compared to only 20.3% of female participants who hold a bachelor's degree as their highest level of education. This could indicate

that a larger proportion of males might stop their education at the bachelor’s level, whereas females are more inclined to continue to advanced degrees. Similarly, the proportion of men (6.4%) with a diploma is higher than that of women (5.5%). Additionally, the proportion of female participants holding a doctorate is higher, at 15.6%, compared to 10.6% for males.

Graph 2 confirms that women tend to pursue higher education more frequently. Considering that only 28% of the survey respondents are male, it can be concluded that a below-average number of men hold a master's (25%) or doctoral (20%) degree as their highest educational qualification. In contrast, women being 72% of respondents disproportionately often hold higher degrees, specifically master's (75%) and doctoral (80%) degrees. In summary, the two graphs show that there is a general tendency for women to attain higher degrees of education.



Graph 1: Distribution of Education Level by Gender



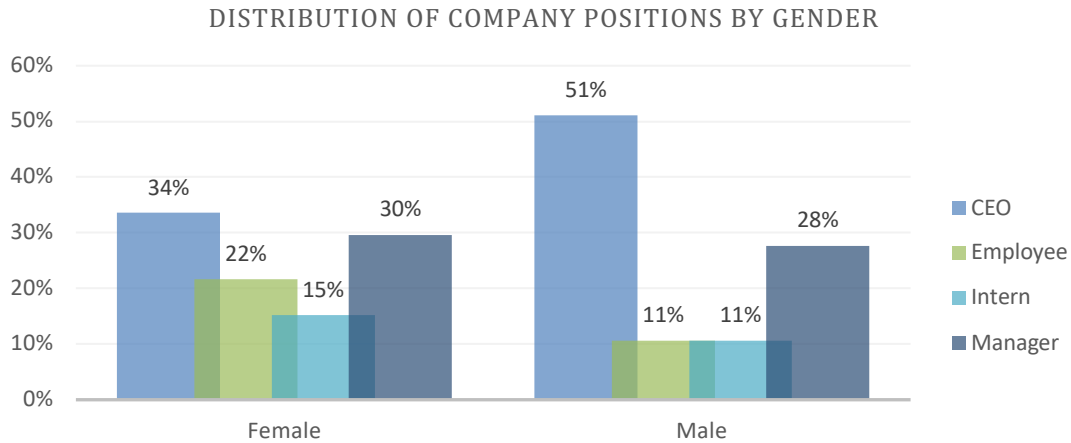
Graph 2: Gender Distribution by Level of Education

4.3.2 Position In the company

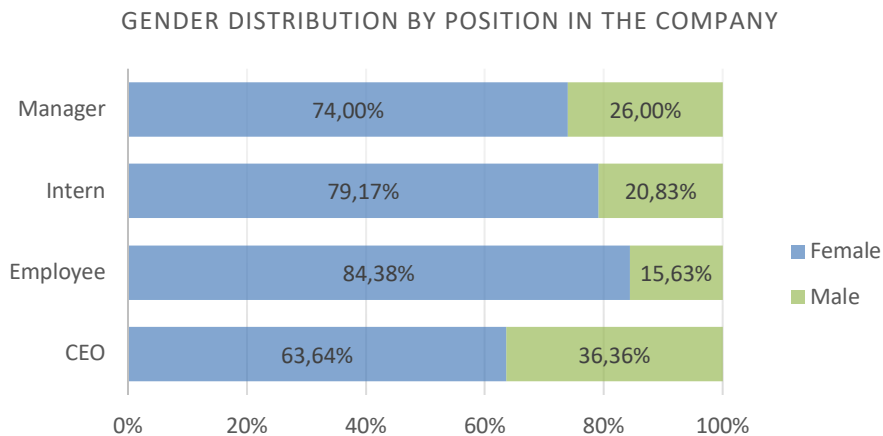
When examining the gender distribution across various company positions, it is evident that a significant disparity exists, particularly in leadership roles. Graph 3 shows that within the male participants, more than half, 51%, occupy the position of CEO, while only 34% of female participants hold the same position. This notable difference highlights a gender gap at the highest level of corporate leadership.

In the category of managers, the percentages are closer, with 30% of women and 28% of men holding managerial positions, indicating only a minimal gender difference at this level. However, the disparity widens again in the employee category, where 22% of women are classified as employees compared to just 11% of men, showing a significant gap of over 10%. The intern category also shows more women (15%) than men (11%), suggesting that a higher proportion of female participants are engaged in entry-level positions. A direct comparison in Graph 4 shows that an above-average number of men (36.36%) and a below-average number of women (63.64%) are represented in the company positions CEO in particular, when these values are compared with the total proportion of men (28%) and the total proportion of women (72%).

Especially when considering that the previous analysis of educational attainment indicated that women tend to obtain higher levels of education, it becomes clear that there are barriers that prevent women from reaching leadership positions regardless of their education and skills.



Graph 3: Distribution of Company Positions by Gender

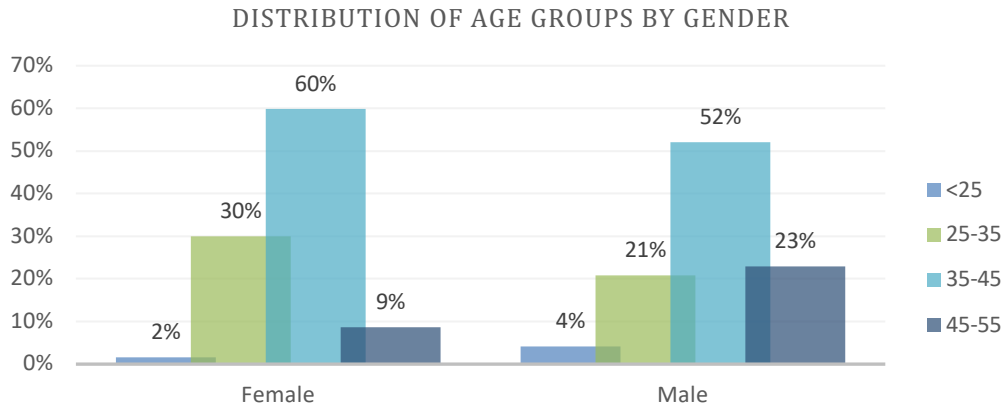


Graph 4: Gender Distribution by Position in the Company

4.3.3 Age groups

Graph 5 illustrates a clear trend of age where the majority of female respondents are younger, with a predominant presence in the 25-35 age group. In contrast, while a significant portion of males also fall into this age group, their representation is more evenly spread across the older age categories, particularly in the 45-55 age range.

These differences suggest that younger women are more represented in this survey, possibly indicating their higher engagement or prevalence in the demographic being studied. On the other hand, men are more evenly distributed across various age groups, with a notable presence in the older age category (45-55), which is less represented among females.

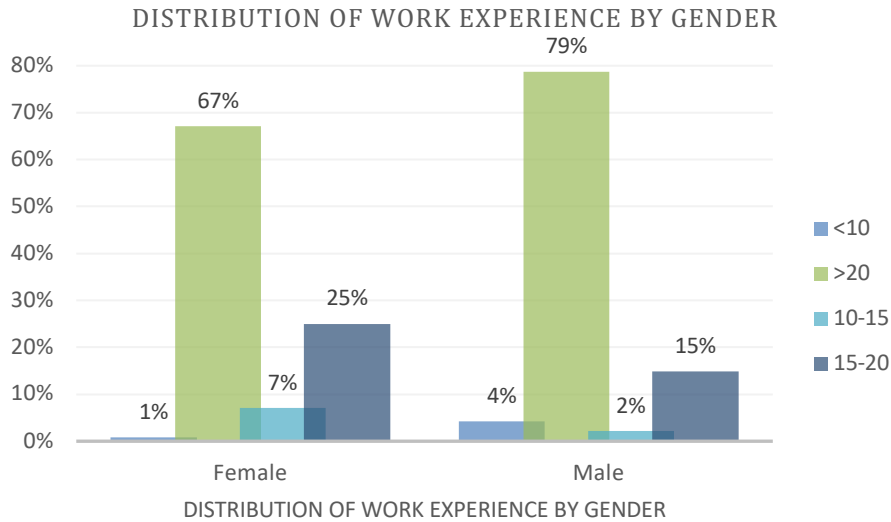


Graph 5: Distribution of Age Groups by Gender

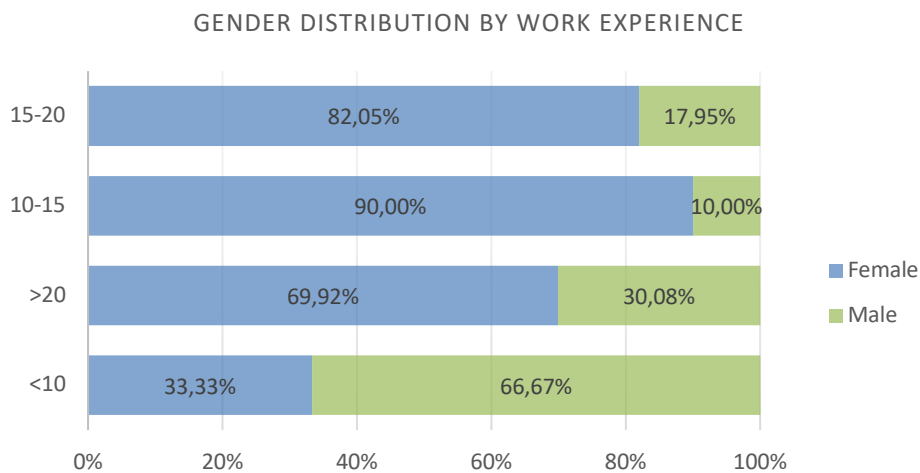
4.3.4 Work experience

The distributions of work experience shown in Graph 6 and Graph 7 indicate that both male and female participants predominantly possess extensive professional experience, with over 20 years being the most common category for both genders. However, males are slightly more represented in the highest experience bracket (79% compared to 67% for females). This suggests that, while both genders are experienced, males in this survey tend to have slightly longer professional tenures on average. The data also shows a significant presence of females with 15 to 20 years of experience (25%), compared to 15% for males, indicating that women are relatively more represented in this intermediate experience category.

The distribution patterns underscore that both male and female participants bring a wealth of experience to their roles, but there are slight variations, with males tending to have marginally more extensive work histories.



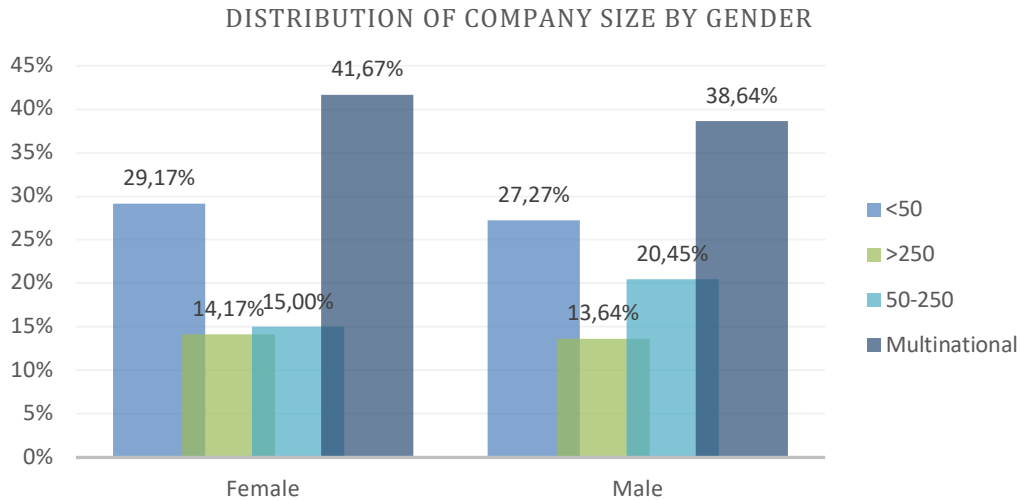
Graph 6: Distribution of Work Experience by Gender



Graph 7: Gender Distribution by Work Experience

4.3.5 Company size

The distribution of company sizes among participants as seen in Graph 8 shows minimal differences between genders. Both men and women most commonly work in multinational companies, with 41.67% of women and 38.64% of men employed in such organizations. The second most common category for both genders is companies with fewer than 50 employees, with 29,17% of women and 27.27% of men. Next, 15% of women and 20,45% of men are employed in companies with 50-250 employees. The least common category for both genders is companies with more than 250 employees, with 14,17% of women and 13.64% of men working in these larger organizations.



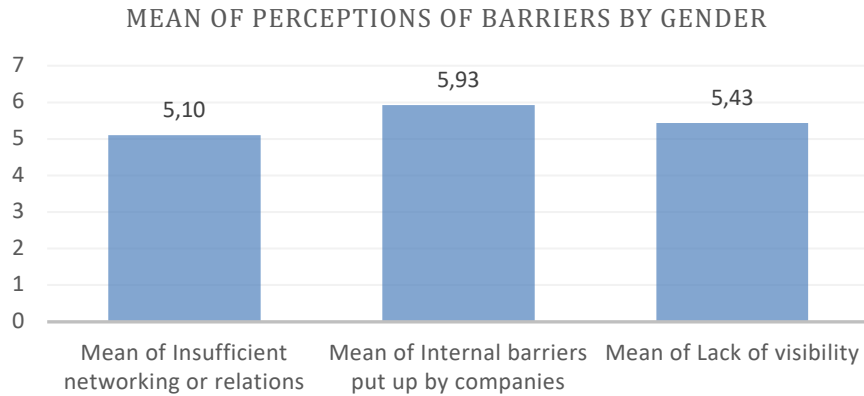
Graph 8: Distribution of Company Size by Gender

4.4 Perceptions of Barriers

4.4.1 Perceptions of Barriers on Average

Graph 9 shows the average rating by all participants of the influence of various barriers on women in (prospective) leadership positions. The mean of all responses is displayed, with a scale ranging from 1 to 7. A rating of 1 indicates that participants assigned little relevance to the barrier, while a rating of 7 indicates that they clearly perceived the barrier as a significant obstacle for women.

From the graph, it is evident that internal barriers put up by companies was considered the most significant barrier, with the highest mean rating of 5,9. The second most significant barrier was lack of visibility, with a mean rating of 5,4. With a mean rating of 5,1, the barrier insufficient networking and relations was rated as the least significant. Table 1 provides a statistical summary of the means and standard deviations for the three identified barriers.



Graph 9: Mean of Perceptions of Barriers by Gender

Corporate Barriers measured	Mean	SD
Lack of visibility	5.43	1.68
Insufficient networking or relations	5.10	1.77
Internal barriers put up by companies	5.93	1.21

Table 1: Variables

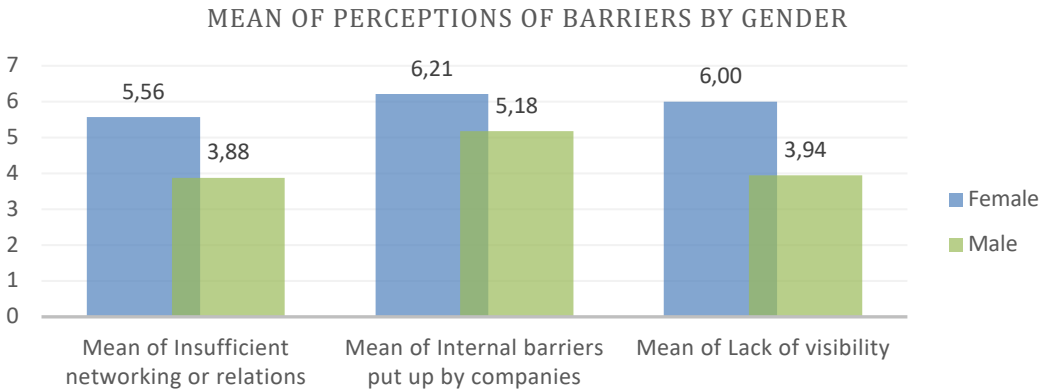
Although these scores provide information about the respondents' perceptions of the barriers, for our research question, the gender scores need to be evaluated separately to assess differences between the genders.

4.4.2 Perceptions of Barriers by Gender

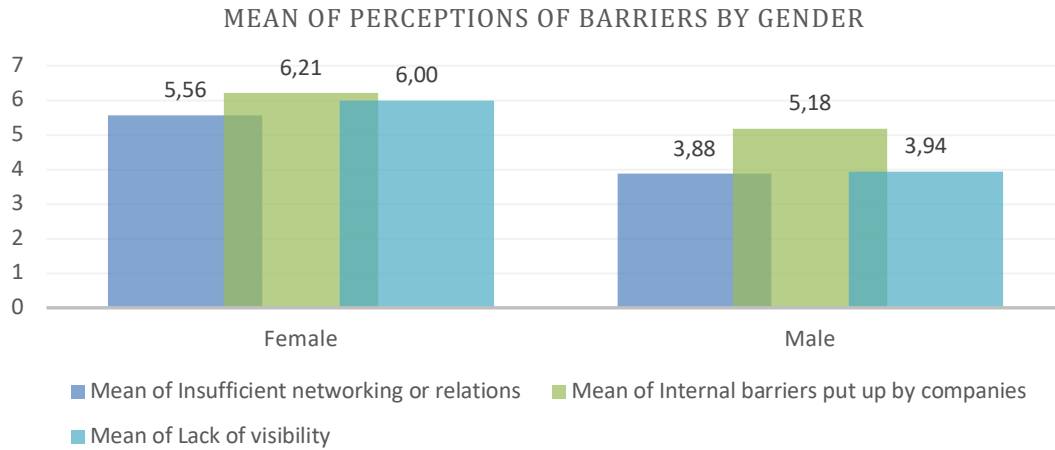
Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation of men's and women's ratings of the three barriers in tabular form. Graph 10 illustrates the results of the different evaluations of women and men regarding the three barriers using columns. It is noteworthy that women rated all three barriers as more significant than men. For all barriers, the mean for women is at least one full point higher on the Likert scale. The largest difference in means was observed for the barrier of lack of visibility, with a value of 3,94 for men and a value of 6,0 for women. Similarly, for the barrier of insufficient networking or relationships, the mean score for men was 3,88, while for women it was 5,56. The barrier with the smallest difference of one point on the scale is internal barriers put up by companies, rated by women with an importance of 6,21 and by men with 5,18.

Graph 11 shows the different rankings of the two genders according to the importance of the barriers. As reflected in the averages, women ranked the internal barriers put up by companies as the most influential. The second most important barrier for women is lack of visibility, while the lowest-ranked barrier is insufficient networking or relationships. For men, the barrier internal barriers put up by companies was also rated as the most influential.

The standard deviations provide additional insights into the variability of the responses. For lack of visibility, the standard deviation was 1,25 for women and 1,77 for men, indicating greater variability in men's responses. For insufficient networking or relations, the standard deviation was 1,46 for women and 1,95 for men, again showing greater variability among men. Finally, for internal barriers put up by companies, the standard deviation was 0,961 for women and 1,45 for men, suggesting that women's views on this barrier were more consistent than men's. These differences in standard deviation highlight that men's perceptions of these barriers are more dispersed, while women's perceptions are more consistent, particularly for internal company barriers.



Graph 10: Mean of Perceptions of Barriers by Gender



Graph 11: Mean of Perceptions of Barriers by Gender

Corporate Barriers measured	Male		Female	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Lack of visibility	3.94	1.77	6.00	1.25
Insufficient networking or relations	3.88	1.95	5.56	1.46
Internal barriers put up by companies	5.18	1.45	6.21	0.961

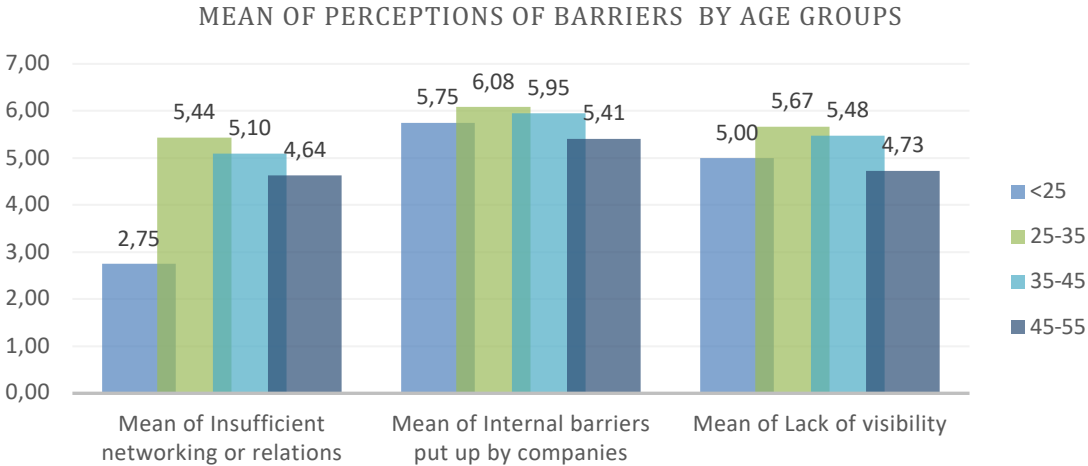
Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations of Dependent Variables

4.4.3 Perceptions of Barriers by Age Group

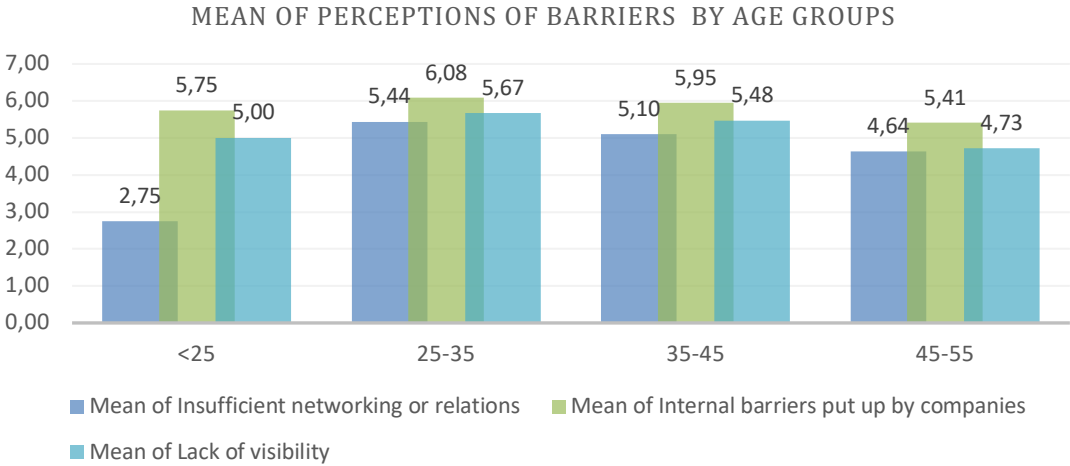
Graph 12 and Graph 13 illustrate the respective assessments of barriers across different age groups. It is evident that, on average, the barrier internal barriers put up by companies achieved the highest mean value. The peak value here is 6,08, observed in the age group of 25-35 years. From Graph 12 and Graph 13, it can be seen that this age group also recorded the highest values for the other two barriers, with 5,44 for insufficient networking or relations and 5,67 for lack of visibility. This could be explained by the fact that this age group is generally less advanced in their careers and more acutely aware of the barriers they face, as they are directly affected by them.

Notably, the mean value for the barrier insufficient networking or relations is the lowest overall, at 2,75, in the age group under 25. However, for this age group, the mean values for the other barriers are not as low, lying within the range of values observed in the other groups for both internal barriers put up by companies and lack of visibility. Overall, the groups under 25

and 45-55 recorded the lowest values in their assessments. This could be because respondents under 25 have had a shorter career span and thus have not yet encountered many obstacles. For the 45-55 age group, it might be that they are less aware of the barriers in their career paths because they are no longer in the peak phase of their careers and have typically already settled into the job market.



Graph 12: Mean of perceptions of Barriers by Age Groups



Graph 13: Mean of Perceptions of Barriers by Age Groups

4.5 Analysis and Results

The three hypotheses under investigation were analyzed using an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to determine if there were significant differences between women's and men's perceptions of the barriers. This statistical method was chosen because ANOVA is particularly effective for comparing the means of multiple groups and identifying any statistically significant differences between them.

The hypothesis deducted from the theoretical framework to be analyzed constitute the dependent variables of the analysis, being:

- Hypothesis 1 (H1): There is a significant difference in the perception of the barrier lack of visibility between males and females.
- Hypothesis 2 (H2): There is a significant difference in the perception of the barrier insufficient networking or relations between males and females.
- Hypothesis 3 (H3): There is a significant difference in the perception of the barrier internal barriers by companies between males and females.

Before conducting the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), a Levene's test was carried out to ensure that the variances across different groups are equal. This precondition of homogeneity of variances is a fundamental requirement for the validity of ANOVA results.

In this analysis, the dependent variables lack of visibility, insufficient networking or relations, and internal barriers put up by companies were examined. The independent variable was gender, divided into the categories of women and men. The results of the Levene's test as shown in Table 3 indicated that the p-values for all dependent variables were less than .001. This suggests significant differences in variances across the groups, which violates the assumption of homogeneity of variances. Therefore, a Welch's ANOVA was used for all three types of barriers analyzed.

	Levene statistic	df1	df2	Significance (p-value)
Lack of visibility	11.8	1	175	<0.001
Insufficient networking or relations	15.8	1	175	<0.001
Internal barriers put up by companies	19.7	1	175	<0.001

Table 3: Test of Levene (All Barriers)

	Statistic (F)	df1	df2	Significance (p-value)
Lack of visibility	55.7	1	67.1	<0.001
Insufficient networking or relations	30.0	1	69.4	<0.001

Internal barriers put up by companies	21.0	1	64.7	<0.001
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Table 4: Test of Welch (All barriers)

Table 4 represents the results of the Welch ANOVA carried out for the three barriers lack of visibility, insufficient networking or relations and internal barriers put up by companies.

In the Welch's ANOVA, the p-value was also below 0.001 for all three dependent variables examined. This means that the null hypothesis N0, that there are no significant differences between the groups of women and men in the perception of barriers, is rejected in all three cases.

Accordingly, it can be concluded that H1 is true and there is a significant difference in the perception of the lack of visibility barrier between men and women. Likewise, Hypothesis H2 can be confirmed that there is a significant difference in the perception of the barrier insufficient networking or relations between males and females. Finally, Hypothesis H3 can also be confirmed that there is a significant difference in the perception of the barrier internal barriers by companies between males and females.

5 Discussion

The research results indicate that women perceive the barriers lack of visibility and internal barriers put up by companies to their career development as more important than men, sustaining Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2.

One possible reason for the difference in perceptions between women and men regarding the barriers of lack of visibility and internal barriers may be that these two barriers are largely based on stereotypes. Although it is well known in society that there are certain prejudices against both genders, it is unlikely that men fully understand the extent of bias against women.

Assessments of an individual's skills and competence are often made unconsciously rather than based on explicit evaluation criteria. As a result, it is likely that neither gender is fully aware of the broad and deep impact of stereotypes on their perceptions. However, women most likely have a heightened awareness of these stereotypes because they have often encountered them and had to challenge them. Thus, women may perceive the stereotyped barrier of lack of visibility more acutely because of their extensive negative experiences. Such experiences can occur in professional settings as well as early in life, for example, when families and social institutions impose traditional gender roles or when women are treated differently than their brothers.

Empirical research conducted (Deaux & Emswiller, 1974; Feather, 1969; Heilman, 1995; Nieva & Gutek, 1980) supports the assertion that women are less likely to receive recognition for their achievements and more likely to be denied credit for their work. Furthermore, Heilman (2001) found that in professional settings, a woman's deliberate approach to decision-making may be perceived as indecisiveness, while a man's similar behavior may be interpreted as caution and prudence. In addition, Deaux and Emswiller (1974) showed that when men and women perform a task typically associated with masculinity and are equally successful, the man's performance is often attributed to skill while the woman's is often attributed to luck. This bias does not extend to tasks perceived as feminine, where male and female performance ratings are similar.

Because men rarely experience such disadvantages, their awareness of these dynamics is likely limited. Even when they are informed of such experiences by female colleagues,

friends, or partners, the impact of second-hand accounts is not equivalent to first-hand experience of bias, and therefore does not foster an equivalent level of awareness.

As explained in the theoretical section Devaluation of Performance and Lack of Recognition, men are also confronted with stereotypes. However, these stereotypes tend to benefit them in the work environment, as they are stereotypically associated with positively connoted qualities in the workplace, such as competence, independence, assertiveness, and rationality (Eagly et al., 2019; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Wood, 2016; Fiske et al., 1991; Heilman et al., 1989, 1995). Therefore, in the professional context, stereotypes tend to favor men. In most work environments, the traditional "masculine" leadership style is still seen as the ideal. By aligning stereotypes of men with attributes of the conventional, heroic leadership style, these stereotypes tend to contribute to men being seen as more suitable for leadership positions (Ford, 2010).

Prejudices and stereotypical barriers often lie beneath the surface and their effects are most clearly perceived by those who are directly affected in a detrimental way. Since stereotypes are more of an advantage than a disadvantage for men, it is possible that they are less aware of the stereotypes that apply to themselves, making it difficult to empathize with women who experience stereotypes that are detrimental to them in a professional context.

Future research should take into account the current changing perceptions of gender as social norms and the shift away from traditional views. The increased acceptance of diverse family models, the growing number of stay-at-home fathers, and greater openness about gender and sexual orientation may lead to a reduction in gender stereotypes. Ideally, this societal shift would foster leadership styles free of gender bias, although accurate predictions of these changes require thorough research.

Internal barriers within organizations are also strongly influenced by stereotypes. For example, stereotypes may lead to the penalization of women's success when the expectations of a female role model do not match the actual behavior of a woman. The fact that men may not be fully aware of the extent of the impact of stereotypes on women may be a possible reason for the different perception of this barrier by women and men.

Furthermore, differences in perceptions of internal barriers may also be due to the differential impact of successful leadership on gender reputation. Heilman et al. (1995) highlight that women in leadership roles are often viewed less favorably compared to their non-leadership

female colleagues, whereas successful leadership typically enhances men's reputations relative to the average man. This paradoxical situation means that women's success in leadership positions often reduces their social favorability, leading to a unique form of gendered penalty that men may not fully recognize.

Another reason why men may rate the barrier of internal company barriers as less important may be that they are less aware of the actual extent and impacts of sexualized and hostile environments. The sex- role spillover theory states that when a female employee's gender role is more dominant than her professional identity, she is typically perceived primarily as a woman rather than as a competent professional (Gutek & Cohen, 1987). In male-dominated work environments, where there are disproportionately more men than women, the likelihood of this phenomenon increases (Burgess & Borgida, 1997). The perception of a woman primarily as a woman and not as a colleague is the origin of social sexual behavior, which can manifest in form of sexual harassment (Gutek & Cohen, 1987; Gutek & Morasch, 1982). In most corporate companies, there is a higher proportion of men than women at management level. It is therefore a factor that increases the risk of sexual behavior and sexual harassment in the environment investigated.

The reason that men and women rate this barrier as having a different impact may be that they have different perceptions of sexualized work environments. For example, men may perceive actions such as displaying sexually explicit materials or telling sexual jokes to groups as "harmless", while women may find it disrespectful, intimidating and derogatory. While it is possible that not all men do these things with bad intentions, academic research shows that these actions also contribute to a hostile, sexualized environment (Gutek et al., 1990). Hostile environments in turn have a negative impact on the psychological health of their employees. They can lead to lower job satisfaction, increased intentions to leave the organization, and greater instances of emotional exhaustion (Baker, 2016). It can be deducted this potentially hinders women on their path to leadership. Because men are likely to underestimate the true extent of sexualized violence and the frequency of incidents, they may not consider it as much of a barrier to women's career advancement in comparison to women.

A possible explanation for men rating the barrier of insufficient networking and relations lower than other barriers might be their limited awareness of the differences in networking styles between men and women. Although it might appear that women engage in as much networking as men, it is important to recognize that women often form expressive ties rather than

the instrumental or multiplex ties that men are more likely to establish (Abbasi et al., 2014; Burt, 1992, 1997; Hall & Wellman, 1985; Ibarra, 1992). These latter types of ties are more beneficial for career advancement (Brass, 1985; Markiewicz et al., 2000; O'Brien et al., 2010). Academic research also indicates that unlike women, men are less prone to gender homophily in networking, which expands their networking scope (Laniado et al., 2016). Gender homophily leads women to preferentially network mainly with other women, which restricts their opportunities to connect with higher-ranking and influential employees (Brass, 1985; Ibarra, 1992). Women also feel hindered by other social stereotypes, such as the assumption that interactions between the sexes could develop into romantic or sexual relationships, or concerns about perceived favoritism (Horan & Chory, 2009; Kram, 1988; McBride & Bergen, 2015; Sias et al., 2003). As these rarely affect men, they may also be less aware of them and therefore perceive see them as barriers.

Men typically have more opportunities to convert social ties into social capital, such as job opportunities, promotions, and professional advice that come from connections. The old boys' network is a quintessential example of a system where social capital is abundant for its members (McDonald, 2011; Simon & Warner, 1992). Due to their ability to easily translate networking into tangible benefits, men may not fully understand or perceive the constraints and challenges faced by those outside these privileged networks. Furthermore, even though exclusionary practices within old boys' networks have been identified, it is not certain that men acknowledge these as a disadvantage for women.

The Intragroup Theory, which focuses on the dynamics within a particular group, is one possible reason for why men and women may perceive the barrier of insufficient networking differently. Within male-dominated networks, such as the traditional old boys' network, members develop a strong group identity shaped by shared characteristics, goals, and values. This group identity reinforces self-categorization and the attachment of value to their social category, fostering a sense of exclusivity and prestige (Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner, 1975). Men within these networks are likely to perceive their networking opportunities as sufficient and effective, largely because these networks actively promote their members' careers through established social capital, which includes job opportunities, promotions, and valuable professional advice (McDonald, 2011; Simon & Warner, 1992).

Women, however, often find themselves outside these established networks, leading to their perception of networking opportunities as insufficient. They face barriers to entering these

networks due to the strong group identity that prioritizes similarity and exclusivity. The activities and support systems within these networks are designed to reinforce the existing social structure, simultaneously perpetuating gender inequalities (Benschop, 2009). Women's lack of access to such networks could be the reason for their perception of networking insufficiency.

In addition to exclusion from powerful networks, the lower level of mentoring and sponsorship of women compared to men may also be a reason for the different perception of the barrier. Ibarra et al. (2010) observed a significant disadvantage for women in the workplace concerning mentorship. Their research indicates that women's mentors are typically less senior and possess less organizational power compared to those mentoring men. This distinction is crucial because the seniority of a mentor is directly correlated with faster career advancement for the mentee. Although it may appear externally that women have equal access to mentoring opportunities, the reality of these mentorships often lacks the influence necessary to substantially advance women's careers (Ibarra et al., 2010).

Moreover, men may not readily perceive this disparity, as they are more frequently the beneficiaries of sponsorship, which is an essential component of career progression. Sponsorship differs from mentorship alone, since it involves active advocacy and support for career advancement (Downing et al., 2005; Ibarra et al., 2010). Studies highlight that while men are more likely to receive this kind of support, women often must advocate strenuously for themselves to convince their mentors of their readiness for higher positions. Such scenarios, which require women to assert themselves vigorously to gain recognition and advancement opportunities, occur less frequently among men (Ibarra et al., 2010). Consequently, men might be less aware of these challenges since they are less likely to experience or observe them directly.

In summary, the differences in the nature and efficacy of networking and mentorship create a substantial barrier that men might not fully recognize. This is because their networking experiences, generally more beneficial due to effective sponsorship, contrast sharply with the less advantageous conditions faced by women.

6 Conclusion

This study explored women's and men's perceptions of the barriers to women's advancement in leadership positions and revealed significant findings on the differing perceptions between men and women regarding barriers to leadership positions. It demonstrated significant gender differences in perceptions concerning all three investigated barriers: lack of visibility, internal barriers put up by companies, and insufficient networking or relations.

The research highlighted that despite similar qualifications and skills, women face unique challenges that are not as apparent or acknowledged by their male counterparts. For example, women's success in leadership roles is penalized and judged more harshly than men's, suggesting an underlying bias that favors traditional male leadership paradigms. This bias is further aggravated by internal organizational barriers, such as sexualized work environments and the spillover of traditional gender roles, which create hostile and unsupportive conditions for women's professional growth.

The study also highlights the inadequacy of networking opportunities for women, influenced by a tendency to be excluded from influential male networks. This limits women's access to influential networks and, consequently, their career advancement. The findings also underscore the critical difference in the quality of mentorship available to men and women, with women often having mentors with less organizational clout, which diminishes the effectiveness of such relationships in promoting career advancement.

Although the survey rated the three main barriers, it did not assess the specific factors contributing to these barriers as discussed in the theoretical section of this paper. Consequently, it is not possible to determine how participants evaluated the individual factors associated with each barrier. Given that these were the aspects rated in the survey and the results provide limited insights into how the factors contributing to these barriers influenced the outcomes.

Therefore, conducting a further survey that specifically measures various factors, such as stereotype recognition, denial of credit, performance devaluation, penalization for success, lack of mentoring, lack of sponsoring, hostile work environments, and sexualized work environments, could yield more precise insights into which aspects of the examined barriers show the greatest differences.

Moreover, a subsequent study would be beneficial, considering the data from the 2016 survey. Perceptions may have shifted in the interim, particularly regarding internal barriers put up by

companies, where awareness of sexual violence has notably increased due to movements such as #MeToo.

It would also be insightful to conduct another survey with a higher proportion of male respondents. Examining whether more men participate in a more recent survey compared to 2016 could provide information on whether there has been an increase in men's awareness of these issues and any changes in their psychological stance regarding gender equality.

Scientific research indicates numerous studies and papers on various barriers, with a growing certainty and awareness emerging about these issues. However, there is still scant research on how the perceptions of men and women differ substantially. As noted in 3.3.3 Men's Role in Gender Parity, men's awareness of the obstacles faced by women is essential for striving towards, and ideally achieving, gender equality. Given that men currently hold substantial power in corporations, it is crucial that they engage with this topic, even if they are not directly affected. The first step is making them aware of the various barriers. Even though women may recognize and rate these barriers as more influential, further progress is necessary. Since many processes occur subconsciously, it can be assumed that women are not fully aware of the consequences of these barriers. Thus, it is vital to raise awareness among both women and men, particularly from a young age, about these inequalities.

Furthermore, companies must continue to contribute to equal opportunities in the professional advancement of women and men. This could be achieved through measures such as educational workshops and training programs, transparent promotion and evaluation criteria, mentoring programs, networking opportunities, or accountability measures to ensure employees are responsible for promoting inclusion.

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