ICAC-ASEPUC 2023 STUDY

The Role of Women in Auditing

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The ICAC does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this Study.

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The opinions expressed in this Study solely reflect the views of the authors and should not be attributed to the Spanish Accounting and Audits Institute.

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Executive Summary

The following study on *The Role of Women in Auditing* analyses the perceptions of employees in Spanish audit firms regarding possible difficulties, both social and organisational, that persist in the professional careers of female auditors, as well as their view of the measures implemented to boost female talent and the factors that have contributed to their professional success. The study also looks at people's job satisfaction and their intention to leave the sector and/or the firm where they are currently employed, all of which are key issues for the future of the profession.

The report has been drafted on the basis of responses to an online survey of 280 professionals from different Spanish audit firms, and who occupy different positions within them.

The results obtained reveal the persistence of gender stereotypes and women's perception of socio-cultural pressures to put family obligations before professional ones or to fulfil their traditional gender role.

Auditors perceive that the organisational culture of the firms promotes values such as mutual support, collaboration and empathy, although it also continues to encourage other values such as competitiveness, authority and control.

Moreover, the results reveal that even today, flexible working hours are not sufficiently promoted in companies, and this, together with the policy of full-time availability and lower number of female directors, is detrimental to women who continue to have a greater presence in the family and private sphere than men.

On the other hand, firms have made significant progress in providing women with possibilities of accessing power groups and networking activities that previously were generally limited to men.

While the results of this study indicate that in general neither women nor men perceive discrimination in firms' human resources policies, differences due to gender are still observed. Women feel more strongly than men that the policy of complete availability for clients, as well as the latter's allocation, are detrimental to them. Women also feel that their salaries are lower and believe that firms are less receptive to family reconciliation measures compared to men.

In general, audit professionals (women 59%) and men (41%), including younger ones, consider that becoming a mother interrupts and delays their opportunities for promotion, which is not the case for fathers. Women continue to find it more difficult to achieve a healthy work-life balance.

Firms have made great strides towards parity at all organisational levels, which is appreciated by both women and men.

However, they stress the need to recruit more women, to increase the promotion of women to the highest levels and to establish awareness, visibility and training programmes on equality.

Career success may be marked or driven by various factors, related to both individual and organisational factors and those of the environment in which the activity is carried out. This research demonstrates that flexibility and adaptability, tenacity and perseverance, personal sacrifice, teamwork, high levels of education and experience, ethics and responsibility, confidence and professional ambition, as well as family and peer support are the most relevant factors for both genders.

Finally, the report reveals that auditors appreciate their work and are generally satisfied with it, the degree of satisfaction increasing as one moves up the career ladder. However, in all categories, women have lower expectations of achieving professional success than men, despite having the

same interest in reaching positions of responsibility, with the biggest difference being in the lowest category.

Most professionals wish to continue to work in the audit sector. The results show that turnover intention is at 23%, being higher for men than for women, something that is repeated across all professional categories.

1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction and research goals

Women's widespread access to bachelor's and master's degrees in economics and business, as well as the attractiveness of auditing as a career path for students, but especially for women (ICJCE, 2019), has led to a considerable increase of female auditors at audit firms in recent years. The increased presence of women has mainly occurred in the lower echelons of the profession, with the percentage of women compared to men currently joining audit firms at around 50% (ACCA, 2020; AICPA, 2022; ICJCE, 2019). This increase has been driven by women's own interest in professions that were previously the sole purview of men in the recent past, and probably also due to a change in the mentality of firms as well as society in general.

Firms appear to be accelerating the promotion of women to higher ranks, attempting to balance existing differences, being aware that the loss of female talent may pose a problem. However, the reality is still far from true parity. Gender diversity among young auditors is not reflected at the senior levels, especially at the level of partners and directors (AICPA 2020; ICAC, 2022). According to the latest data provided by the ICAC (2022), the percentage of female auditors in partner positions in Spain is around 20%. In other countries, this percentage has been increasing recently, with a much higher growth rate than in previous years, with the percentage of women partners in US audit firms at around 39% (AICPA, 2022).

The team's previous study on the appeal of auditing as a career (ICJCE, 2019) shows that women have a more positive idea of auditing as a professional activity and they especially have a more positive perception of the career advancement opportunities offered by the sector and its social contribution. However, the literature reveals that women are more likely to leave the sector than men and therefore do not make it to top management positions in firms (Nouri & Parker, 2020).

Studies conducted in different organisations and professional activities have shown that women have traditionally faced obstacles in their careers that have prevented them from reaching top positions in some cases, and in others, have taken longer to reach said positions (Cai *et al.,* 2023). In this regard, data from professional organisations reveal that women who reach leadership positions do so 7 years later on average than men (ACCA, 2018). The reasons put forward for this delay in promoting women range from the difficulties for women to "fit in" a predominantly male model of success, based on strong competition, with an organisational culture encouraging complete availability to the client, as well as the lack of role models, inability to achieve work-life balance, to the barriers and/ or unconscious biases present in organisations (Almer *et al,* 2022; Anderson-Gough *et al*., 2001; Anderson-Gough *et al*., 2005; Gammie, *et al*., 2008; Hardies *et al*., 2021; ICJCE, 2021; Jonnergård *et al*., 2010; Khavis & Krishnan, 2021; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008; Taminiau, *et al.,* 2022; Vidwans & Cohen, 2020; Whiting, *et al*., 2015).

The loss of female talent is no longer solely a matter of concern for the necessary equality of rights and opportunities, but the literature reveals that a greater female presence, with a sufficient critical mass, brings benefits related to fundamental aspects of auditing, such as improved quality of service (Cameran *et al.,* 2018; Ittonen *et al.,* 2013) or independence (Hardies *et al.,* 2016), higher fees for the provision of services (Aguilar Agreda *et al*., 2019; Hardies *et al*., 2021; Ittonen & Peni, 2012), improved social responsibility and ethics, as well as increased moral sensitivity of professionals (Carrera & Van der Kolk, 2021).

In the quest for more inclusive and diverse organisations, audit firms face the challenge of maintaining a female presence at all levels of the organisation, and thus reaping the benefits of gender diversity

in audit firms. Thus, the lack of parity in leadership positions and the need to retain female talent in firms makes it important to delve deeper into key issues so that progress may be made regarding knowledge of the current and future role of women in the audit sector. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of the causes leading to this situation and the internal and external barriers faced by audit practitioners is required. To this end, it is necessary to gather auditors' views on the reasons for the lack of parity in senior positions in audit firms, persistent difficulties in terms of career progression in firms, and the effective measures and success factors being introduced in order to move towards a more diverse and equal profession.

The main objective of this study is to shed light on the extent to which the employees of these firms deem existing measures to promote female talent to be useful, and the career obstacles still faced by female professionals plus the factors that have contributed to their success. This study also looks at the job satisfaction of people working in the audit sector, and their intention to continue within it and in the firm where they are currently employed.

Specifically, this project has the following objectives:

OBJECTIVE 1: To learn how auditors perceive the various difficulties arising from the social and organisational environment which may influence their career development. Specifically, this paper seeks to identify whether obstacles related to gender stereotypes and social and cultural pressure still persist, as well as others arising from the organisational environment and especially related to auditors' work-life balance.

OBJECTIVE 2: To highlight the differences between the difficulties perceived by male and female auditors, showing how they vary across career paths.

OBJECTIVE 3: To determine the most effective measures for encouraging the appointment of female talent to leadership positions in firms.

OBJECTIVE 4: To analyse the reasons that contribute to the professional success of auditors.

OBJECTIVE 5: To examine the job and career satisfaction of auditors.

OBJECTIVE 6: Identify the future career aspirations of current auditors.

1.2 Differential analysis by gender and position

The barriers faced by female auditors in their professional careers has been studied in the scientific literature, as well as measures to promote female talent to the management of these companies (Anderson-Gough *et al.,* 2001; Almer *et al.,* 2022; Broadbent & Kirkham, 2008; Dambrin & Lambert, 2012; ICAC, 2021; ICJCE, 2021; 2022; Taminiau *et al.,* 2022; Vidwans & Cohen, 2020). However, most studies have not taken into account the point of view of their male peers. This study compares the perceptions of male and female auditors.

Furthermore, it must be considered that the perception of promotion to management positions, the measures established by the firms to boost talent, the socio-cultural, motivational or organisational barriers, as well as job satisfaction and turnover or lack thereof may vary according to the position held by the professional. As careers progress, job expectations change with regard what they initially were. For this reason, we have conducted a differential analysis by professional category for all the chapters of the study.

With regard to professional categories, there is no uniformity between audit firms. Larger firms use intermediate categories, which have been grouped together in this study to facilitate comparability with smaller firms. Thus, although there were respondents who defined themselves as senior managers and others who defined themselves as managers, here they have been grouped into a single category, that of manager. Furthermore, given that the number of female and male directors is relatively lower than the other categories in this study, this position has been equated to non-equity partners for the comparative analysis by category. Therefore, the categories used for the comparative analysis were as follows: Assistant, Senior Employee, Manager, Director together with Non-Equity Partner and Equity Partner.

The opinions of professionals belonging to firms of different sizes could not be compared due to sample limitations. The distribution by professional categories within firms of different sizes was not homogeneous, therefore it was decided to exclude the comparison by firm size, in order to avoid distorting the results.

1.3 Sources of information, research methodology and structure

As part of this study, an exhaustive review of the literature at both national and international level was first carried out. With the information obtained from previous works, we drafted a questionnaire that includes different scales used to measure the different aspects under analysis. Likewise, in order to adapt the survey to the reality of Spanish audit firms, we have worked closely with associations that represent auditors. In this regard, the help and support provided by the *Instituto de Censores Jurados de Cuentas ICJCE* (Institute of Chartered Accountants of Spain) and the *Registro de Economistas Auditores REA* (Registry of Economists and Auditors) has been key to this study.

Once the suggestions and areas for improvement proposed by the corporations and the representatives of the firms had been incorporated, the online survey was distributed by both corporations in October 2023.

After excluding responses from participants who failed to complete the survey, 280 valid responses were obtained from male and female auditors from different audit firms and with varying professional experience. Once the responses to the questionnaires had been collected, they were analysed by displaying the averages compared by gender and professional category. In order to facilitate the interpretation of the results for certain questions, the answer frequencies have been included.

This study consists of nine chapters. After this first introductory chapter, the second chapter presents the characteristics of the participants. This includes demographic variables as well as data relating to professional experience, such as years worked in the audit sector, position held in the firm, size of the firm, or type of working day. Chapters 3 to 8 present the descriptive analysis of the responses to the different questions under study.

Chapter 3 addresses career advancement in audit firms through auditors' perceptions of issues related to gender stereotypes and social or cultural pressure associated with their gender. Thus, this chapter shows, on one hand, the extent to which male and female auditors in this study perceive that because of their gender, certain qualities and behaviours are attributed to them in various organisational aspects such as leadership or decision-making skills. On the other hand, the chapter deals with the social and cultural pressure felt by women and men in relation to their careers.

Chapter 4 describes the influence of the organisational environment on talent development. It presents the results of auditors' perceptions of their firm's culture, including their opinions on the values, attitudes and behaviours that are encouraged in the organisation. It also analyses their perception of access to networks of influence within the organisation and their opinion of human resources practices and policies, with especial emphasis on the evaluation processes for promotion in the firms.

Chapter 5 looks at the difficulties of reconciling work and personal life. Thus, this chapter examines the extent to which audit professionals manage to achieve a balance between work and personal or family life and the impact of different aspects such as working hours and work flows, family responsibilities, maternity or paternity, have on work-life balance.

Chapter 6 analyses the respondents' opinion on the effectiveness of the various measures for promoting female talent to managerial positions in the firms. It analyses different measures and initiatives being implemented by audit firms with the aim of moving towards more equal organisational structures.

Chapter 7 focuses on auditors' perceptions of the factors that have contributed to the success of their careers. These factors refer both to individual qualities such as their professional capacity or their tenacity and perseverance, and to organisational or work environment aspects such as the training and support received from the company, colleagues or family.

Chapter 8 analyses the job satisfaction of the participants, their motivation, as well as their perception of their professional future, especially their turnover intention as well as their expectations regarding the possibility of becoming a partner in the firm.

Finally, Chapter 9 presents the main conclusions and final reflections of the study.

2 Characteristics of the participants of the study

The aim of this chapter is to present the characteristics of participants of this study. Firstly, Table 1 displays the demographical data such as age, gender and whether or not they have sons and daughters. The next table (Table 2) provides information on the professional background of the participants, namely the years of experience in auditing, the position they currently hold, and the size of the firm they work for.

2.1 Demographic data

The demographic data of the participants are shown in the attached table (Table 1). The data are classified according to gender.

//// TABLE 1 **Demographic data segregated by gender**

Age	Absolute values				% row		
	Men	Women	Total	%	Men	Women	Total
Up to 25 years old	21	30	51	18%	41%	59%	100%
Between 26 and 35 years old	36	54	90	32%	40%	60%	100%
Between 36 and 45 years old	12	44	56	20%	21%	79%	100%
Between 46 and 55 years old	12	41	53	19%	23%	77%	100%
More than 55 years old	14	16	30	11%	47%	53%	100%
Total	**95**	**185**	**280**	**100%**	**34%**	**66%**	**100%**
Children	**Men**	**Women**	**Total**	**%**	**Men**	**Women**	**Total**
Yes	33	77	110	39%	30%	70%	100%
No	61	107	168	60%	36%	64%	100%
No response	1	1	2	1%	50%	50%	100%
Total	**95**	**185**	**280**	**100%**	**34%**	**66%**	**100%**

As may be seen from the total absolute values, the sample includes 280 participants. If we look at the gender classification, 34% of the total sample consists of men and 66% of women.

No participant opted for non-binary gender, therefore the study-wide analysis by was conducted only for the male and female genders. The former will be referred to as men and the latter as women throughout the study.

The sample includes participants of all ages. Thus, 18% of the sample corresponds to professionals under 25 years of age. The largest group consists of professionals between 26 and 35 years of age,

who represent 32% of the total. This is followed by the 36-45 and 46-55 age groups, which account for 20% and 19% respectively. Professionals over 55 years of age represent 11% of the total sample.

Of the total number of respondents, 39% have sons and daughters compared to 60% who have none.

In order to obtain a more complete picture of the sample, Table 1 also displays the demographic data classified according to the gender of the respondents.

With regard to age, it may be seen that women, compared to men, are in the majority in all age ranges, the difference being more pronounced in the groups between 36 and 45 years of age (79% women) and between 46 and 55 years of age (77% women). Within the 55+ age group, the difference between male and female participation decreases, with women accounting for 53% of the participants in this age group.

Finally, we can observe that 42% of the women participating in the study have sons or daughters versus 35% of the men.

2.2 Professional experience

The auditors included in the sample have a varied profile, as it includes professionals with different years of experience, occupying positions of varying levels of responsibility, employed full and part-time, and belonging to audit firms of different sizes. Information on professional experience is presented below (Table 2).

//// **TABLE 2**   **Data on professional experience segregated by gender**

Years of audit experience	Men	Women	Total	%	Men	Women	Total
Up to 3 years	35	45	80	29%	44%	56%	100%
Between 3 and 5 years	12	16	28	10%	43%	57%	100%
Between 5 and 10 years	14	27	41	15%	34%	66%	100%
Between 10 and 20 years	15	46	61	22%	25%	75%	100%
More than 20 years	19	41	60	21%	32%	68%	100%
No response		10	10	4%	0%	100%	100%
Total	**95**	**185**	**280**	**100%**	**34%**	**66%**	**100%**

Position	Men	Women	Total	Total	Men	Women	Total
Assistant	24	33	57	20%	42%	58%	100%
Senior Employee	29	44	73	26%	40%	60%	100%
Manager	7	18	25	9%	28%	72%	100%
Senior Manager	8	31	39	14%	21%	79%	100%
Director	2	13	15	5%	13%	87%	100%
Non equity partner	6	10	16	6%	38%	62%	100%
Equity partner	18	35	53	19%	34%	66%	100%
No response	1	1	2	1%	50%	50%	100%
Total	**95**	**185**	**280**	**100%**	**34%**	**67%**	**100%**

Size of audit firm	Men	Women	Total	Total	Men	Women	Total
Big 4 [1]	38	47	85	30%	45%	55%	100%
Large firm [2]	25	56	81	29%	31%	69%	100%
Medium firm (5 or more audit partners)	4	12	16	6%	25%	75%	100%
Small firm (less than 5 partners)	22	58	80	29%	28%	72%	100%
Sole practitioners	6	11	17	6%	35%	65%	100%
No response		1	1	0%	0%	100%	100%
Total	95	185	280	100%	34%	66%	100%
Working Hours	**Men**	**Women**	**Total**	**Total**	**Men**	**Women**	**Total**
Full time	92	172	264	94%	35%	65%	100%
Reduced working hours	2	13	15	5%	13%	87%	100%
No response	1		1	0%	100%	0%	100%
Total	95	185	280	100%	35%	66%	100%

[1] Including the 4 biggest audit firms: Deloitte, EY, KPMG and PwC (in alphabetical order)

[2] According to the 2023 ranking published by *Expansión*: Adac; ADN&GRM Audit; Audalia Nexia; Audria; Auren; Avlon; Baker Tilly; BDO; Bnfix; Busquet; Capital Auditores; CGM Auditores; Cortés&Pérez; Crowe Spain; E-Consulting/ GrupoAdade; Ecovis; ETL Global; Eudita; Faura-Casas; Forward; FYI, Gap-Audicon-Elizalde; Gabinete Técnico Auditoría; GNC; Grant Thornton; HLB España; Kreston Iberaudit; Mazars; Moore Global; Morera Asesores; Morison ACPM; PKF Attest; Pleta Auditores; PrimeGlobal; Rusell Bedford; UHY; Uniaudit Oliver Camps; Vir Audit (in alphabetical order)

In terms of years of experience in auditing, 29% of those surveyed had less than 3 years' experience in the audit sector. The following groups are those with a high level of experience. Thus, 22% of participants have between 10 and 20 years of experience and 21% have more than 20 years of experience in the profession.

Most of the participants in the study are senior auditors (26%) and partners (25%), including equity (19%) and non-equity (6%) partners. Given that the number of partners is much lower than the number of employees in lower categories in most audit firms, we can see that the sample displays a high representation of professionals in the highest category of the firms. The manager category represents 23% of the total sample, which includes both managers and senior managers. Assistants represent 20% of the total sample. Finally, directors represent 5% of the total number of participants. In this study, the professional categories have been divided into the following groups for the purpose of comparison by professional category. On one hand, there is a group of equity partners, a second group of non-equity partners and directors, a third group of managers and senior managers, whom we have collectively termed managers, a fourth group of professionals in the senior employee category and, finally, a fifth group of assistants.

In terms of firm size, participation is similar amongst professionals in one of the four largest audit firms or the Big Four (30%), large firms (29%) and small firms with less than 5 partners (29%). Participation is lower among medium-sized audit firms (6%) and sole practitioners (6%).

Finally, 94% of the sample had full working days and only 5% had reduced working days.

Table 2 also collects information on respondents' professional experience, category and firm size, aggregated by gender.

With regard to years of experience, women are in the majority in all experience ranges, compared to men. The difference between female and male participation is smaller among less experienced auditors, with women representing 56% of professionals with up to three years' experience and 57%

in the three to five years' experience range. The differences between men and women are more pronounced in the groups with more professional experience, mainly among participants with 10 to 20 years of experience (75% women) and among professionals with over 20 years of experience (68% women).

With regard to the position they occupy in the firm, we observe that women are also in the majority in all professional categories. Similar to the previous variable of auditing experience, it is among the lower ranks of the firms that gender differences are the smallest. Thus, 58% of assistants and 60% of senior employees are women, compared to 40% of men. Despite their low representativeness within the total sample, it is worth noting that the biggest difference is found among directors, where 87% of the sample are women. In the managerial categories, women also account for over 70% of the sample.

Regarding gender distribution in the firms according to size, Table 2 shows that women are in the majority amongst the participants in all firm sizes. Participation in the four largest audit firms is more even, with 55% of women versus 45% of men. The proportion of women is greater than men in the case of medium and small firms, with more than 70% of women in these types of firms.

Finally, if we look at the gender of those engaged in auditing on a part-time basis, we see that the majority are women (87%).

3 Gender stereotypes and social/cultural pressure

Some difficulties faced by women in organisations when seeking to advance their careers are rooted in gender biases. Gender roles encourage the identification of others by their socially assigned stereotype. Traditionally, the female stereotype has been associated with a so-called communal role, associated with caring tasks and characterised by a cooperative, kind, conciliatory and respectful behaviour, which leads to an unconscious association of this behaviour with women. Similarly, men are identified with the agentic role, characterised by more autonomous, aggressive, competitive and risk-taking behaviour, which fits the model associated with leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002, Eagly, & Wood, 2012). These stereotypical qualities engender the view that women do not possess leadership attributes, and as a result, they suffer gender discrimination (Heilman, 2001).

Furthermore, these socially established gender roles have also been traditionally assumed by men and women in seeking to fit the attributes and behaviours that are socially expected of them (Eagly & Karau, 2002). However, traditional gender roles are changing in today's society. The massive incorporation of women into the labour market is leading to a more egalitarian society in which both genders combine professional, personal and family life, and in which the differences between the identities associated with men and women are decreased (Barnett & Hyde 2001). This situation increasingly leads to the identification of similar behaviours for men and women, thereby reducing discrimination related to gender stereotypes.

This chapter analyses auditors' perceptions of gender biases arising from female stereotyping, and how social or cultural pressure influences the behaviour expected of them.

3.1 Gender stereotypes

This section discusses the perception of gender biases stemming from the female stereotype. Specifically, participants were asked whether they felt that, due to their gender, others have attributed certain qualities, roles and expectations to them in various organisational aspects such as leadership or decision-making ability. Respondents were asked to rate five questions from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree).

The figure below displays the average responses of women and men in relation to perceived gender stereotypes.

//// **FIGURE 1**   Gender stereotypes. I feel that due to my gender, others think that:

Thus, Figure 1 shows that in none of the five items, does the level reach the mid-point of 3, rather, it remains under this point for all cases. This indicates that in general both women and men disavow the existence of such gender stereotypes.

However, there are clear differences between women and men in relation to the perceived stereotype. The results show that women identify each and every item to a greater extent than men, i.e., they feel that others believe that because they are women they are less suitable for leadership positions than men; that they are more insecure; and that they are too emotional and sensitive for positions of responsibility. More than men, women also identified that others believe that they are less able to cope with the pressure associated with leadership position, or that they find it more difficult to take decisions.

The following figures (2 to 6) display the frequency of women and men's responses to the five questions mentioned above.

//// **FIGURE 2**   Frequencies: I feel that due to my gender, others think that I am less qualified for leadership positions than persons of other genders
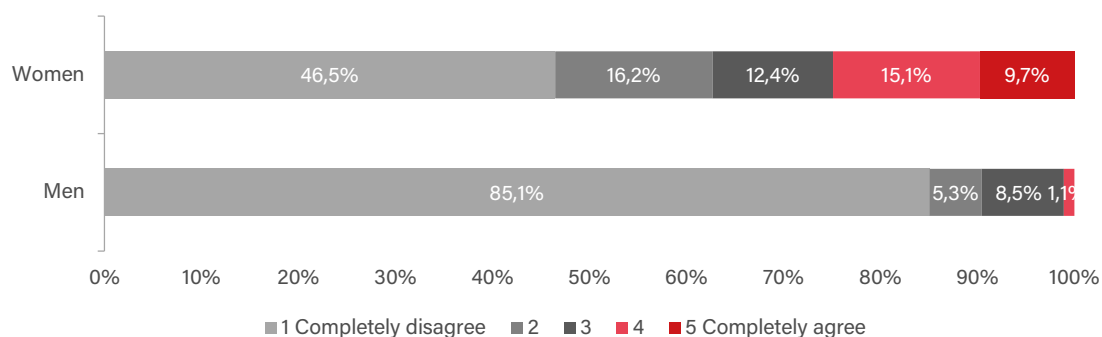
//// **FIGURE 3**   Frequencies: I feel that due to my gender, others think that I am more insecure than persons of other genders

	1 Completely disagree	2	3	4	5 Completely agree
Women	50,3%	21,1%	9,7%	13,0%	5,9%
Men	85,1%	5,3%	9,6%		
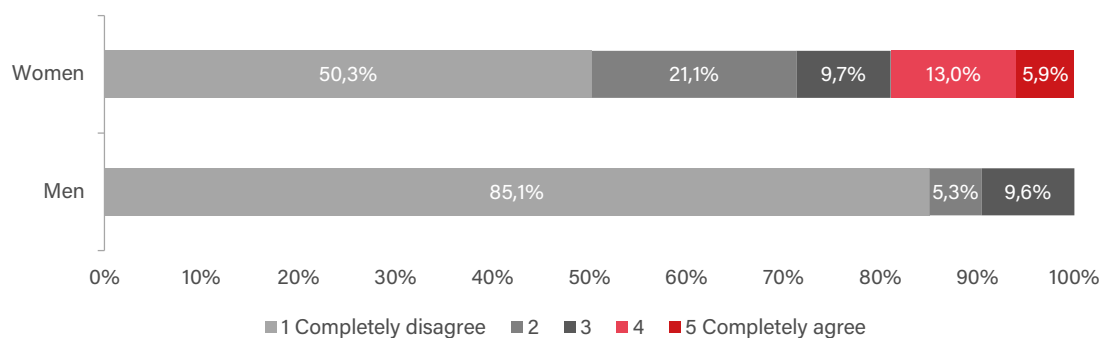
//// **FIGURE 4**   Frequencies: I feel that due to my gender, others think that I am less able to take decisions than persons of other genders

	1 Completely disagree	2	3	4	5 Completely agree
Women	55,4%	19,0%	13,0%	9,2%	3,3%
Men	81,9%	7,4%	9,6%	1,1%	
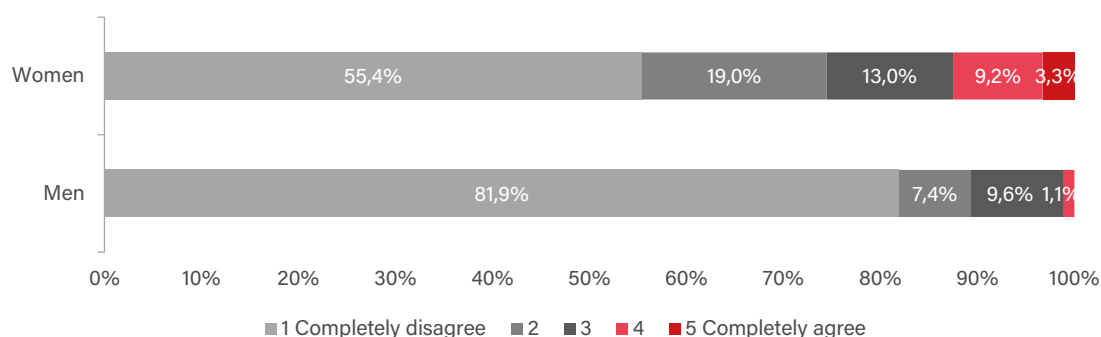
//// **FIGURE 5**   Frequencies: I feel that due to my gender, others think that I am too emotional and sensitive to hold positions of responsibility

	1 Completely disagree	2	3	4	5 Completely agree
Women	48,1%	18,9%	15,1%	11,9%	5,9%
Men	71,3%	16,0%	11,7%	1,1%	
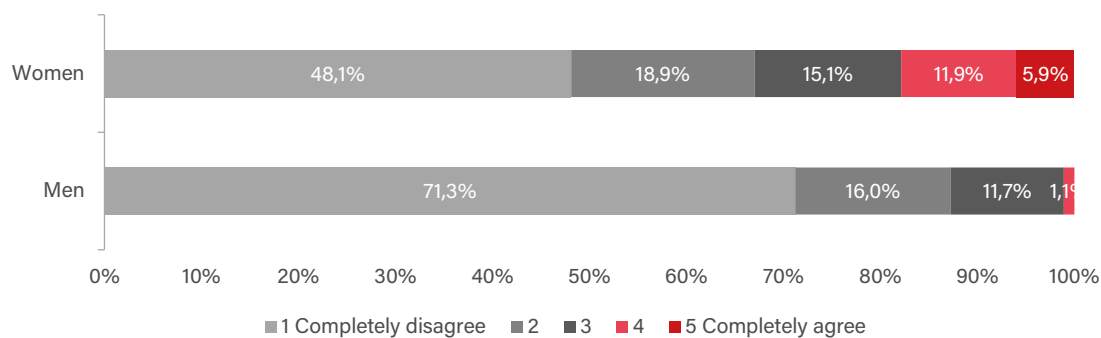
//// **FIGURE 6**   Frequencies: I feel that due to my gender, others think that I am less able to deal with the pressure associated with leadership positions than persons of other genders

	1 Completely disagree	2	3	4	5 Completely agree
Women	53,0%	18,4%	11,9%	13,0%	3,8%
Men	83,0%	7,4%	9,6%		
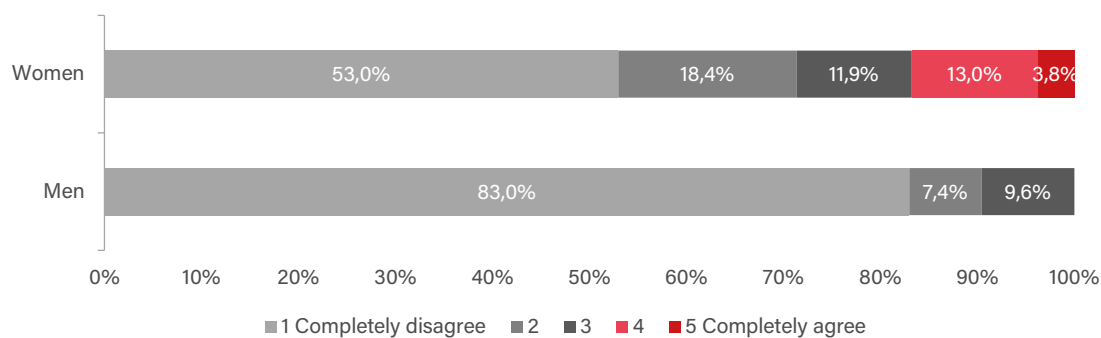
The figures above display clear differences regarding identified gender stereotypes. Thus, if we consider those who agree or strongly agree with the above statements (4 and 5), we can observe that 25% of women feel that others consider them to be less capable for leadership positions than men and 19% think that, because they are women, they are considered more insecure than men. In case of men, these percentages are at the lowest levels, barely 1%. The difference in terms of how others perceive the decision-making abilities of men and women is not as pronounced. However, 18% of women feel that women are perceived by others as too emotional and sensitive for positions of responsibility and 17% of women feel that because they are women, it is assumed that they are less able to cope with the pressure associated with leadership positions than men. In case of men, these percentages are between 0% and 1%.

The differences between the different professional categories are shown below (see Figures 7 and 8).

//// **FIGURE 7**　**Gender stereotypes. Women. I feel that due to my gender, others think that:**
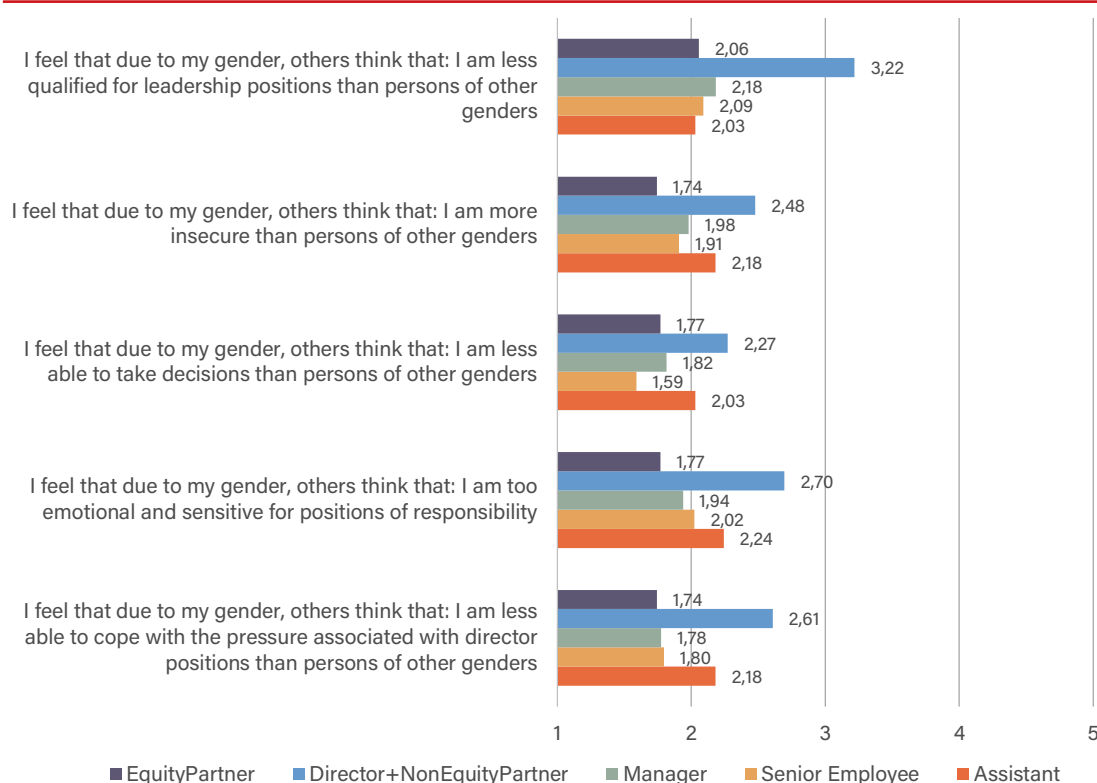
Firstly, the figure above displays the differences by different professional categories for women. It is observed that it is the female directors and non-equity partners who identify these gender stereotypes to a greater extent, exceeding, for the first of the questions, the mid-point: *I feel that due to my gender, others think that I am less qualified for leadership positions than persons of other genders.*

It is also observed that, among women, the second group that perceives these gender stereotypes to a greater extent are female assistants. Finally, the figure shows how female equity partners and senior members identify these stereotypes to a lesser extent.

//// **FIGURE 8** **Gender stereotypes. Men. I feel that due to my gender, others think that:**
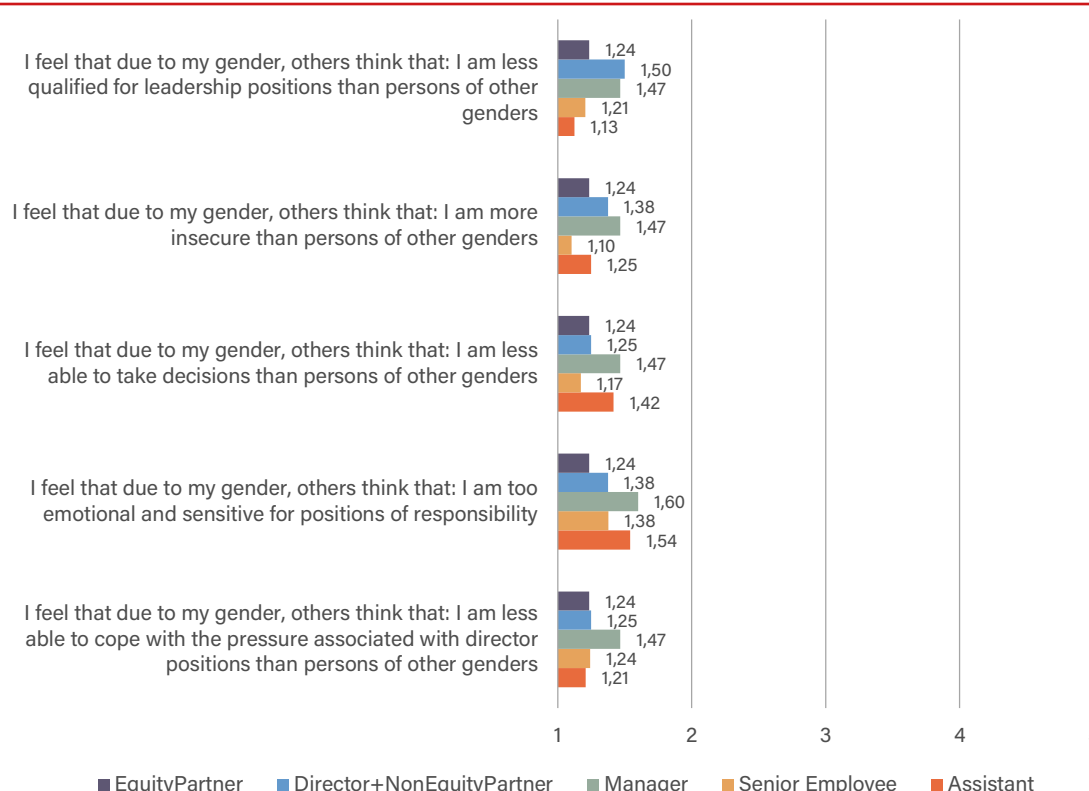
The figure above displays the results for men. As may be seen, in all categories, men's scores for all questions is significantly lower than that of women. The results show that at all career levels, men do not identify the biases labelling them as less suitable for leadership positions, as more insecure, more indecisive, or unable to cope with the pressure associated with leadership position. If we compare the different professional categories, we observe that the highest scores (even when they are very low) are given by managers.

3.2 Social/cultural pressure

This section covers the social and cultural pressures felt by women and men in relation to their careers. Specifically, participants were asked about their level of agreement with aspects such as whether they feel a social/cultural pressure to place family obligations before professional obligations or vice versa, whether they feel pressured to fulfil their traditional gender roles, as well as whether they feel pressured to not be ambitious. Respondents were asked to rate five questions from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The results to these questions, grouped by gender, may be seen in Figure 9.

//// **FIGURE 9** **Social/cultural pressure by gender**
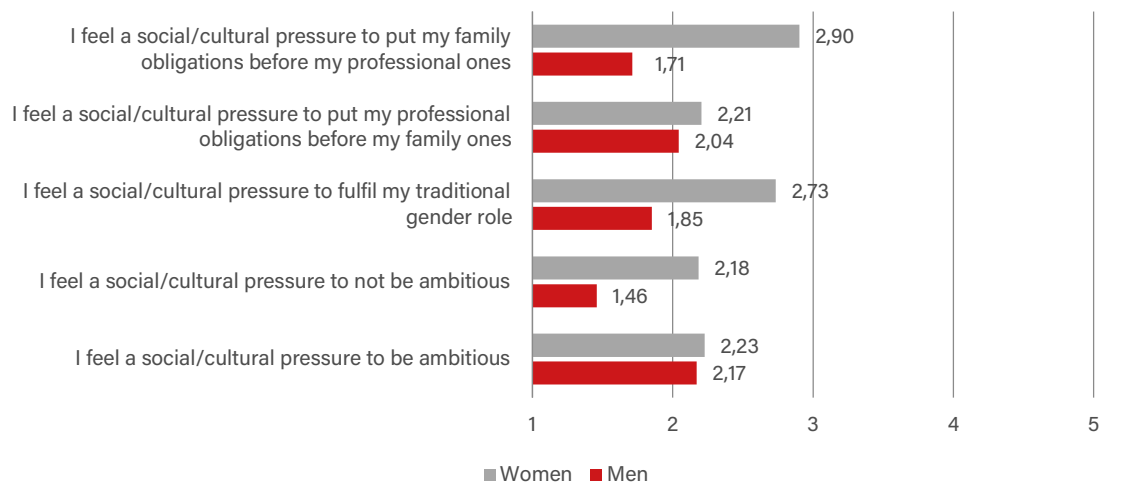
The results reveal that, in general, women feel the most social and cultural pressures. They feel that the social and cultural pressures to prioritise family obligations are greater than the pressures to prioritise professional obligations. However, in the case of men, it is the pressure to prioritise professional obligations that is felt most strongly. It is also worth noting that women feel a greater social pressure than men to fulfil their traditional gender role, with the gap between the two responses being very wide.

Both women and men feel greater pressure to be ambitious rather than to not be ambitious, but this difference is much more pronounced for men

The following figures (10 to 14) display the frequencies of responses to the questions on social and cultural pressures for men and women.

//// **FIGURE 10** **Frequencies: I feel a social/cultural pressure to put my family obligations before my professional ones**
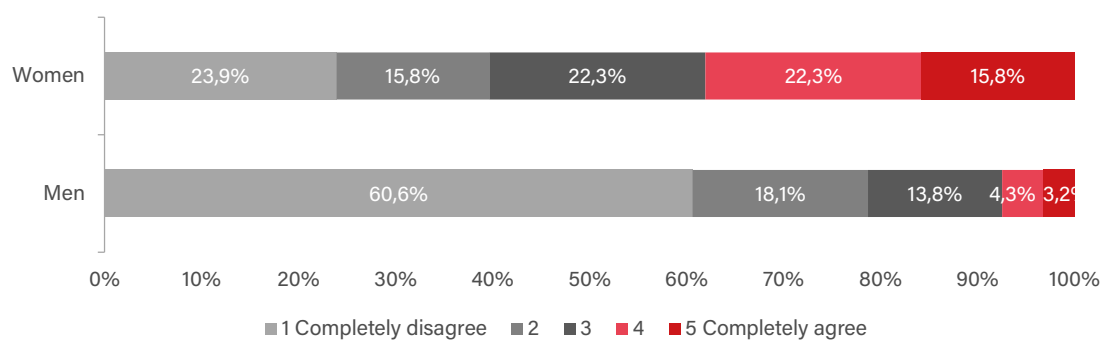
//// **FIGURE 11**   Frequencies: I feel a social/cultural pressure to put my professional obligations before my family ones
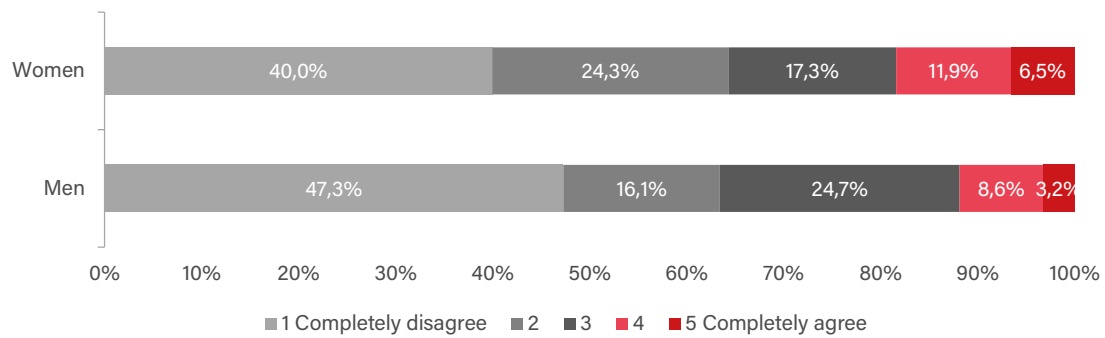
//// **FIGURE 12**   Frequencies: I feel a social/cultural pressure to fulfil my traditional gender role
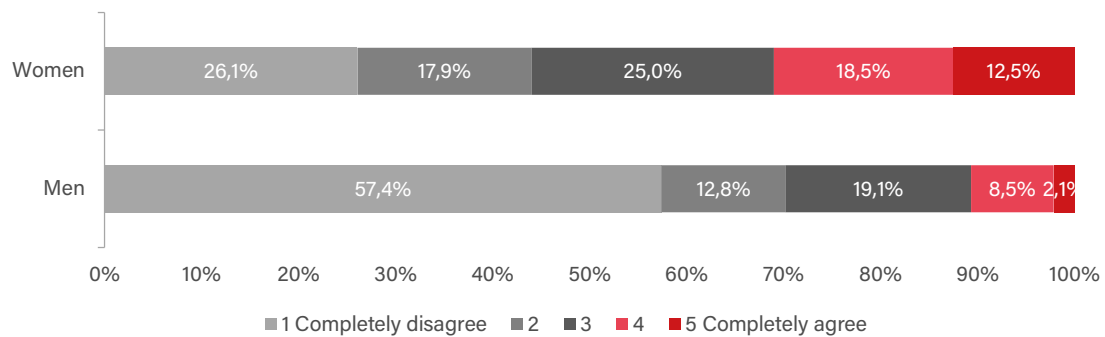
//// **FIGURE 13**   Frequencies: I feel a social/cultural pressure to not be ambitious
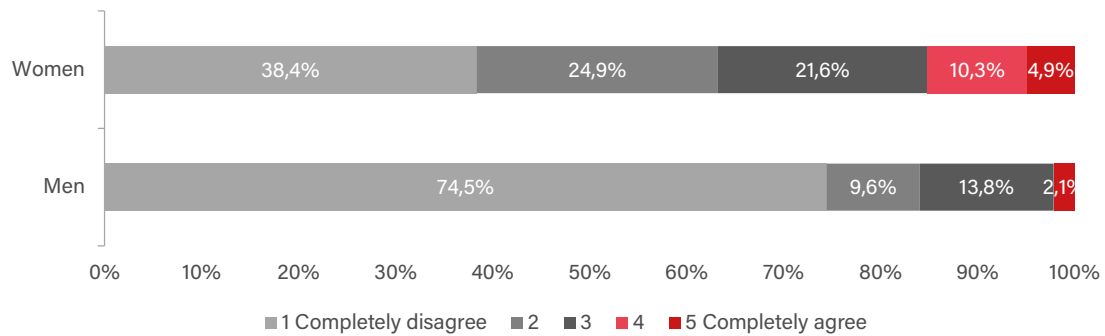
//// **FIGURE 14**   Frequencies: I feel a social/cultural pressure to be ambitious
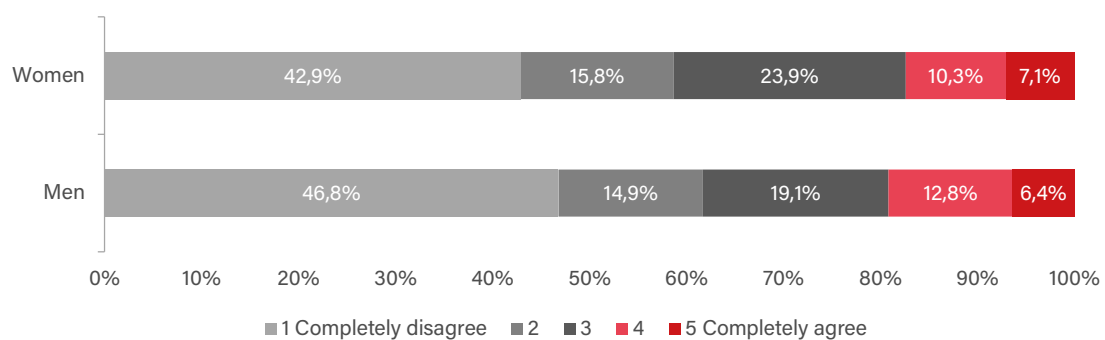
The figures display significant differences between the two genders with regard to socio-cultural pressure. Thus, if we consider those who agree or strongly agree with the indicated statements (4 and 5), we see that 38% of women feel social and cultural pressure to place their family obligations before their professional ones, as opposed to only 7% of men, but curiously, there is also a higher percentage of women than men (18% compared to 12%) who feel social and cultural pressure to put place their professional obligations before their family obligations. Moreover, 31% of women feel the pressure to fulfil their gender role, compared to 11% of men.

The results to these questions are presented below, aggregated by professional category in two figures, one for women and one for men.

//// **FIGURE 15**   **Social/cultural pressure by position. Women**
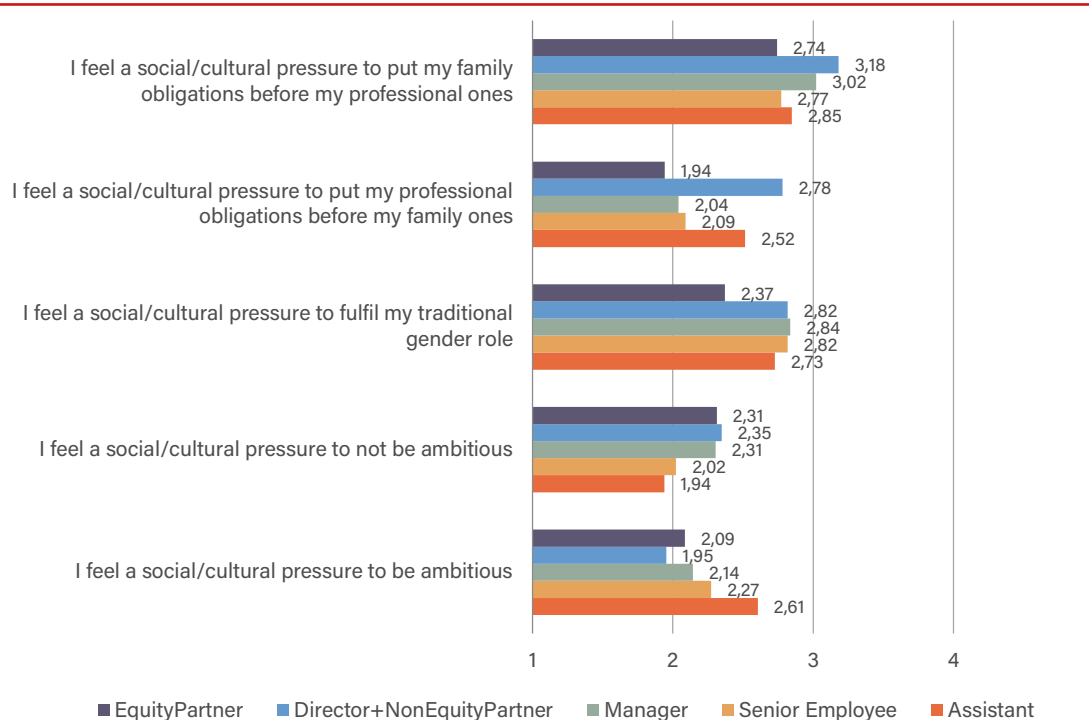
The figure above shows values close to the mid-point for many of the issues, indicating that in general, women in different categories neither disagree nor agree with the issues raised.

Figure 15 shows that, in the case of women, there are significant differences depending on the professional category. With regard to perceived pressures, directors and non-equity partners feel greater pressure to place family obligations before professional ones. However, it is striking that this is also the group that perceives the greatest pressure to place professional obligations before family obligations.

Next, we observe that it is female managers who perceive the greatest pressure to put family obligations before professional ones, and along the same lines, women in this category perceive the most pressure to fulfil their gender role.

Regarding female audit assistants, we note from the above figure that, while pressure to put family obligations first is perceived

The results of the questions on social/cultural pressure for men are displayed in the figure below.

//// **FIGURE 16**   Social/cultural pressure by position. Men
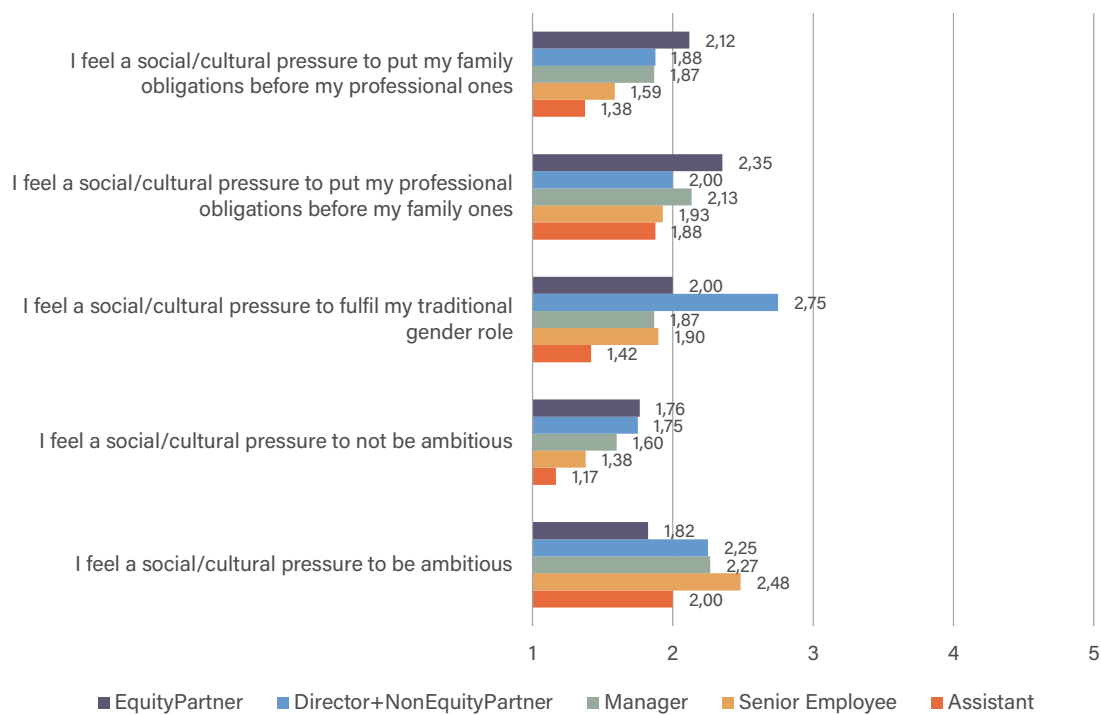
As may be seen in Figure 16, there are no issues that reach the mid-point, indicating that in general, men do not feel these pressures. However, the figure reveals differences between professional categories. It is observed that in all categories men feel a greater pressure to put professional obligations before family obligations, and not the other way around. Along the same lines, in all categories, men are observed to feel greater pressure to be ambitious than to not be ambitious. It is also worth noting that male directors and non-equity partners feel the greatest pressures to fulfil their traditional gender roles.

4 Influence of the organisational environment on talent development

This chapter addresses the influence of the organisational environment on talent development. The under-representation of women in the top management of audit firms stems from a number of factors influencing the opportunities and obstacles faced by men and women throughout their careers, including the organisational environment. In recent years, firms are implementing measures to promote equal opportunities for all auditors (Cohen *et al.*, 2020; ICJCE, 2023; Whiting *et al.*, 2015). However, a thorough understanding of the difficulties that still hold back women from being promoted to leadership positions is still lacking. There are practical implications to identifying the difficulties as well as opportunities encountered by professionals within their organisations, as these are aspects where the firms themselves can act by implementing initiatives favouring more equal structures.

Thus, this chapter displays the results of how auditors perceive the culture of their audit firms, including their opinions on the values, attitudes and behaviours fostered within the organisations. It also presents their perception of access to networks of influence within the organisation, as well as their opinion on human resources practices and policies, with especial emphasis on the evaluation processes for promotion in the firms.

4.1 Organisational culture

This section displays the results related to auditors' perception of organisational culture, including aspects such as whether it promotes mutual support, collaboration and empathy, or competitiveness, authority or control. The opinion of whether the organisational culture encourages employees' full-time availability or facilitates flexible working hours is also included. Respondents were asked to rate five questions from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree).

The figure below shows the results grouped by gender.

//// **FIGURE 17**   **Organisational culture by gender**
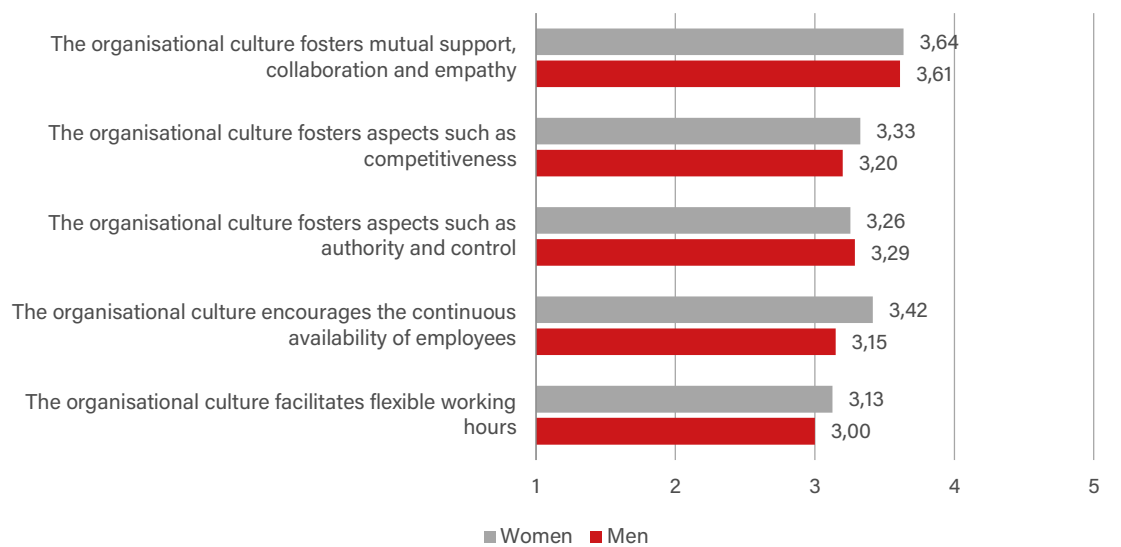
In this case, it may be observed that more or less all participants are somewhat in agreement with all statements, especially with the statement that the organisational culture promotes aspects such as mutual support, collaboration and empathy. On the other hand, the question of facilitating flexible working hours received the lowest score, with an average of around 3.

It is worth noting that, regarding the perception of organisational culture, there are practically no differences of opinion between women and men, being highly similar for almost all issues. The only issue on which there is a difference between the two genders is the perception that the organisational culture encourages the full-time availability of employees, with women being the most likely to agree with this statement.

Given the similarities in the results obtained by men and women, the analysis of the frequencies of the items under analysis is not presented.

The results according to professional category and gender are presented below.

//// **FIGURE 18**   **Organisational culture by position. Women**

The organisational culture fosters mutual support, collaboration and empathy
- EquityPartner: 4,11
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 3,48
- Manager: 3,35
- Senior Employee: 3,70
- Assistant: 3,58

The organisational culture fosters aspects such as competitiveness
- EquityPartner: 3,31
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 3,26
- Manager: 3,51
- Senior Employee: 3,02
- Assistant: 3,52

The organisational culture fosters aspects such as authority and control
- EquityPartner: 3,49
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 3,35
- Manager: 3,35
- Senior Employee: 2,84
- Assistant: 3,36

The organisational culture encourages the continuous availability of employees
- EquityPartner: 3,00
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 3,87
- Manager: 3,59
- Senior Employee: 3,21
- Assistant: 3,55

The organisational culture facilitates flexible working hours
- EquityPartner: 3,71
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 2,82
- Manager: 3,06
- Senior Employee: 3,11
- Assistant: 2,82

■ EquityPartner ■ Director+NonEquityPartner ■ Manager ■ Senior Employee ■ Assistant

The figure for women grouped by occupational category shows that women in virtually all categories tend to agree somewhat with the statements made. It should be noted, for example, that all professional categories agree that the organisational culture encourages aspects such as mutual support, collaboration and empathy, which is highly relevant for job satisfaction and the intention to remain within the organisation. However, female equity partners agree the most with this statement and female managers the least.

It is also noted that female assistants and managers perceive competitiveness within audit firms to a greater extent.

Another interesting aspect is that the perception of whether the organisational culture encourages the full-time availability of employees or facilitates flexibility varies according to women in different professional categories. In this case, female partners are the least likely to agree with this statement, while non-equity partners and directors, followed by managers and assistants are the most likely to agree with it. It is also worth noting how the results reveal the difference in perception as to how organisational culture facilitates flexible working hours between female partners and the other categories.

The following figure displays the results for men.

//// **FIGURE 19**   **Organisational culture by position. Men**
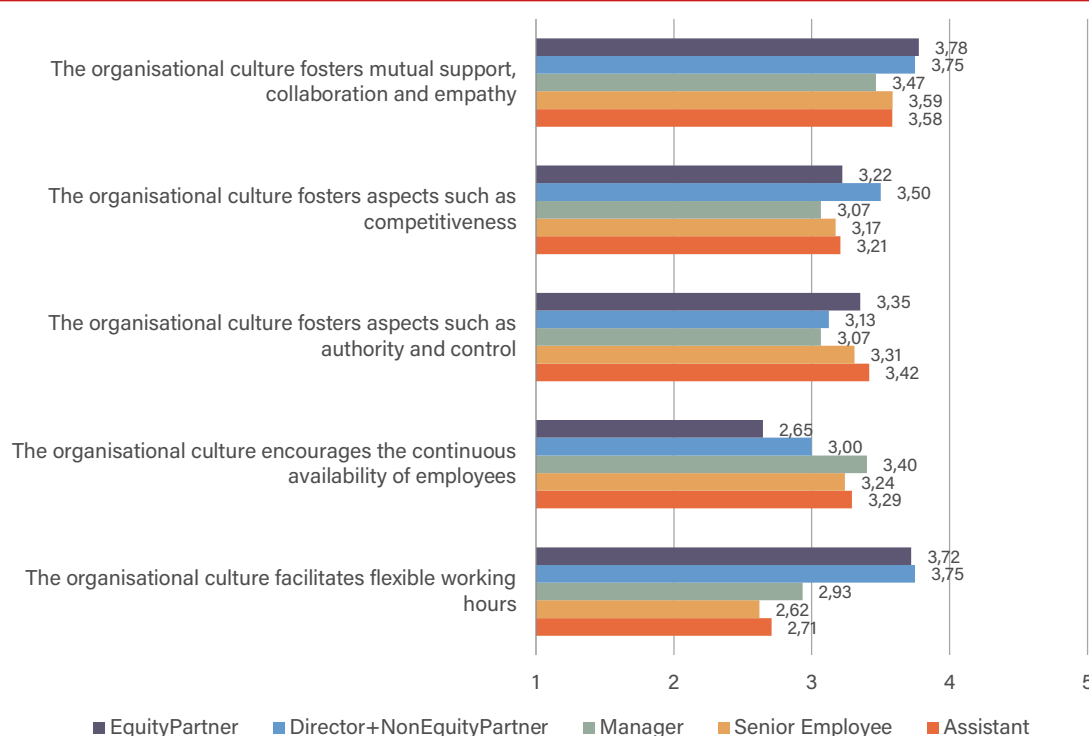
The results in Figure 19 also show that men in general, across all professional categories, tend to agree with the statements made. However, they also display differences of opinion based on their professional category. All categories agree that the organisational culture promotes aspects such as mutual support, collaboration and empathy, although equity partners, non-equity partners and directors agree with this to a greater extent. The biggest differences between men in the different categories may be seen in aspects such as the organisational culture's encouraging full-time availability, where equity partners agree the least (as is the case for women), and in the facilitating of flexible working hours, where equity partners, non-equity partners and directors agree quite strongly, an assessment that is not shared by the lower categories.

4.2 Access to networks of influence

This section reflects auditors' views on access to networks of influence, as well as the existence of role models. In particular, participants were asked whether power groups and networks consist of people of their own gender, whether they have difficulties accessing them, whether there are enough directors of their own gender to serve as a role model, as well as the extent to which their firm's net-working activities favour people of their gender more than others. Respondents were asked to rate four questions from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree).

The results grouped by gender are displayed in Figure 20.

//// FIGURE 20 **Access to networks of influence by gender**

Groups and networks of power and influence are composed of persons of my gender	Women: 2,01 / Men: 2,83
My gender does not limit my access to power groups and networks	Women: 3,09 / Men: 3,23
There are sufficient directors of my gender that they serve as a role model for me	Women: 2,25 / Men: 3,57
My firm's current networking activities (dinners, lunches, sports activities, etc.) favour persons of my gender more	Women: 1,66 / Men: 1,44

■ Women ■ Men

In this case, the figure shows that in general men express a higher degree of agreement with the statements made. More than women, men perceive that power groups consist of people of their gender, that they do not have difficulties in gaining access to them, and that there are enough male directors as role models, the last being the statement with the most significant differences between men and women.

Figures 21 to 24 below show the frequency of participants' responses for each question.

//// FIGURE 21 **Frequencies: Power groups and networks of influence are composed of persons of my gender**

	1	2	3	4	5
Women	46%	25%	17%	5%	6%
Men	24%	18%	17%	31%	10%

■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5
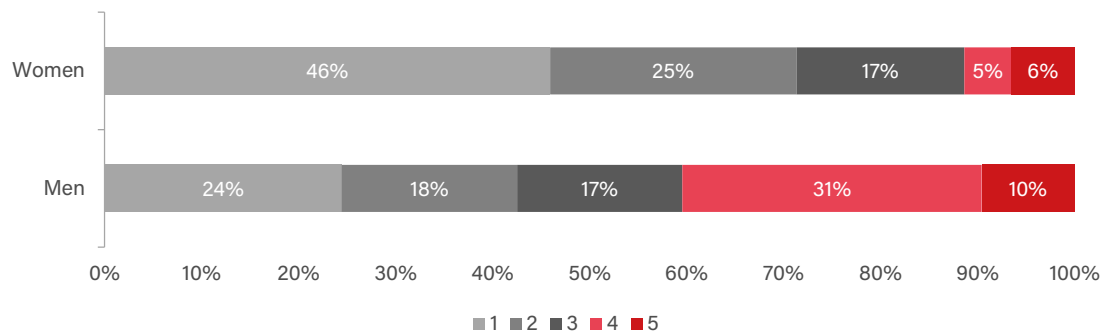
//// **FIGURE 22**   Frequencies: My gender does not limit my access

	1 Completely disagree	2	3	4	5 Completely agree
Women	17%	18%	25%	21%	20%
Men	26%	6%	21%	13%	34%
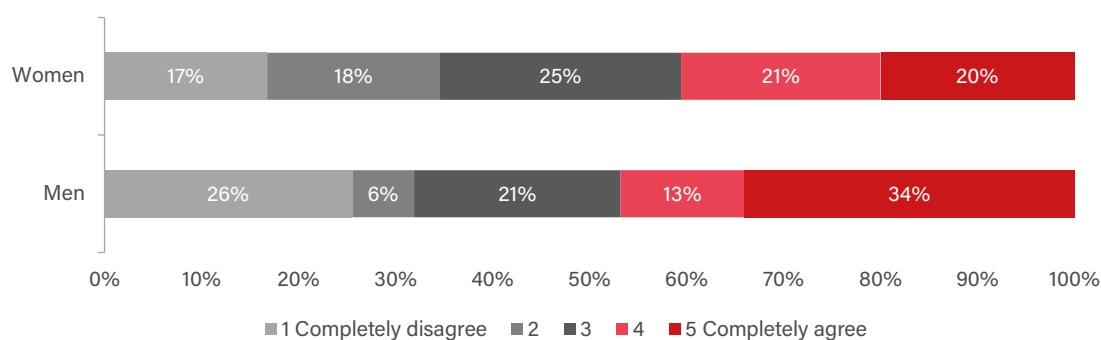
//// **FIGURE 23**   Frequencies: There are sufficient directors of my gender that they serve as a role model for me

	1 Completely disagree	2	3	4	5 Completely agree
Women	39%	26%	15%	11%	9%
Men	14%	4%	25%	25%	32%
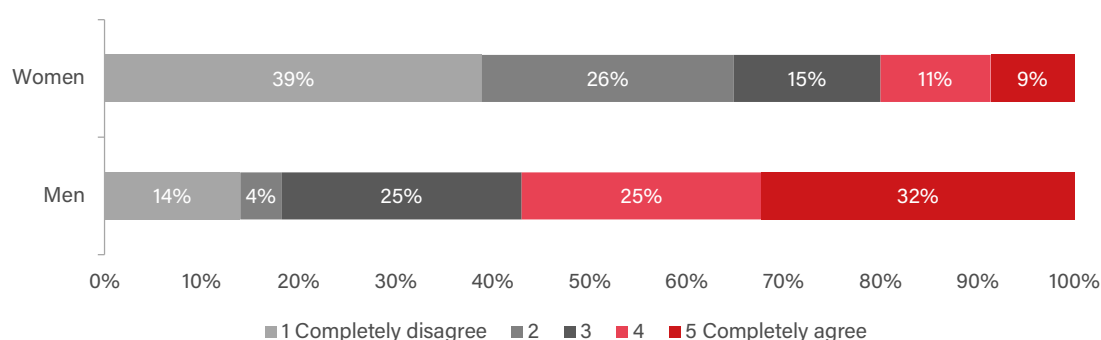
//// **FIGURE 24**   My firm's current networking activities (dinners, lunches, sports activities, etc.) favour persons of my gender more

	1 Completely disagree	2	3	4	5 Completely agree
Women	64%	13%	20%	3%	2%
Men	78%	5%	15%		2%
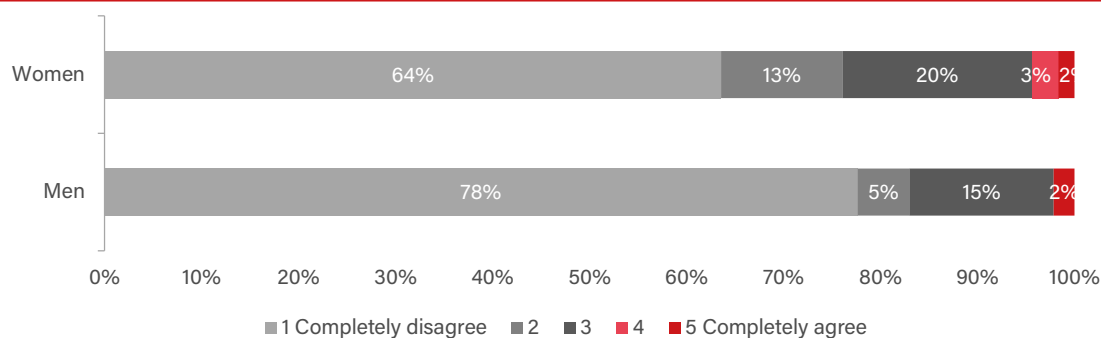
The main differences are discussed below. Firstly, if we consider those who agree or strongly agree with the above statements (4 and 5), the figures show that only 11% of women consider that power groups are composed of women, while 41% of men perceive that these groups are mostly male. Regarding difficulties in accessing power groups and networks, both genders display similar results, with around 35% of female and 32% of male auditors perceiving difficulties in accessing power groups and networks due to their gender. On the other hand, while 57% of men consider that there are currently enough male directors, only 20% of women consider that they are sufficiently represented in leadership positions. Finally, the differences with regard to networking activities are not significant.

Below are the figures grouped by occupational categories for women and men separately.

//// **FIGURE 25** **Access to networks of influence by position. Women**
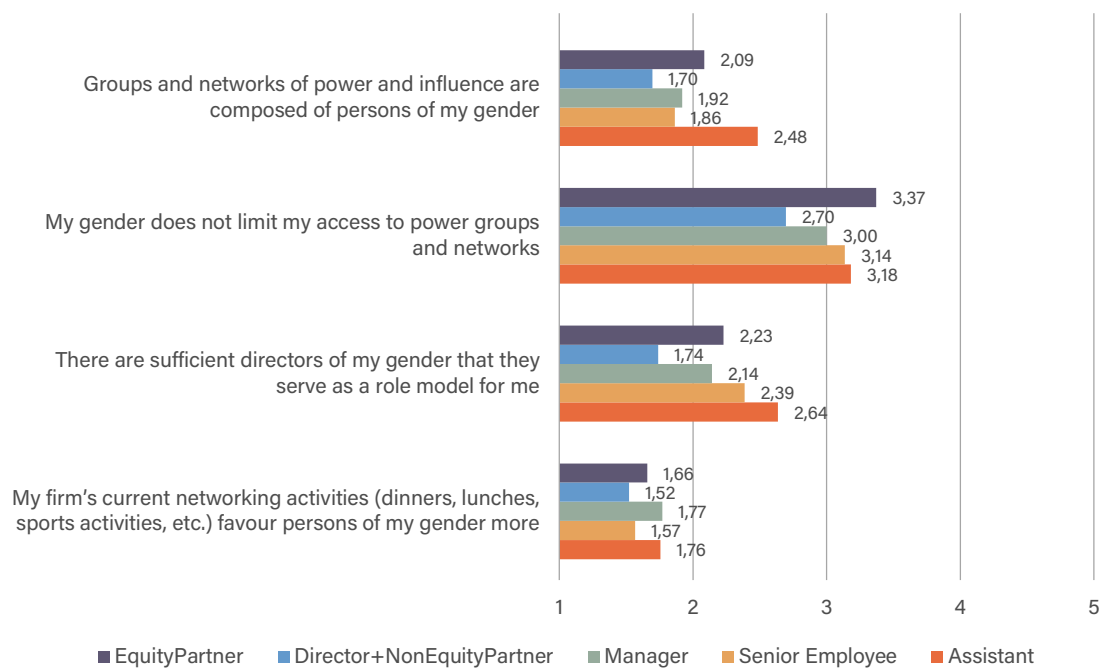
Figure 25 shows that in the case of women, in none of the professional categories do they agree that power groups are made up of people of their gender, nor that there are enough female directors to serve as role models. For these two issues, despite not perceiving parity at the top of the firms, it is the female assistants who are more in agreement. On one hand, it is the female non-equity partners and directors who show greater disagreement. On the other hand, in general, women in the different categories do not demonstrate difficulties in accessing power groups due to their gender, with equity partners agreeing to a greater extent. Finally, women in all categories disagree that networking activities are more favourable to women.

The results for men are shown in the figure below.

//// **FIGURE 26**   Access to networks of influence by position. Men
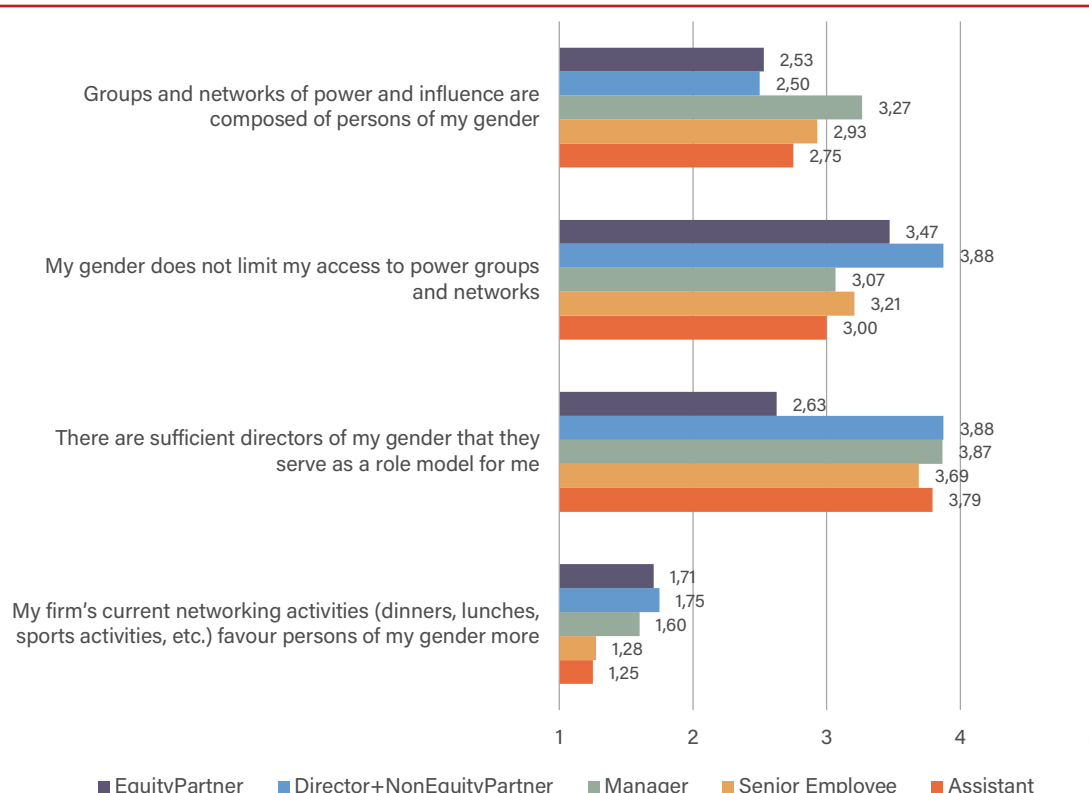
The figure above shows that the results for men in terms of access to networks of influence differ from those of women. Firstly, it is worth noting that, in general and in all professional categories, men are more in agreement with power groups consisting of persons of their gender. This view is mainly expressed by managers. Likewise, although none of the professional categories report difficulties in accessing power groups and networks due to their gender, it is the male non-equity partners and directors, followed by male equity partners, who perceive the least difficulties. With regard to the existence of sufficient directors as role models, all categories are in broad agreement, with the exception of partners, who fail to reach the mid-point. On this issue, the differences with women are evident in all professional categories, with the gap being more pronounced in the case directors and non-equity partners. Finally, in the case of men, there is no category where they consider that networking activities are more favourable for them.

4.3 Human Resources practices and policies

This section includes different questions in an attempt to show professionals' perception of the firms' human resources practices and policies. Thus, this section includes questions on the client allocation policy, performance appraisal, the detriment of the policy of complete availability for clients, or the possible perception of the existence of a wage gap, as well as the perception of the firm's acceptance of work-life balance measures adopted by employees. Respondents were asked to rate five questions from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree).

The following figure shows the results grouped by gender.

//// **FIGURE 27**   **Human Resources practices and policies by gender**
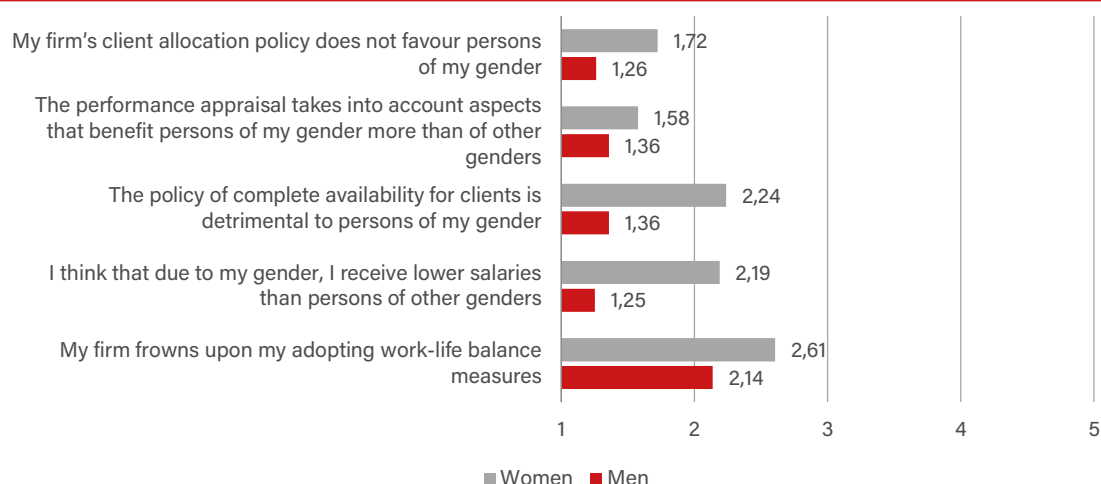
As may be seen in Figure 27, in general, the results reveal that both genders disagree with the statements indicated, although there are notable differences by gender. Thus, men fall between strongly disagreeing and broadly disagreeing on all issues, therefore they do not consider the client allocation policy to be detrimental to them, nor do they feel that the policy of complete availability for customers is detrimental to them, nor do they feel that they receive lower salaries, and they also do not think that adopting work-life balance measures is frowned upon.

More than men, women consider the policy of complete availability for customers and the client allocation policy to be detrimental to them, that their salaries are lower, and they also believe that they are less welcome than men to adopt work-life balance measures.

The differences between women and men for each item, considering the frequencies, are displayed in Figures 28 to 32.

//// **FIGURE 28**   **My firm's client allocation policy does not favour persons of my gender**
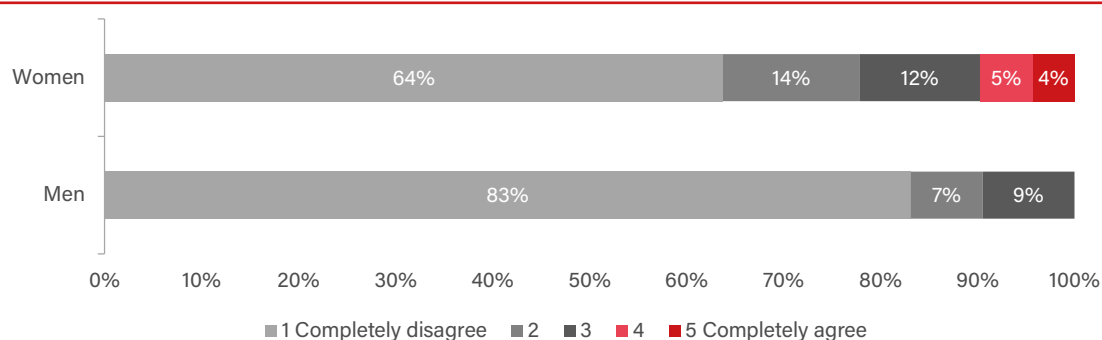
//// **FIGURE 29**   The performance appraisal takes into account aspects that benefit persons of my gender more than of other genders

Women	68%	15%	13%	2%	3%
Men	82%	3%	13%	1%	1

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ 1 Completely disagree   ■ 2   ■ 3   ■ 4   ■ 5 Completely agree
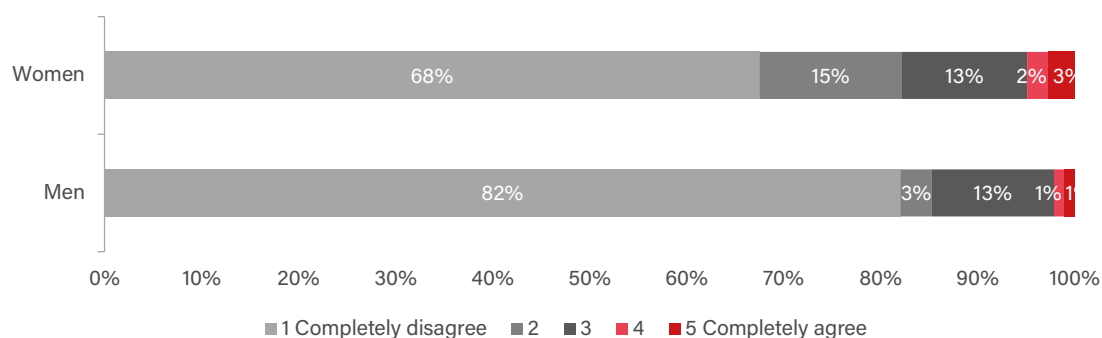
//// **FIGURE 30**   The policy of complete availability for clients is detrimental to persons of my gender

Women	49%	14%	14%	13%	11%
Men	82%	3%	13%	1%	1

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ 1 Completely disagree   ■ 2   ■ 3   ■ 4   ■ 5 Completely agree
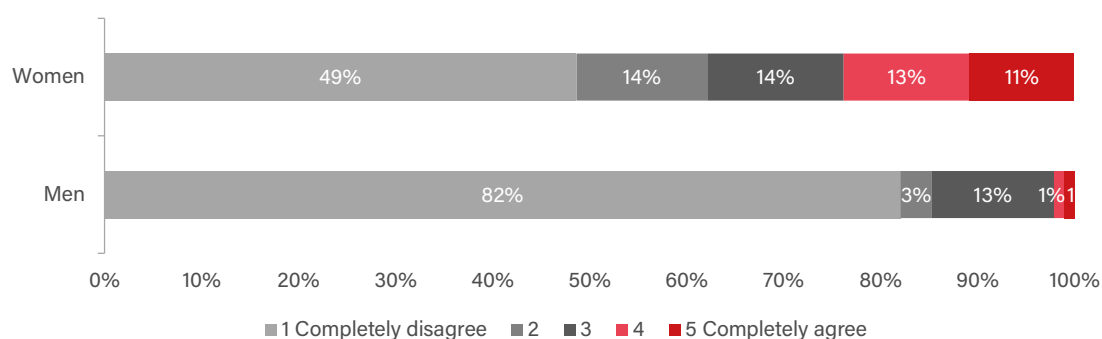
//// **FIGURE 31**   I think that due to my gender, I receive lower salaries than persons of other genders

Women	54%	11%	12%	8%	15%
Men	86%	4%	8%	1%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ 1 Completely disagree   ■ 2   ■ 3   ■ 4   ■ 5 Completely agree
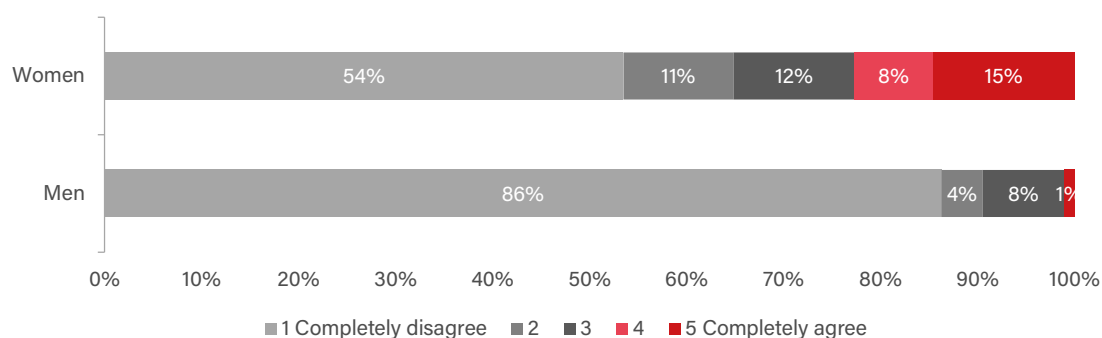
//// **FIGURE 32**   My firm frowns upon my adopting work-life balance measures

Women	37%	14%	17%	14%	18%
Men	53%	12%	12%	15%	9%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ 1 Completely disagree   ■ 2   ■ 3   ■ 4   ■ 5 Completely agree
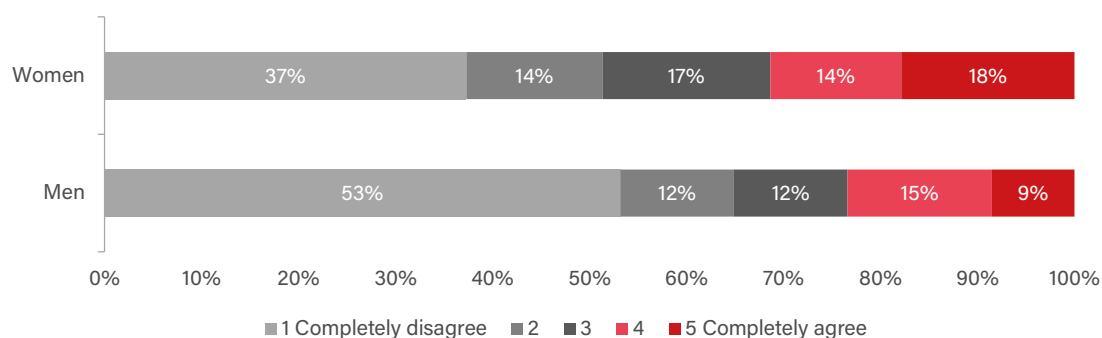
If we group together the persons who fall between broadly agreeing and strongly agreeing, we observe important distinctions between women and men. Thus, around 9% of women compared to no men consider that the client allocation policy in their firm is detrimental to women, 24% of women compared to 2% of men believe that the policy of complete availability for clients is detrimental to persons of their gender compared to the rest, 23% of women compared to 1% of men believe that because of their gender they receive lower salaries, and finally, 32% of women compared to 24% of men consider that their firm frowns upon their adopting work-life balance measures.

The following figure displays the results for women grouped by professional category.

//// **FIGURE 33** Human Resources practices and policies by position. Women
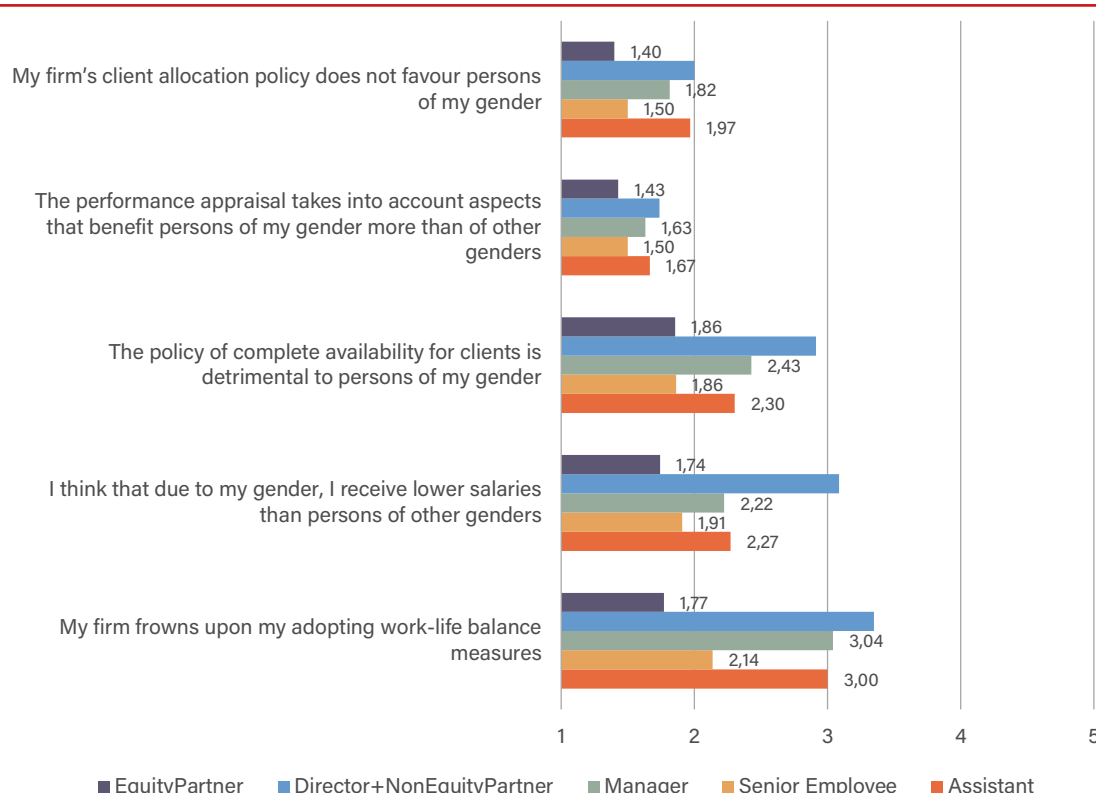
Figure 33 shows that, in general, women in different categories do not agree with the issues raised, or at least not all of them. The data reveal quite a few differences in opinions regarding HR policies based on their professional category. The most significant differences are observed between the group of female non-equity partners and female directors as opposed to the groups of female partners and female senior employees. The first group has a more negative view of human resources policies. Thus, female directors and female non-equity partners believe more than others that the policy of complete availability for clients is more detrimental to women and that they receive lower salaries due to their gender. The other two questions concerning client allocation policy and performance appraisal do not demonstrate major differences between respondents.

With regard to the perception of the adoption of work-life balance measures, the results reveal that female directors and female non-equity partners, followed by female managers and female assistants, perceive to a greater extent that their firm frowns upon the adoption of work-life balance measures. This opinion is clearly different from that of female equity partners, which reveals a lack of communication or clarity in the use and enjoyment of these work-life balance measures.

Female equity partners are the ones that disagree the most that performance appraisal takes into account aspects that do not benefit women, and perceive that there are fewer human resources practices that discriminate against women because they are women, such as client allocation, the policy of complete availability for clients, or salaries.

The same analysis is displayed below for men (Figure 34).

//// **FIGURE 34**   **Human Resources practices and policies by position. Men**
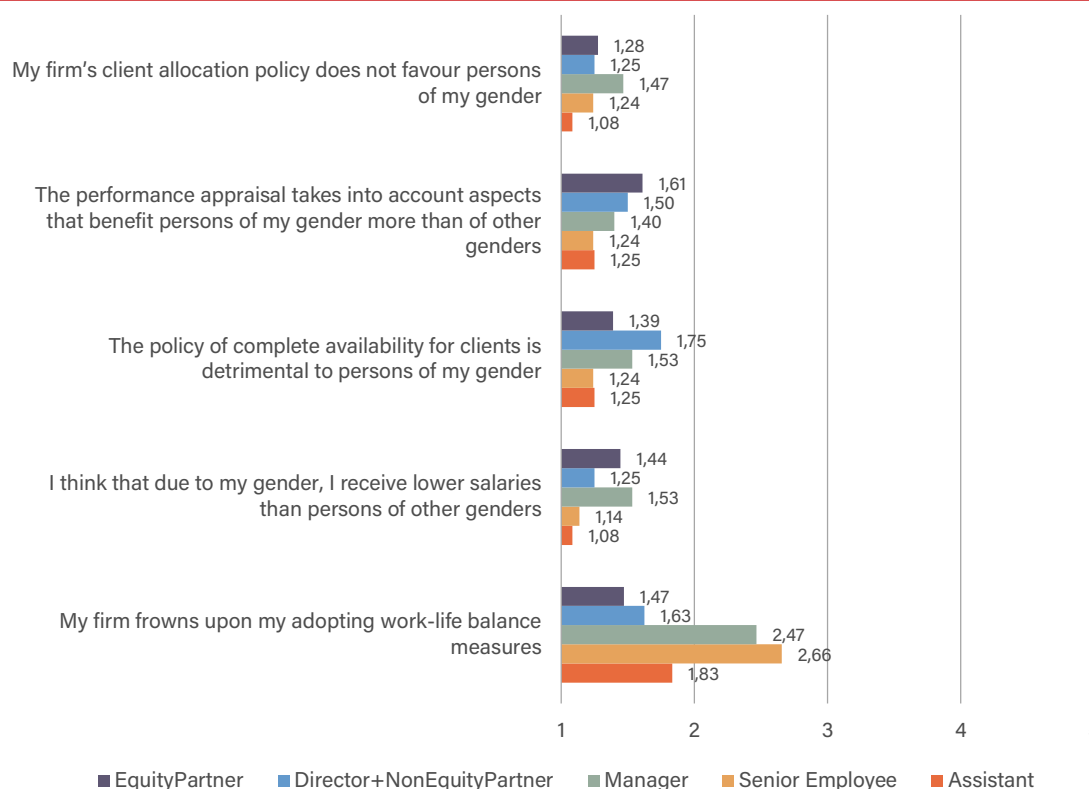
In all professional categories, the scores for men are significantly lower than that of women, and in general, they broadly disagree with them. The only significant differences are to be found in the opinion on work-life balance measures. Thus, we observe that it is senior employees, followed by managers, who perceive to a greater extent that firms frown upon the adoption of work-life balance measures. All in all, there is no clear trend regarding men's opinions on human resources policy in audit firms, based on their professional category.

4.4 Performance appraisal

This section analyses participants' opinions on the appraisal processes for promotion in firms. Specifically, it looks at whether audit professionals feel that, because of their gender, more demands are placed on them, whether they feel they are assessed more strictly or whether they feel they need to demonstrate their abilities more than persons of other genders. Respondents were asked to rate the three questions on a Likert scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree).

Figure 35, broken down by gender, is presented below.

//// **FIGURE 35**   Performance appraisal by gender
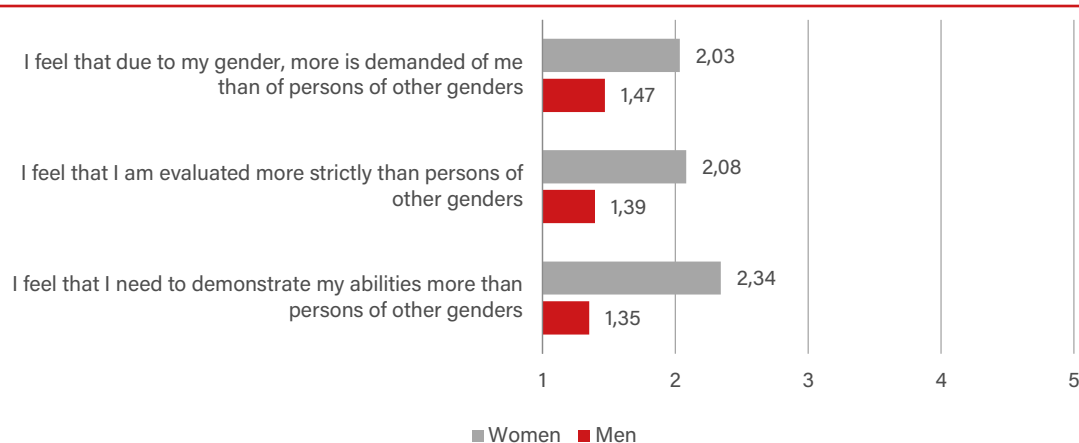
As may be seen in Figure 35, none of the three items reaches the mid-point of the scale, indicating that in general, neither women nor men agree that there are gender differences in appraisal processes. However, the figure shows that there are differences in perception depending on the gender of the respondent. Thus, women feel to a greater extent than men that because of their gender more is demanded of them, they are evaluated more strictly, and have to demonstrate their abilities more than men.

In order to obtain more detailed information on the responses of the participants, the frequencies of responses for both women and men are shown in Figures 36, 37 and 38 below.

//// **FIGURE 36**   Frequencies: I feel that due to my gender, more is demanded of me than of persons of other genders
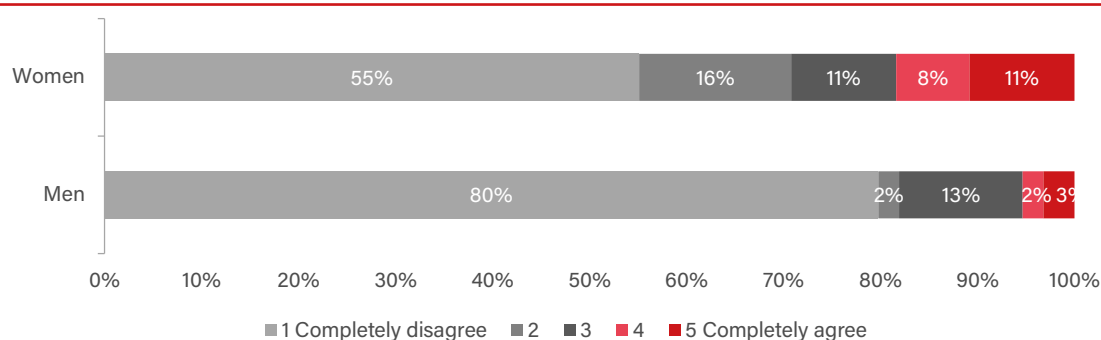
//// **FIGURE 37**   Frequencies: I feel that I am evaluated more strictly than persons of other genders
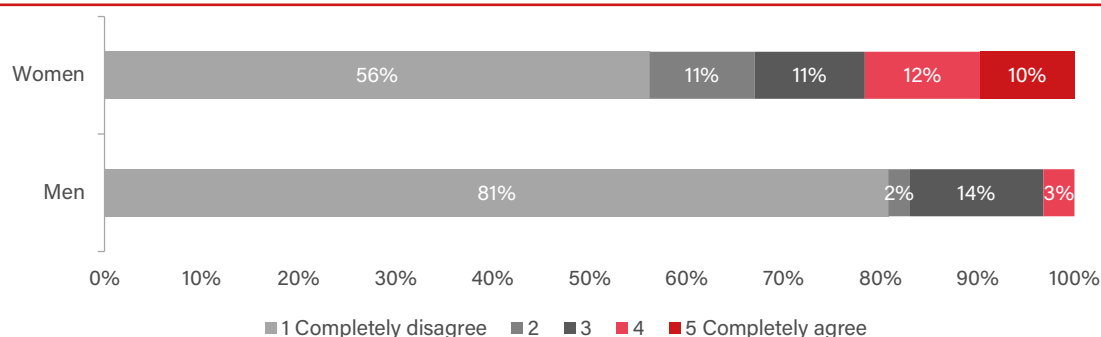
//// **FIGURE 38** **Frequencies: I feel that I need to demonstrate my abilities more than persons of other genders**
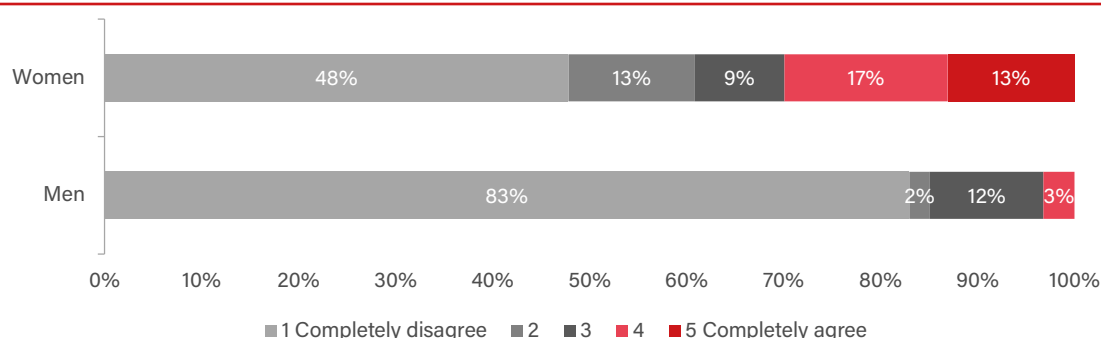
The figures show that, although the average score of the responses is not high, 19% of women (taking the values 4 and 5 in the figure to indicate agree and completely agree) feel that they are required to do more than men and 22% feel that they are evaluated more strictly than men. The percentages are much lower for men, 5% and 3% respectively. It is also worth noting that 30% of women feel that they have to demonstrate their abilities more than men, compared to 3% of men who feel that they have to demonstrate their abilities more than women.

In addition to analysing gender differences in relation to this perceived requirement, the differences based on the positions held in the firms were also analysed. The results are displayed in the following figures.

//// **FIGURE 39** **Performance appraisal by position. Women**
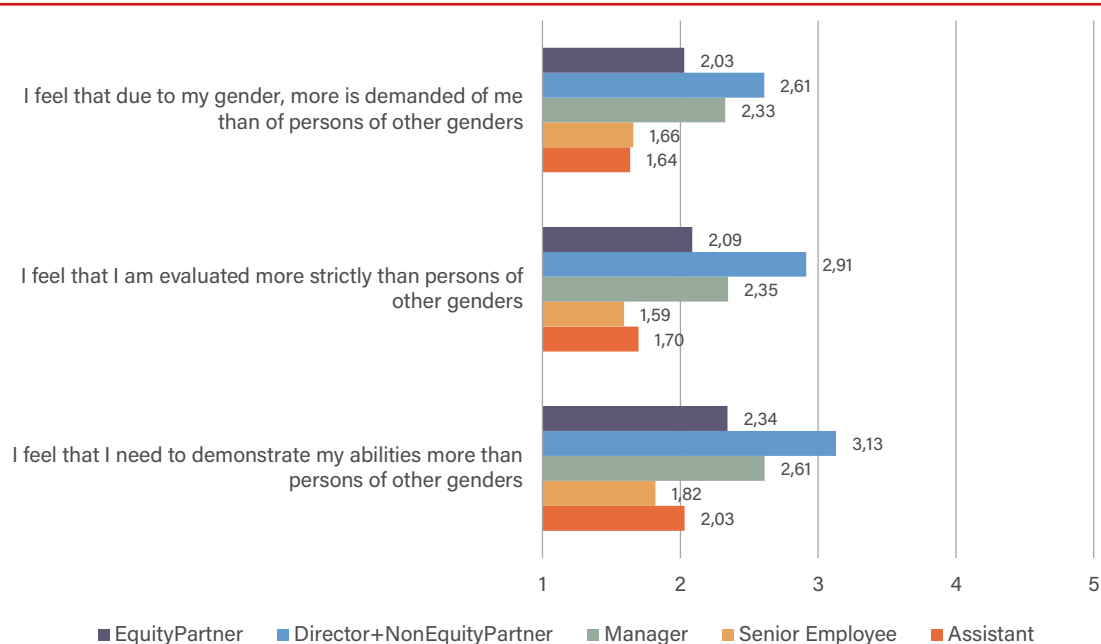
Figure 39 on women grouped by professional category, shows that female directors and female non-equity partners, followed by female managers, perceive that due to their gender, more is demanded of them, they are more strictly evaluated, or have to demonstrate their abilities to a greater extent than their male counterparts. Finally, the group of women in the lower categories also perceive this to a lesser extent.

The same results are displayed below for men (Figure 40).

//// **FIGURE 40** **Performance appraisal by position. Men**
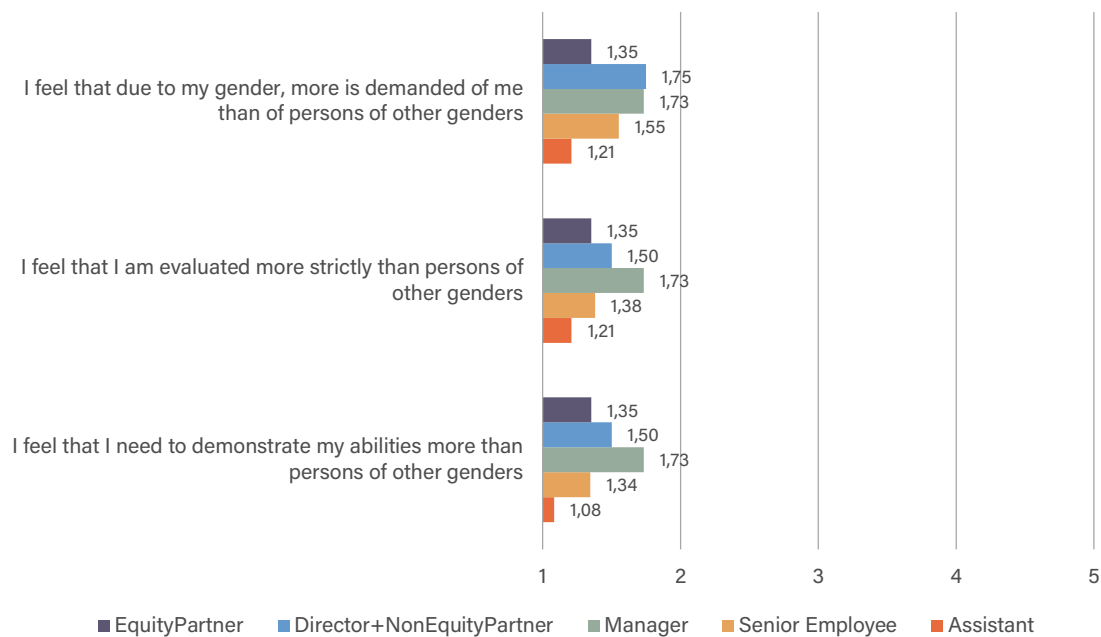
The figure above reveals that, men generally do not perceive a greater demand or stricter appraisal due to their gender. In fact, no category for any of the three questions achieves a score of 2. This implies that everyone strongly disagrees or disagrees with greater demands, stricter appraisal or having to prove their abilities to a greater extent due to their gender. Even so, there are differences between them. Thus male managers, to a greater extent, perceive that because of their gender, they are evaluated more strictly or have to demonstrate their abilities to a greater extent than women. The second group in order of agreement is made up of male directors and male non-equity partners. In the end, it is the male assistants who perceive this to a lesser extent.

5 Work-family balance

This chapter covers the extent to which audit professionals continue to achieve a balance between work and family life. Both in the past and today, the possibility of finding a work-life balance is one of the elements to be considered when choosing a career. It also improves commitment to the organisation, job satisfaction (Persellin *et al.*, 2019) and, consequently, the desire to remain in the organisation. Numerous studies also reveal that new generations prioritise work environments that offer them the possibility of balancing their careers with their family, personal and social life (ACCA & IFAC, 2021; Deloitte, 2022).

Traditionally, women have experienced the greatest difficulties in achieving work-life balance, as they are generally the ones who take care of family matters to a greater extent (Anderson-Gough *et al.*, 2001; Gammie *et al.*, 2008). Today, however, the situation may have changed. Greater family co-responsibility, progress towards a more equal society or the professional expectations of new generations are factors that may affect the importance attached by both men and women to work-life balance. Therefore, this study provides current data on the perception of audit professionals of both genders.

In order to measure this work-life balance, participants were asked a series of questions such as whether the working hours and work organisation makes it more difficult for them to devote themselves to their careers than for persons of other genders, whether they place family responsibilities before professional responsibilities or vice versa to a greater extent than persons of other genders, whether they find it more difficult to achieve this work-life balance, whether motherhood and/or fatherhood interrupts and delays opportunities for promotion, and, finally, whether family responsibilities make it more difficult for them to devote themselves to their careers and to be promoted, than for persons of other genders. Respondents were asked to rate seven questions from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree).

Figure 41 below displays gender differences in the respondents' perception of work-life balance.

///// **FIGURE 41** **Work-life balance by gender**

Statement	Women	Men
The working hours and work organisation make it more difficult for me to devote myself to my career than for persons of other genders	2,65	1,55
Achieving a work-life balance is more difficult for me than for persons of other genders	2,96	1,82
I place my family responsibilities before my professional responsibilities more than persons of other genders	2,43	1,53
I place my professional responsibilities before my family responsibilities more than persons of other genders	2,26	1,94
My family responsibilities make it more difficult for me to devote myself to my career and to be promoted than for persons of other genders	2,57	1,51
Motherhood interrupts and delays women's promotion opportunities	3,58	2,86
Fatherhood interrupts and delays men's promotion opportunities	1,60	1,97

■ Women ■ Men

The figure above displays gender differences with regard to work-life balance. It reveals that in all cases, with the exception of fatherhood, women display much higher values than men, indicating, in general, a greater difficulty in achieving work-life balance.

Thus, working hours and work organisation make it more difficult for women to devote themselves to work than men, they find it harder to achieve work-life balance, their family responsibilities also make it difficult for them to devote themselves to their careers and to be promoted. They also believe that motherhood interrupts and delays their opportunities for promotion, while this is not the case in fatherhood for men. It is also worth noting that women are the ones who place their family responsibilities before their professional ones.

The only issue where men score higher than women is on the effect of fatherhood on the interruption and delay of men's opportunities for promotion. It is noted that men, in general, disagree with this, but even so, they still agree more than women.

It should also be noted that both men and women consider that motherhood, compared to fatherhood, makes professional development more difficult.

Figures 42 to 48 show the frequency of women's and men's responses to questions related to work-life balance.

//// **FIGURE 42**   Frequencies: The working hours and work organisation make it more difficult for me to devote my-self to my career than for persons of other genders

Women	38,6%	11,4%	14,1%	18,5%	17,4%
Men	69,1%		12,8%	14,9%	3,2%

■1 Completely disagree   ■2   ■3   ■4   ■5 Completely agree

//// **FIGURE 43**   Frequencies: Achieving a work-life balance is more difficult for me than for persons of other genders

Women	26,5%	13,5%	16,8%	23,8%	19,5%
Men	66,0%	5,3%	18,1%	2,1%	8,5%

■1 Completely disagree   ■2   ■3   ■4   ■5 Completely agree
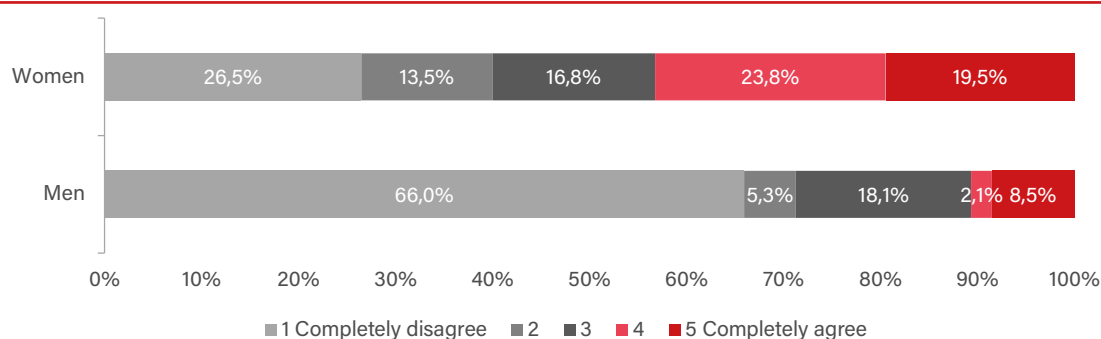
//// **FIGURE 44**   Frequencies: I place my family responsibilities before my professional responsibilities more than persons of other genders

Women	41,1%	13,0%	18,9%	16,2%	10,8%
Men	68,1%	16,0%	11,7%	3,2%	1,1%

■1 Completely disagree   ■2   ■3   ■4   ■5 Completely agree

//// **FIGURE 45**   Frequencies: I place my professional responsibilities before my family responsibilities more than persons of other genders

Women	38,4%	22,2%	20,5%	12,4%	6,5%
Men	58,5%	10,6%	14,9%	10,6%	5,3%

■1 Completely disagree   ■2   ■3   ■4   ■5 Completely agree

//// **FIGURE 46** Frequencies: My family responsibilities make it more difficult for me to devote myself to my career and to be promoted than for persons of other genders

Women 33,5% | 17,8% | 18,9% | 17,3% | 12,4%
Men 74,5% | 7,4% | 13,8% | 1,1% | 3,2%

■1 Completely disagree ■2 ■3 ■4 ■5 Completely agree
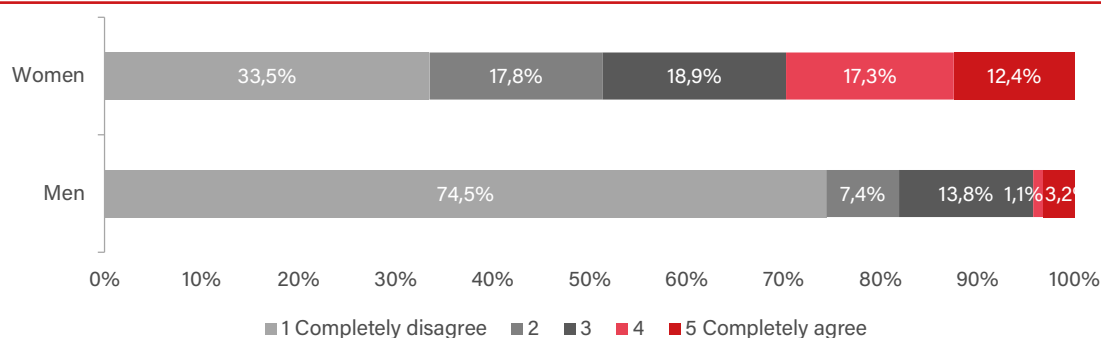
//// **FIGURE 47** Frequencies: Motherhood interrupts and delays women's promotion opportunities

Women 16,3% | 6,5% | 17,9% | 21,2% | 38,0%
Men 25,5% | 12,8% | 21,3% | 30,9% | 9,6%

■1 Completely disagree ■2 ■3 ■4 ■5 Completely agree
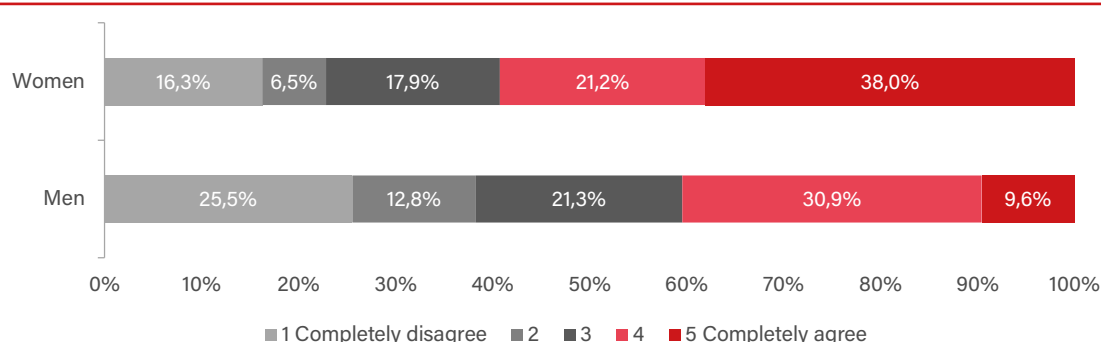
//// **FIGURE 48** Frequencies: Fatherhood interrupts and delays men's promotion opportunities

Women 58,2% | 28,6% | 10,4% | 0,5% | 2,2%
Men 38,3% | 34,0% | 21,3% | 5,3% | 1,1%

■1 Completely disagree ■2 ■3 ■4 ■5 Completely agree
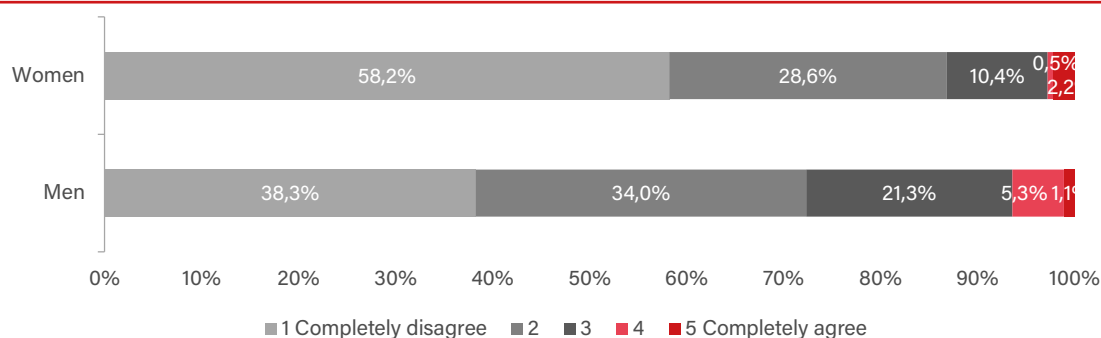
The frequencies of the responses show, in general, that a significant percentage of women find it difficult to achieve work-life balance. Thus, if we consider those who agree or strongly agree with the statements indicated (4 and 5), we see that 35% of women consider that working hours and work organisation make it more difficult for them to devote themselves to their work, compared to 3% of men. Additionally, 43% of women consider that it is more difficult for them to achieve a work-life balance and 29% consider that family responsibilities make it more difficult for women to devote themselves to their careers and to be promoted. These percentages are reduced to 11% and 4% for men.

Likewise, 27% of women consider that they place their family responsibilities before their professional responsibilities to a greater extent than men, while only 4% of men consider the same. The percentages of participants who consider that they place their professional responsibilities before family responsibilities more than persons of other genders are similar.

Finally, a high percentage of women (59%) and men (41%) consider that motherhood interrupts and delays women's opportunities for promotion, although this percentage is much higher for women.

The following figures display the results separately for women and men, grouped by professional category.

//// **FIGURE 49**   **Work-life balance by position. Women**
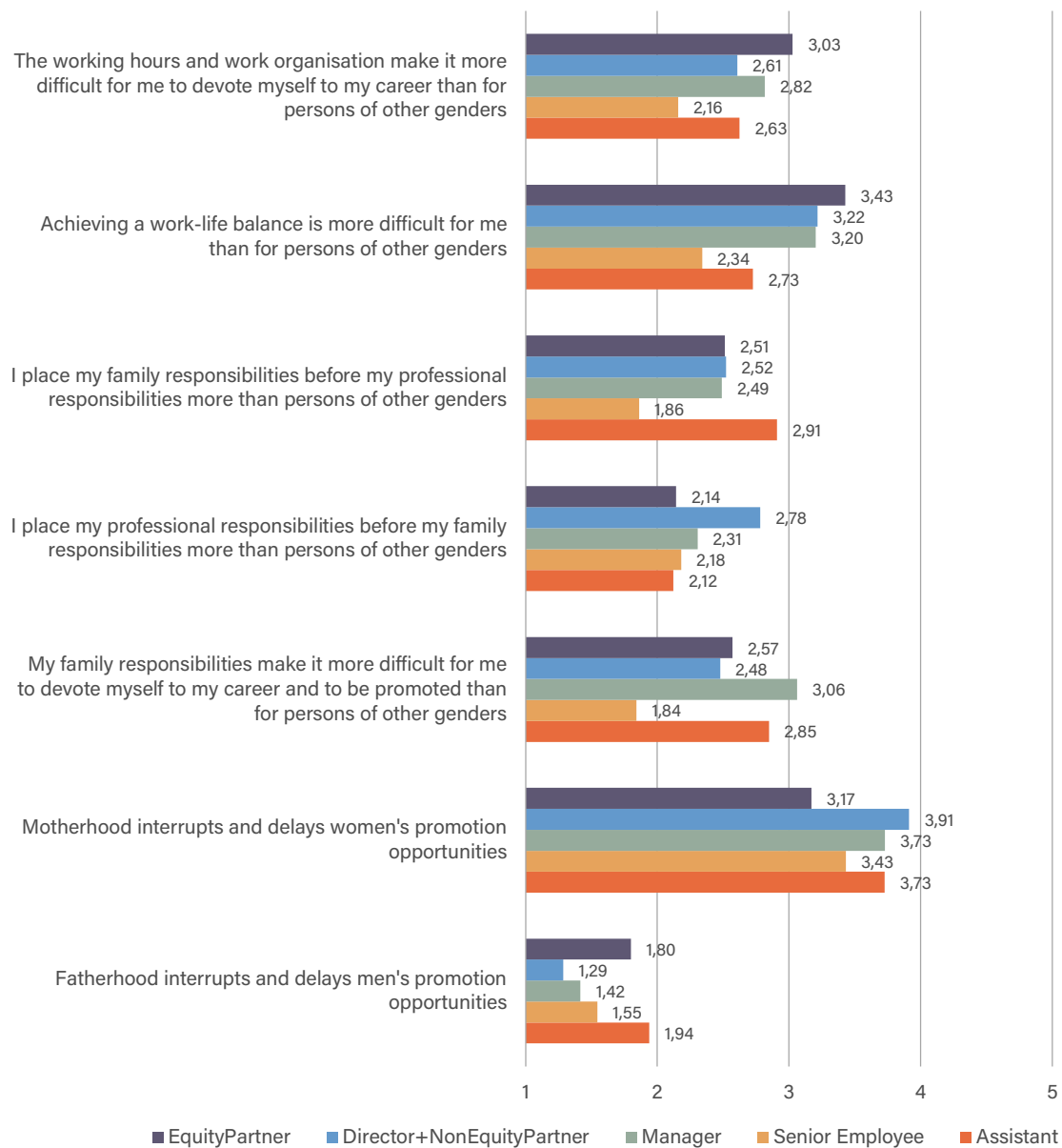
The above figure shows that, in the case of women, the issue on which all professional categories agree most is that motherhood delays women's opportunities for promotion. In all professional categories, including the junior-most, motherhood delays opportunities for promotion.

With regard to working hours and work organisation, it is the female partners who perceive that these factors make it more difficult for women to devote themselves to their careers than for men. Female managers are in second place, followed by female assistants and female directors and female non-

equity partners. Finally, female senior employees are less likely to perceive that working hours and work organisation make it more difficult for women to devote themselves to their careers.

Female partners also perceive that it is more difficult for women than men to achieve a work-life balance. They are followed by female directors and female non-equity partners, and then female managers, as more likely to agree with this statement.

Figure 49 shows that in no occupational category do women consider that they place their family responsibilities before their work responsibilities to a greater extent than men. However, the data show that female assistants who agree most with this statement and, on the contrary, the female senior employees who disagree the most.

It is noteworthy that female directors and female non-equity partners are more likely than men to prioritise their professional responsibilities.

The results also show that female managers, followed by female assistants, perceive that family responsibilities make it more difficult for women to devote themselves to their careers and be promoted.

As mentioned above, women in all categories consider that motherhood interrupts and delays women's opportunities for promotion, with female directors and female non-equity partners considering it to a greater degree. It may also be seen that, although in no category do women consider that fatherhood hinders promotion for men, female assistants agree the most with this statement.

Women perceive the difficulties associated with motherhood and the lack of work-family balance in job promotion, however, they do not consider that their commitment to the firm is less than that of men because of their family responsibilities.

The following figure represents men's opinions grouped by professional category.

//// **FIGURE 50**   **Work-life balance by position. Men**

The working hours and work organisation make it more difficult for me to devote myself to my career than for persons of other genders
- 1,53
- 1,75
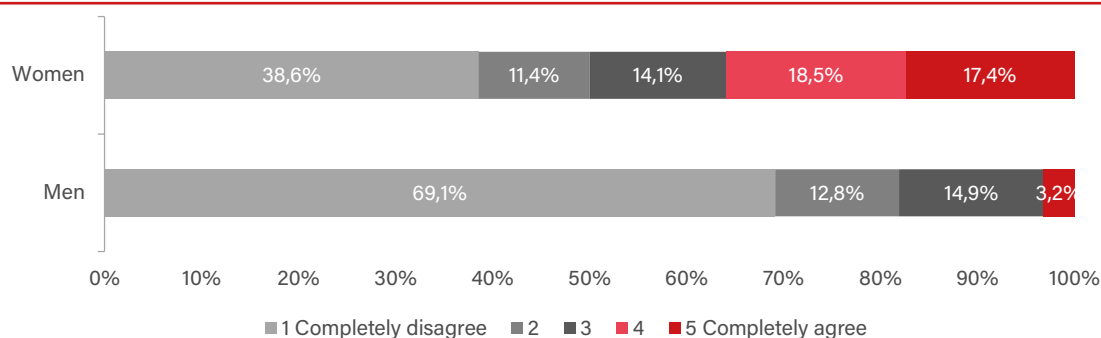- 1,73
- 1,41
- 1,42

Achieving a work-life balance is more difficult for me than for persons of other genders
- 2,29
- 2,25
- 2,07
- 1,55
- 1,38

I place my family responsibilities before my professional responsibilities more than persons of other genders
- 1,53
- 1,75
- 1,53
- 1,59
- 1,42
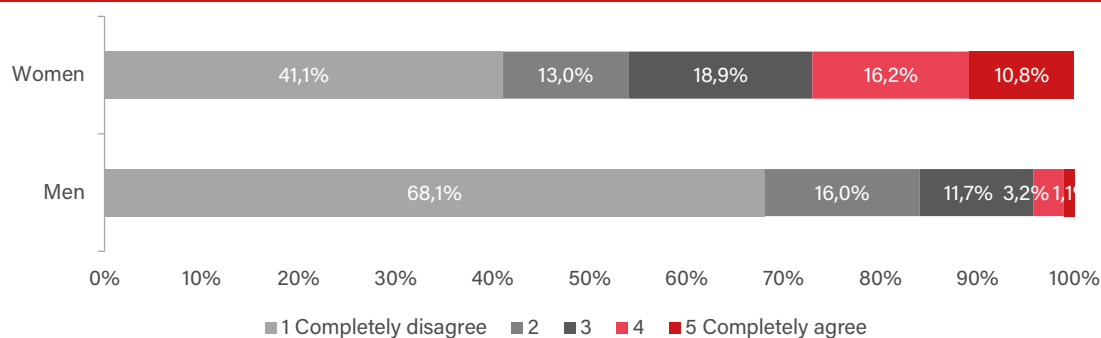
I place my professional responsibilities before my family responsibilities more than persons of other genders
- 2,71
- 2,25
- 2,27
- 1,55
- 1,58
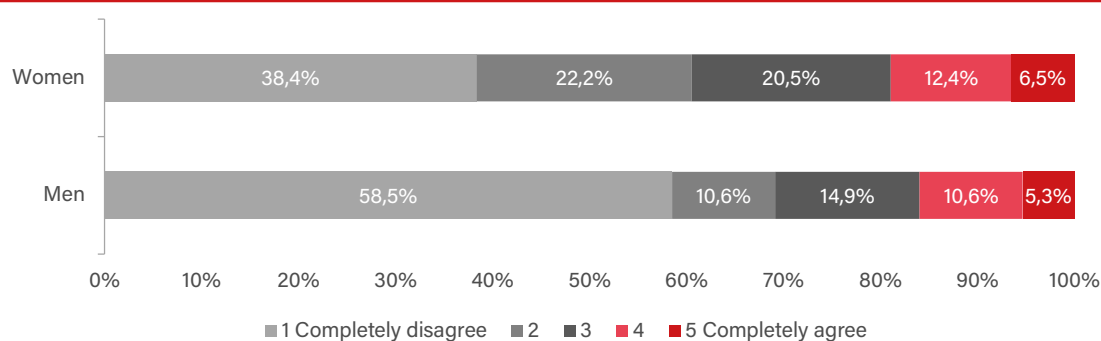
My family responsibilities make it more difficult for me to devote myself to my career and to be promoted than for persons of other genders
- 1,76
- 1,88
- 1,93
- 1,34
- 1,08

Motherhood interrupts and delays women's promotion opportunities
- 3,06
- 3,13
- 2,93
- 3,03
- 2,42

Fatherhood interrupts and delays men's promotion opportunities
- 1,82
- 1,88
- 2,40
- 2,00
- 1,79

■ EquityPartner   ■ Director+NonEquityPartner   ■ Manager   ■ Senior Employee   ■ Assistant

If we look at the figure above, which displays the opinions of men, we see that in general, for most of the items, the score is less than two for all professional categories. It is striking that the only issue on which all respondents except male assistants agree is that motherhood interrupts and delays women's opportunities for promotion, indicating that men are also aware of this reality. On the other hand, male equity partners are more likely to place their professional obligations before family obligations, while male managers are more likely to perceive that fatherhood interrupts and delays opportunities for promotion.

6 Measures for promoting female talent to leadership positions

This chapter looks at measures to promote female talent to leadership position.

The lack of parity in senior positions in audit firms is of concern not only to female professionals themselves but also to the audit firms and the profession as a whole. Female talent represents more than 50% of total talent. In Spain, women represent 55% of total graduates (Government of Spain, Ministry of Universities, 2022) and in the field of Social and Legal Sciences they represent 60% of all graduates. They also represent more than half of all Master's degree (62% women) and PhD students (51%) in this area of knowledge. Women's increased access to business and economics-related undergraduate and graduate has led to increased numbers of female auditors in audit firms. However, this growth observed at the lower levels of firms is not reflected at the senior management level (AICPA 2020; ICAC, 2022).

This chapter specifically analyses the steps taken by audit firms in recent years to move towards more egalitarian organisational structures. In this regard, the opinion of the participants was sought on the effectiveness of measures such as hiring female talent in areas where it is necessary, increasing the promotion of women to the highest professional categories, promoting programmes for visibility and training in equality, establishing policies to safeguard the physical and emotional well-being of female employees, establishing specific career plans for women, implementing mechanisms to monitor the evaluation, promotion and salary review processes for women, or developing coaching and mentoring programmes for women. The auditors were asked to rate seven questions from 1 (not at all effective) to 5 (fully effective).

First, the results grouped by gender are displayed (Figure 51).

//// **FIGURE 51**   Measures for promoting female talent to leadership positions

As shown in the figure above, women rate all measures as more effective compared to men. Both men and women consider that the most effective measure is recruiting female talent in the areas where it is required. The measure most valued by women, in second place, refers to the promotion of women in the highest professional categories, a measure notably less valued by men. There are no highly significant differences in the rest of the measures proposed. In general, women and men agree on the ranking of the effectiveness of measures put in place to promote female talent in firms, with very few differences.

The grouping by professional category is displayed in Figures 52 and 53.

//// **FIGURE 52** Measures for promoting female talent to leadership positions. Women

Recruitment of female talent in areas where it is needed
- EquityPartner: 3,74
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 3,83
- Manager: 3,73
- Senior Employee: 3,59
- Assistant: 4,00

Increase the promotion of women to higher professional categories in each department, director and partner positions.
- EquityPartner: 3,74
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 3,70
- Manager: 3,88
- Senior Employee: 3,59
- Assistant: 3,78

Awareness, visibility and training programmes on equality issues
- EquityPartner: 3,34
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 3,05
- Manager: 3,61
- Senior Employee: 3,45
- Assistant: 3,58

Policies aimed at safeguarding the physical and emotional wellbeing of female workers
- EquityPartner: 3,23
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 2,78
- Manager: 3,42
- Senior Employee: 3,36
- Assistant: 3,36

Career plan adapted to the specific needs of women
- EquityPartner: 3,17
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 3,30
- Manager: 3,35
- Senior Employee: 3,32
- Assistant: 3,15

Mechanisms to monitor internal assessment, promotion and pay review processes, specifically for women
- EquityPartner: 3,23
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 3,09
- Manager: 3,35
- Senior Employee: 3,07
- Assistant: 3,24

Coaching and mentoring programme for women
- EquityPartner: 3,20
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 3,30
- Manager: 3,06
- Senior Employee: 3,30
- Assistant: 3,06

■ EquityPartner ■ Director+NonEquityPartner ■ Manager ■ Senior Employee ■ Assistant

In general, it should be noted that there are no major differences in the opinions of women in different professional categories as regards the effectiveness of the measures established in firms to promote female talent. We can highlight that equality awareness, visibility and training programmes, together with policies aimed at safeguarding physical and emotional well-being, are two measures that are positively assessed by the lower categories, but are considered less effective by women in leadership position in firms, especially, female equity partners, female non-equity partners and female directors.

The following figure displays the results of men's opinions.

//// **FIGURE 53** Measures for promoting female talent to leadership position. Men

	EquityPartner	Director+NonEquityPartner	Manager	Senior Employee	Assistant
Recruitment of female talent in areas where it is needed	3,69	3,50	3,67	3,34	3,46
Increase the promotion of women to higher professional categories in each department, director and partner positions	3,29	3,38	3,27	2,90	3,17
Awareness, visibility and training programmes on equality issues	3,00	3,50	3,33	3,00	3,50
Policies aimed at safeguarding the physical and emotional wellbeing of female workers	2,89	3,00	3,13	2,69	3,38
Career plan adapted to the specific needs of women	3,50	3,00	2,93	2,72	3,13
Mechanisms to monitor internal assessment, promotion and pay review processes, specifically for women	2,72	2,50	3,33	2,52	2,79
Coaching and mentoring programme for women	2,41	3,13	3,07	2,48	2,75

The figure above shows that there are greater differences between men depending on the professional category. Thus, we observe that, in the case of male partners, they mainly advocate for the recruitment of female talent in areas where it is needed, and plans tailored to the specific requirements of women. Compared to professionals in other positions, male directors and male non-equity partners consider it more effective to implement equality awareness, visibility and training programmes, to increase the proportion of women in leadership positions, as well as to implement coaching and mentoring programmes for women. Male assistants, in general, consider all measures to be effective and, similar to female assistants, are in favour of implementing equality awareness and training programmes on and policies to safeguard the physical and emotional well-being of female employees.

7 Career success factors

Career success may be shaped or driven by different factors, both internal to the individual, such as professional ability, tenacity and perseverance, and organisational or environmental factors such as training and support received from the firm, colleagues or family. Knowing how professionals rate the factors that have most influenced their professional success has implications for the measures that may be promoted by firms to further the professional development of female and male auditors. Respondents were asked to rate twenty questions from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (completely important).

Figure 54 below shows the success factors grouped by gender.

//// **FIGURE 54**   **Success factors by position**
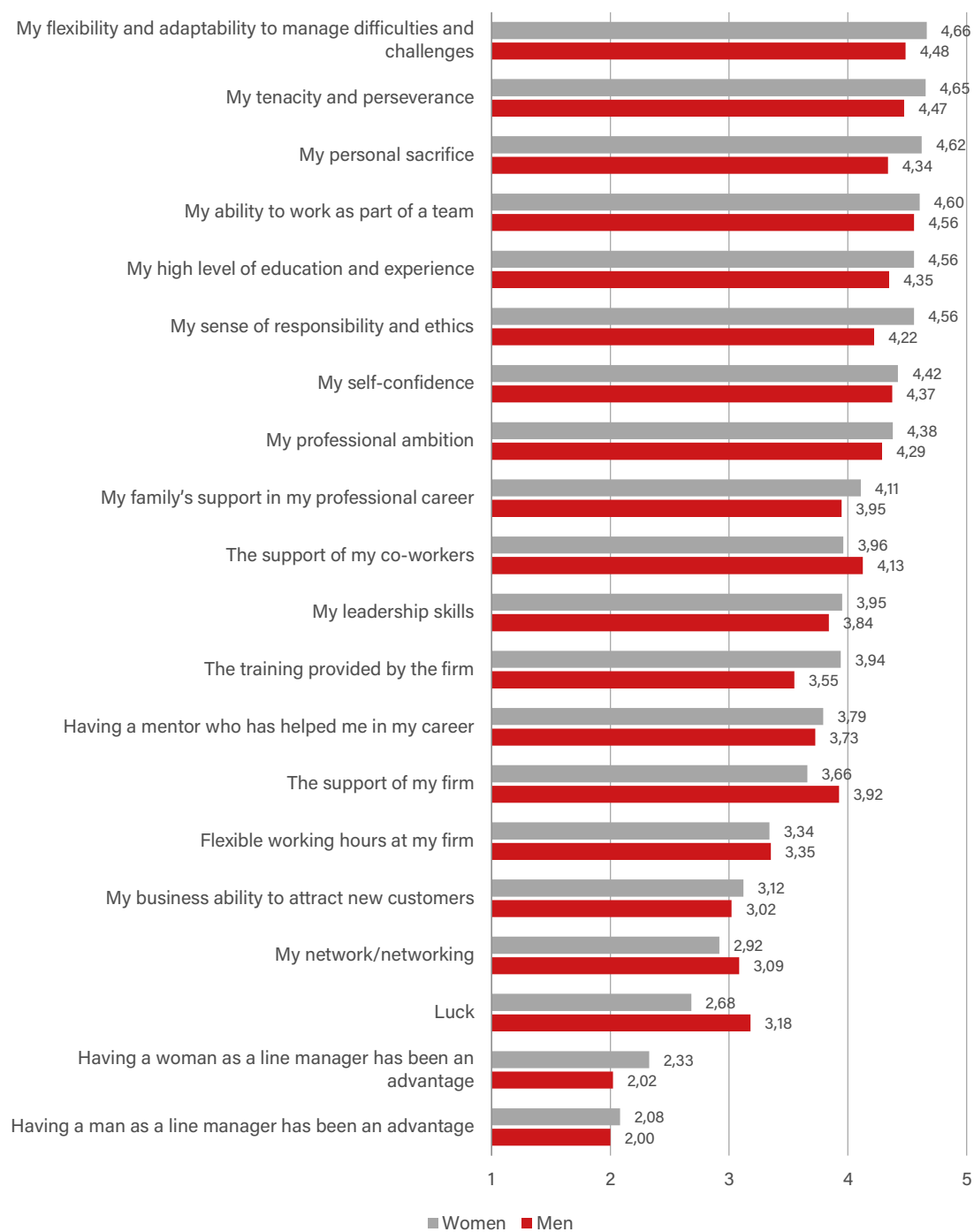
The figure above reveals the importance of different career success factors, as well as the differences between women and men. Flexibility and adaptability, tenacity and perseverance, personal sacrifice, ability to work in a team, high levels of education and experience, ethics and responsibility, confidence and professional ambition, as well as support from family and colleagues are the most relevant factors for both genders.

Conversely, other factors such as the gender of the line manager, luck, networking or business skills are ranked last in the order of importance.

Figures 55 and 56 below display the success factors arranged from the most to the least important for women and men.

//// **FIGURE 55** Success factors. Women

Factor	Women
My flexibility and adaptability to manage difficulties and challenges	4,66
My tenacity and perseverance	4,65
My personal sacrifice	4,62
My ability to work as part of a team	4,60
My high level of education and experience	4,56
My sense of responsibility and ethics	4,56
My self-confidence	4,42
My professional ambition	4,38
My family's support in my professional career	4,11
The support of my co-workers	3,96
My leadership skills	3,95
The training provided by the firm	3,94
Having a mentor who has helped me in my career	3,79
The support of my firm	3,66
Flexible working hours at my firm	3,34
My business ability to attract new customers	3,12
My network/networking	2,92
Luck	2,68
Having a woman as a line manager has been an advantage	2,33
Having a man as a line manager has been an advantage	2,08

■ Women

Factor	Value
My ability to work as part of a team	4,56
My flexibility and adaptability to manage difficulties and challenges	4,48
My tenacity and perseverance	4,47
My self-confidence	4,37
My high level of education and experience	4,35
My personal sacrifice	4,34
My professional ambition	4,29
My sense of responsibility and ethics	4,22
The support of my co-workers	4,13
My family's support in my professional career	3,95
The support of my firm	3,92
My leadership skills	3,84
Having a mentor who has helped me in my career	3,73
The training provided by the firm	3,55
Flexible working hours at my firm	3,35
Luck	3,18
My network/networking	3,09
My business ability to attract new customers	3,02
Having a woman as a line manager has been an advantage	2,02
Having a man as a line manager has been an advantage	2,00

■ Men

If we compare the relevance of the different factors for professional success between women and men, we can see that although, in general, the most important factors match, there are certain differences in how they are ranked according to gender. For example, personal sacrifice ranks third in importance for women but sixth for men, while the ability to work as part of a team ranks fourth for women but is the most important factor for men. Another notable difference is the importance given to self-confidence, which ranks 7th for women and 4th for men, or support from the firm, which is ranked 14th by women and 11th by men.

The following figures show the relevance of the different factors for professional success for women (Figures 57 and 58) and men (Figures 59 and 60) grouped by professional category.

//// **FIGURE 57**   Success factors by position. Women 1/2

My flexibility and adaptability to manage difficulties and challenges
- EquityPartner: 4,69
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 4,82
- Manager: 4,71
- Senior Employee: 4,59
- Assistant: 4,58

My tenacity and perseverance
- EquityPartner: 4,63
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 4,74
- Manager: 4,71
- Senior Employee: 4,59
- Assistant: 4,64

My personal sacrifice
- EquityPartner: 4,74
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 4,78
- Manager: 4,49
- Senior Employee: 4,57
- Assistant: 4,64

My ability to work as part of a team
- EquityPartner: 4,49
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 4,57
- Manager: 4,81
- Senior Employee: 4,52
- Assistant: 4,58

My high level of education and experience
- EquityPartner: 4,80
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 4,70
- Manager: 4,67
- Senior Employee: 4,55
- Assistant: 4,12

My sense of responsibility and ethics
- EquityPartner: 4,77
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 4,65
- Manager: 4,65
- Senior Employee: 4,23
- Assistant: 4,58

My self-confidence
- EquityPartner: 4,34
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 4,22
- Manager: 4,55
- Senior Employee: 4,48
- Assistant: 4,42

My professional ambition
- EquityPartner: 4,46
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 3,91
- Manager: 4,53
- Senior Employee: 4,36
- Assistant: 4,45

My family's support in my professional career
- EquityPartner: 4,29
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 3,48
- Manager: 4,39
- Senior Employee: 3,91
- Assistant: 4,24

My leadership skills
- EquityPartner: 4,11
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 3,70
- Manager: 4,29
- Senior Employee: 3,70
- Assistant: 3,85

■ EquityPartner   ■ Director+NonEquityPartner   ■ Manager   ■ Senior Employee   ■ Assistant

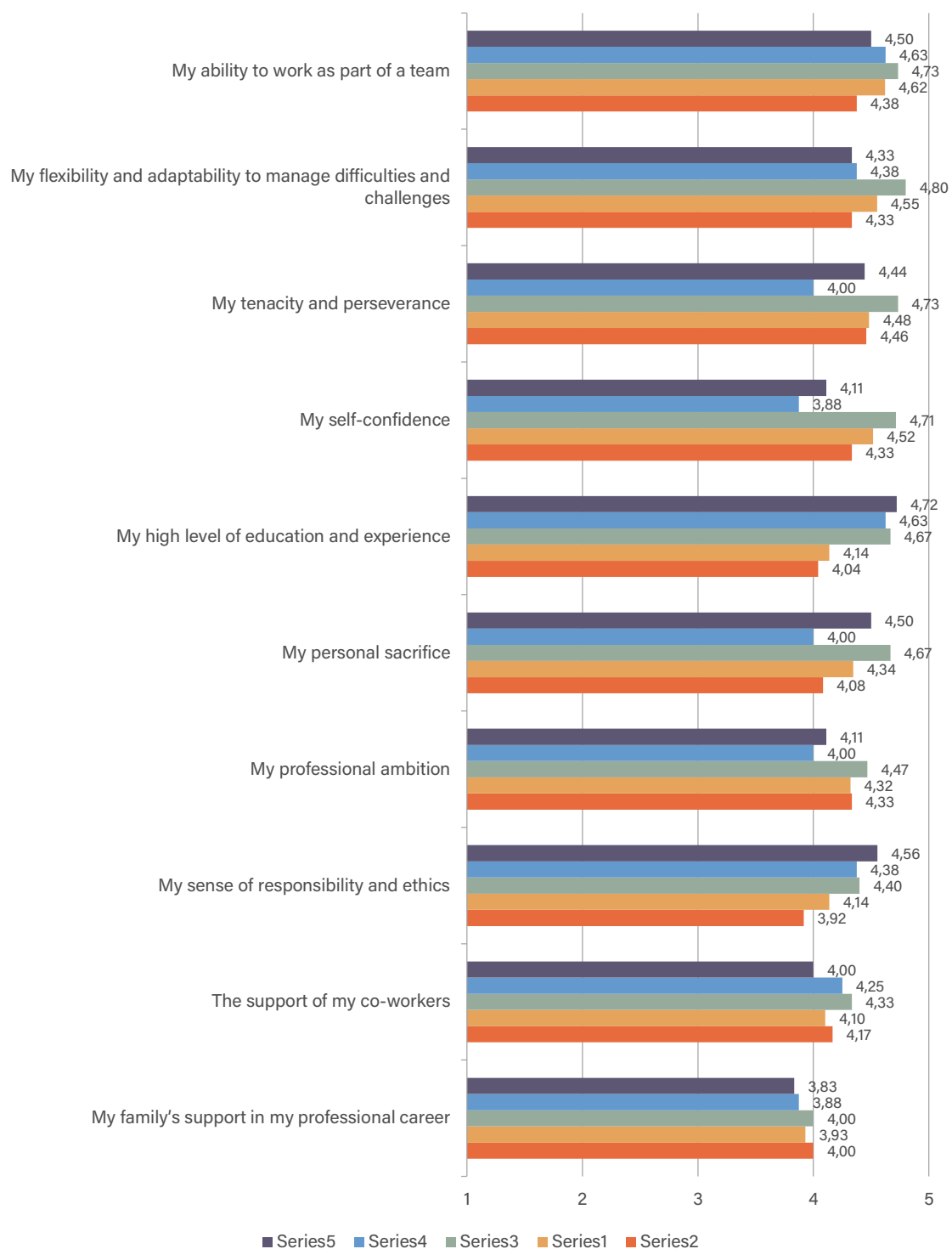//// **FIGURE 58**   Success factors by position. Women 2/2
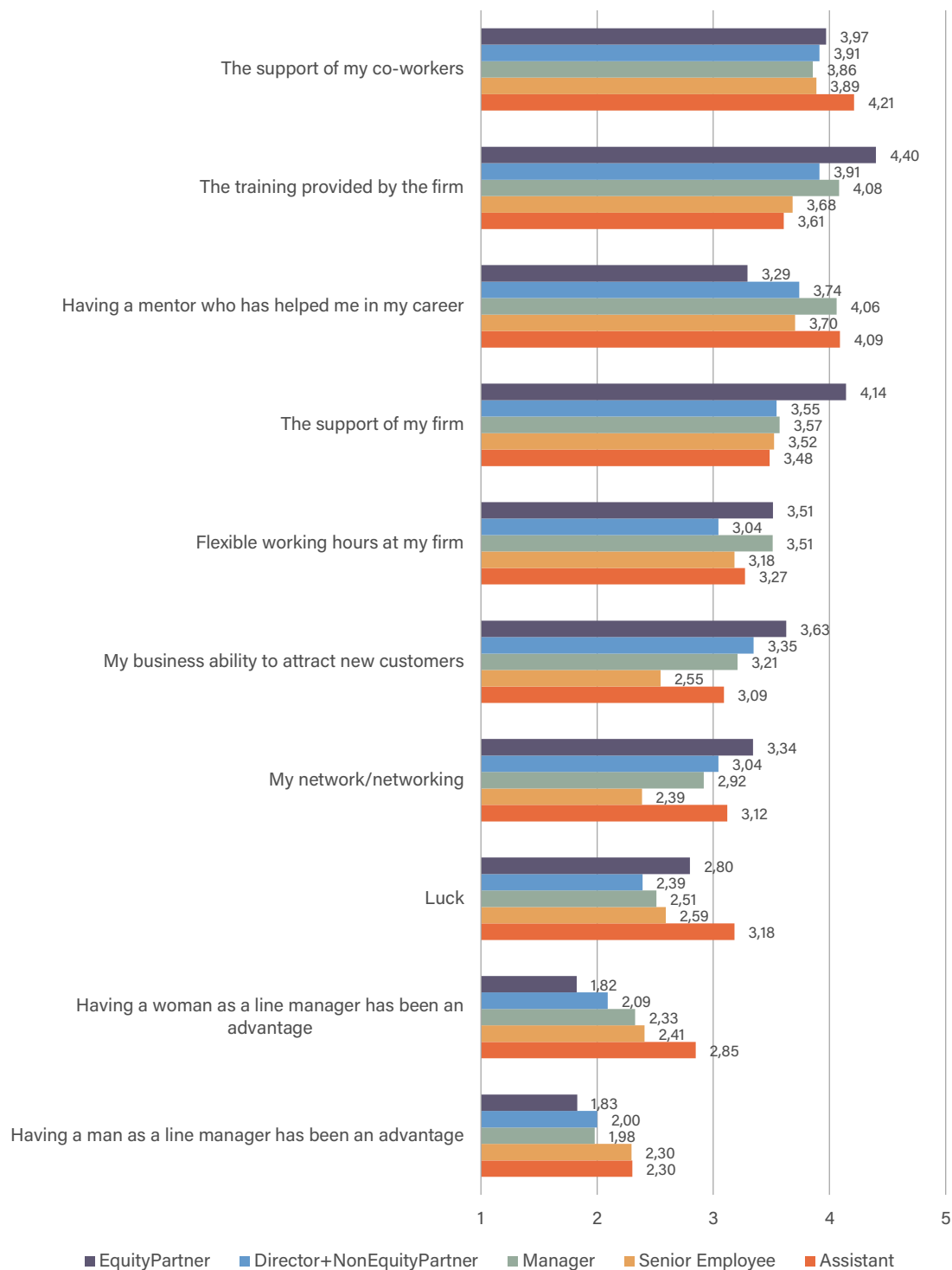
The two figures above reveal that, in general, women in all categories value flexibility and adaptability, tenacity and perseverance, personal sacrifice, ability to work in a team, high levels of education and experience, sense of responsibility and ethics, self-confidence and professional ambition as highly important success factors. However, some differences may be observed in the importance assigned to success factors based on the professional categories, highlighting the high value given by female
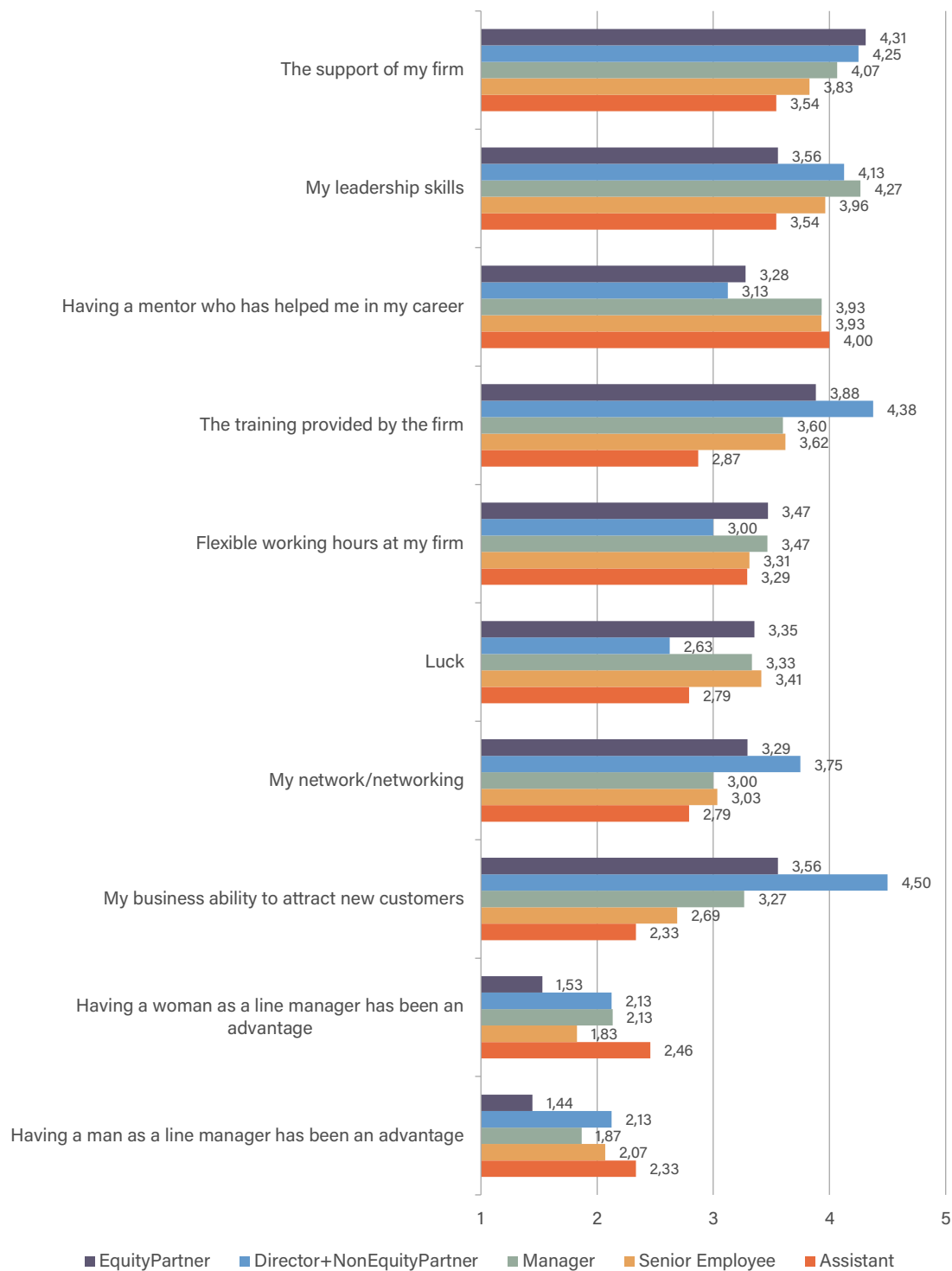
equity partners to the training given by the firm and its support. It is worth noting that they are also the ones who attach greater importance to their business ability to attract clients and their network of contacts. Finally, more than in other professional categories, female assistants value the support received from their colleagues, having a mentor throughout their career, and other aspects such as luck.

Figures 59 and 60 display the differences for men.

//// **FIGURE 59** Success factors by position. Men 1/2

My ability to work as part of a team
4,50
4,63
4,73
4,62
4,38

My flexibility and adaptability to manage difficulties and challenges
4,33
4,38
4,80
4,55
4,33

My tenacity and perseverance
4,44
4,00
4,73
4,48
4,46

My self-confidence
4,11
3,88
4,71
4,52
4,33

My high level of education and experience
4,72
4,63
4,67
4,14
4,04

My personal sacrifice
4,50
4,00
4,67
4,34
4,08

My professional ambition
4,11
4,00
4,47
4,32
4,33

My sense of responsibility and ethics
4,56
4,38
4,40
4,14
3,92

The support of my co-workers
4,00
4,25
4,33
4,10
4,17

My family's support in my professional career
3,83
3,88
4,00
3,93
4,00

■ Series5 ■ Series4 ■ Series3 ■ Series1 ■ Series2

The support of my firm
- EquityPartner: 4,31
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 4,25
- Manager: 4,07
- Senior Employee: 3,83
- Assistant: 3,54

My leadership skills
- EquityPartner: 3,56
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 4,13
- Manager: 4,27
- Senior Employee: 3,96
- Assistant: 3,54

Having a mentor who has helped me in my career
- EquityPartner: 3,28
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 3,13
- Manager: 3,93
- Senior Employee: 3,93
- Assistant: 4,00

The training provided by the firm
- EquityPartner: 3,88
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 4,38
- Manager: 3,60
- Senior Employee: 3,62
- Assistant: 2,87

Flexible working hours at my firm
- EquityPartner: 3,47
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 3,00
- Manager: 3,47
- Senior Employee: 3,31
- Assistant: 3,29

Luck
- EquityPartner: 3,35
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 2,63
- Manager: 3,33
- Senior Employee: 3,41
- Assistant: 2,79

My network/networking
- EquityPartner: 3,29
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 3,75
- Manager: 3,00
- Senior Employee: 3,03
- Assistant: 2,79

My business ability to attract new customers
- EquityPartner: 3,56
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 4,50
- Manager: 3,27
- Senior Employee: 2,69
- Assistant: 2,33

Having a woman as a line manager has been an advantage
- EquityPartner: 1,53
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 2,13
- Manager: 2,13
- Senior Employee: 1,83
- Assistant: 2,46

Having a man as a line manager has been an advantage
- EquityPartner: 1,44
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 2,13
- Manager: 1,87
- Senior Employee: 2,07
- Assistant: 2,33

■ EquityPartner ■ Director+NonEquityPartner ■ Manager ■ Senior Employee ■ Assistant

In the case of men, the above figures show that, in general, auditors in all categories attach high importance to the ability to work in a team, flexibility and adaptability, tenacity and perseverance, self-confidence, training and experience, personal sacrifice, ambition, sense of responsibility and ethics, support received from colleagues and co-workers as well as support from family. Male auditors'

evaluation of these success factors in different professional categories is not as homogeneous as in the case of female auditors. In addition to these factors, it is worth noting that male partners value the firm's support very highly, as well as male non-equity partners and male directors who, in addition to the support received at the firm, also consider the training received at the firm and their business ability to attract new clients to be very important in their professional success.

8 Job satisfaction and professional future

The job satisfaction of audit professionals influences their commitment to the firm and their intention to leave. Working conditions, the possibility of work-life balance and the support received from the firm may influence the audit professional's degree of job satisfaction (Dilmaghani, 2021), as well as his or her work future. The audit sector, characterised by a heavy workload, often makes work-life balance difficult and reduces job satisfaction. On the other hand, having a mentor, enjoying work-life balance measures, the firm's support, as well performing an enriching job increase job satisfaction (Almer & Kaplan, 2002; Dilmaghani, 2021; Ngo *et al.,* 2014). As job satisfaction decreases, the risk that audit professionals will leave increases (Gertsson *et al.*, 2017; Herda & Lavelle, 2012).

8.1 Job satisfaction

This section covers the job satisfaction of audit professionals. Knowledge regarding job satisfaction is crucial for audit firms and the profession as a whole, since it can lead to improvements for increased job satisfaction and is a relevant predictor of organisational commitment and turnover intention (Chow *et al.,* 2002; Dole and Schroeder, 2001; Maupin and Lehman, 1994; Mynatt *et al.,* 1997; Smith *et al.,* 2020).

Figure 61 displays job satisfaction between women and men. This satisfaction was observed through the participants' answers to three interlinked questions, such as whether they are satisfied with their job, whether they like their job more than the average worker, and also whether they dislike their job. Auditors were asked to rate three questions from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree).

//// **FIGURE 61**   **Job satisfaction by gender**
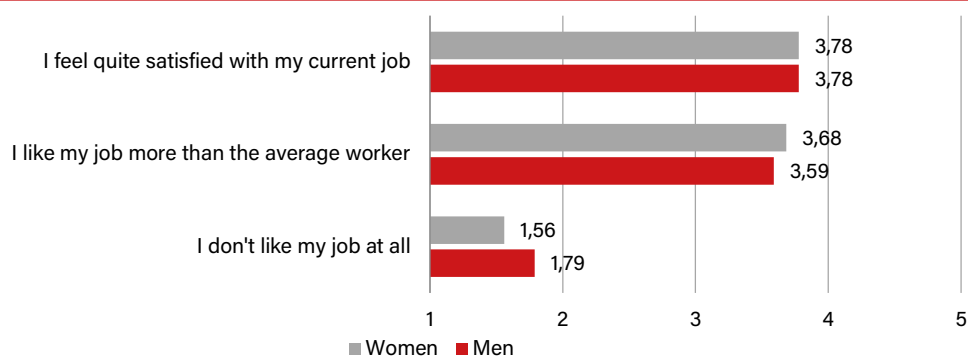
The results show that in general, audit professionals are quite satisfied with their work and like it more than the average worker, with no major gender differences in this assessment.

As the differences between men and women in the assessment of their job satisfaction are not significant, an analysis of the frequencies of responses is not shown.

Figure 62 below shows the average of the responses of the women grouped by professional categories.

//// FIGURE 62 **Job satisfaction by position. Women**
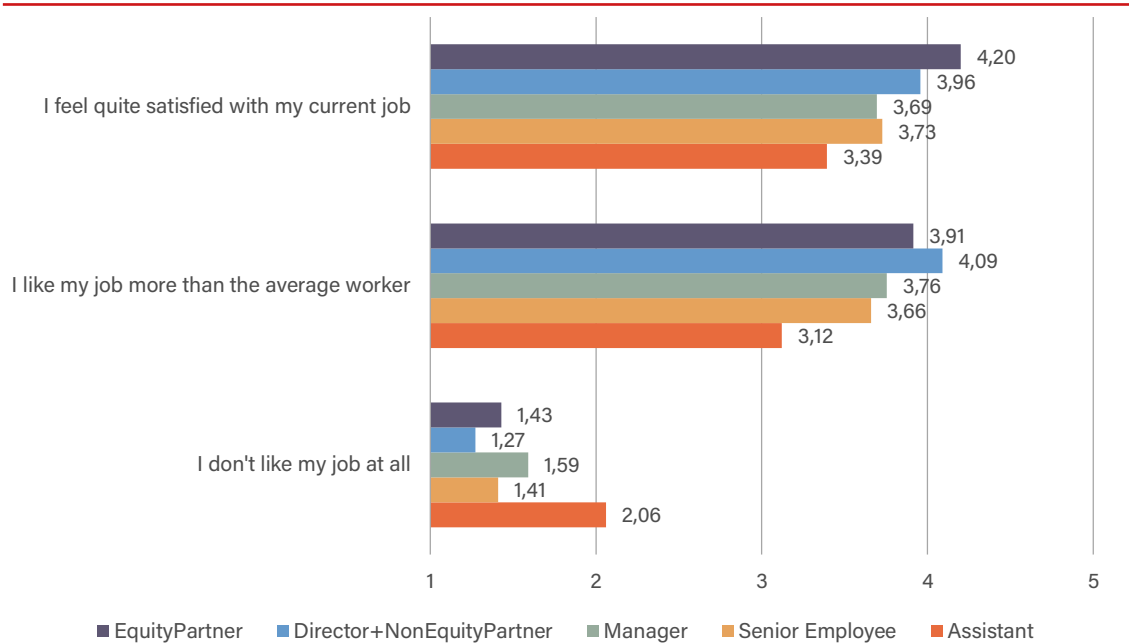
The figure above shows the results for women according to their professional category. In this case, it is worth noting that women are generally satisfied with their work in all professional categories. The figure especially shows that female equity partners, followed by female non-equity partners and directors, are the most satisfied, being in the position of fairly satisfied and even exceeding it in the case of the equity partners. The same trend is observed for the question on whether they like their job more than the average worker, although in this case, it is the female non-equity partners and female directors scoring higher than 4. It is worth noting that overall job satisfaction decreases slightly as one moves down the professional categories. Female assistants, although they like their work, are the least satisfied and like their work the least compared to other positions.

Figure 63 displays the results for men, separated by occupational category.

//// **FIGURE 63** Job satisfaction by position. Men
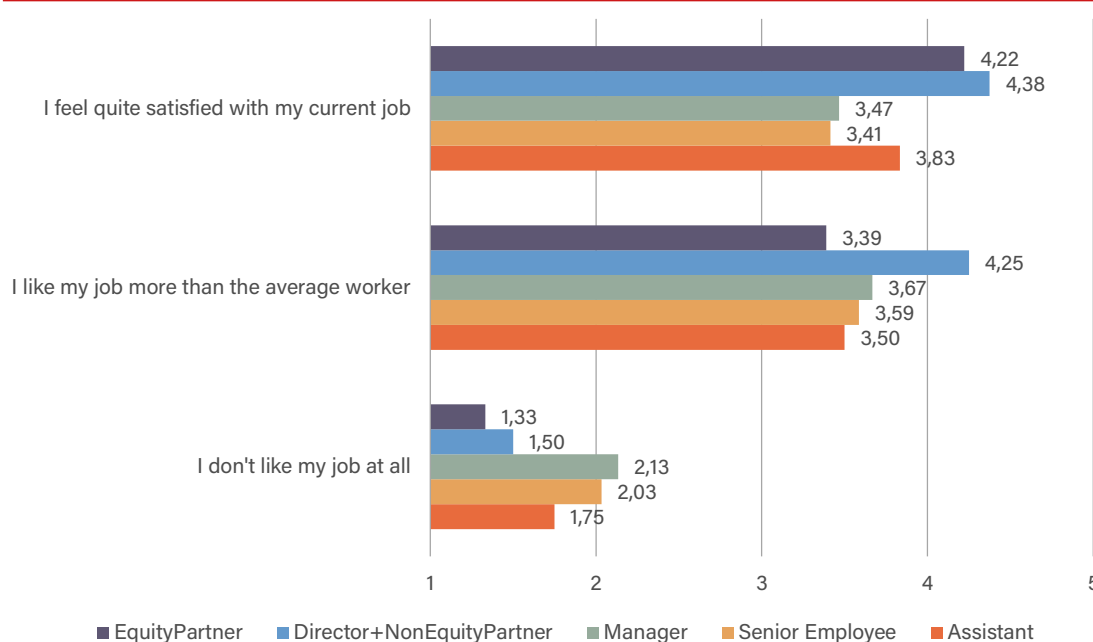
In the case of men, the figure reveals that they are also quite satisfied with their jobs. If we look at the differences between professional categories, we see that, in this case, it is also male directors who are the most satisfied. Specifically, male non-equity partners and male directors display the highest values, followed by male equity partners. The third position is held by male assistants, followed by male managers and male senior employees. The data show that men's job satisfaction does not decrease as the professional category decreases (as was the case for women), but that, on the contrary, male assistants are more satisfied than male senior employees or managers. Male non-equity partners and male directors like their jobs the most, with significantly higher values than other categories.

8.2 Motivation barriers

The following section includes participants' opinions on motivation barriers, i.e. whether the professionals are really interested in occupying positions of responsibility, what their professional ambitions are, compared to persons of other genders, and their expectations of achieving professional success. These questions are highly relevant, as their expectations, together with ambition and interest, will denote their intention to continue their career and to strive to occupy the highest professional categories.

Respondents were asked to rate three questions from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree).

The results grouped by gender are displayed in the figure below.

//// **FIGURE 64**   **Motivation barriers by gender**
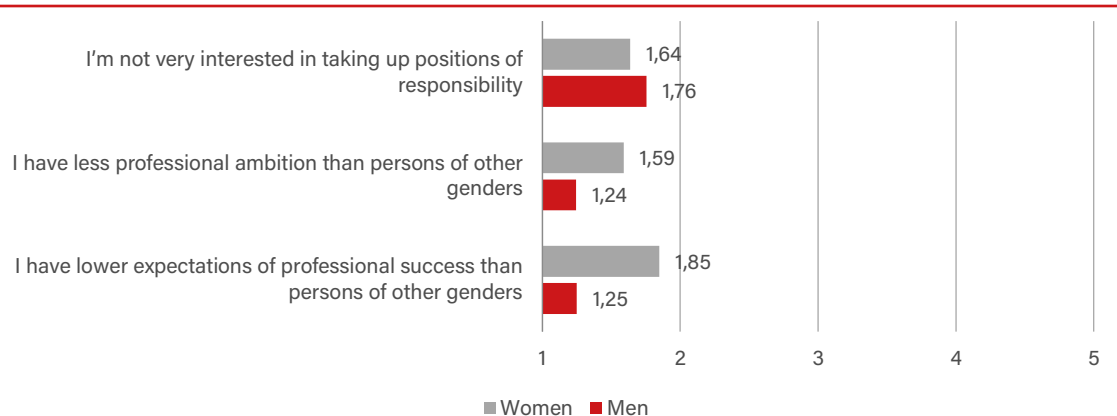
As may be seen in Figure 64, professionals do not agree with the existence of these motivation barriers, since in general, the evaluation has a score of less than two. Specifically, when analysing each of the three questions, it is observed that men show less interest in occupying positions of responsibility, while women who display less professional ambition, and it is also women who have lower expectations of achieving professional success than men.

Figures 65 to 67 are displayed below for each item, differentiating the frequencies for women and men.

//// **FIGURE 65** **Frequencies: I'm not very interested in taking up positions of responsibility**
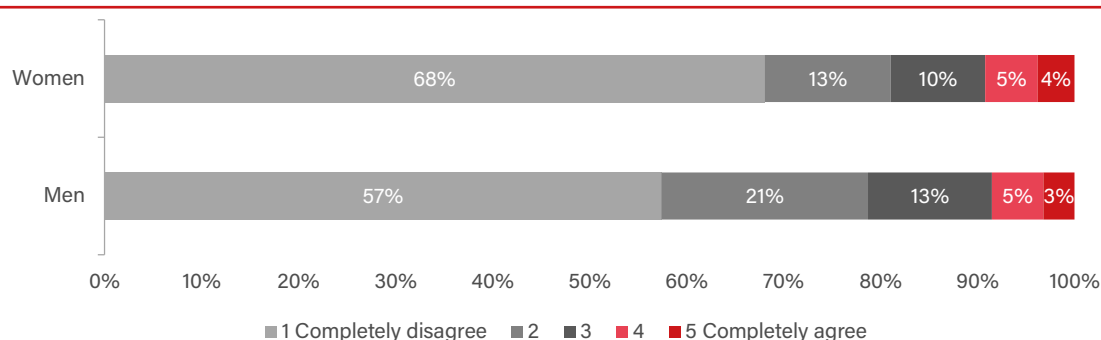
//// **FIGURE 66**   **Frequencies: I have less professional ambition than persons of other genders**
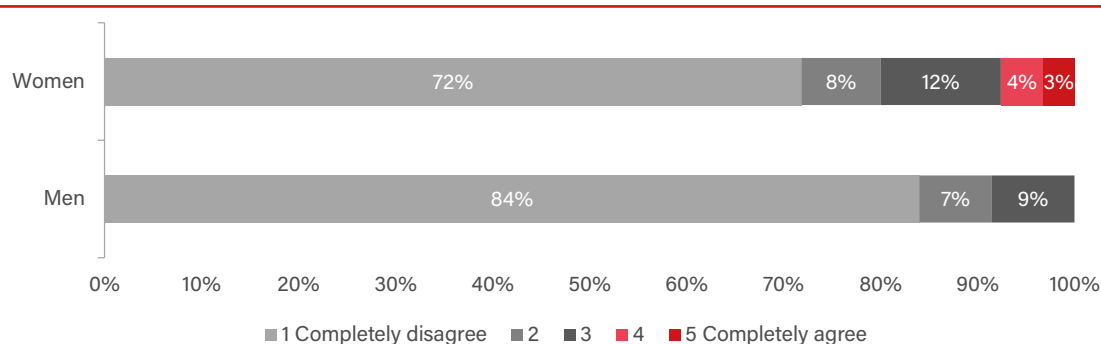
//// **FIGURE 67**   **Frequencies: I have lower expectations of professional success than persons of other genders**
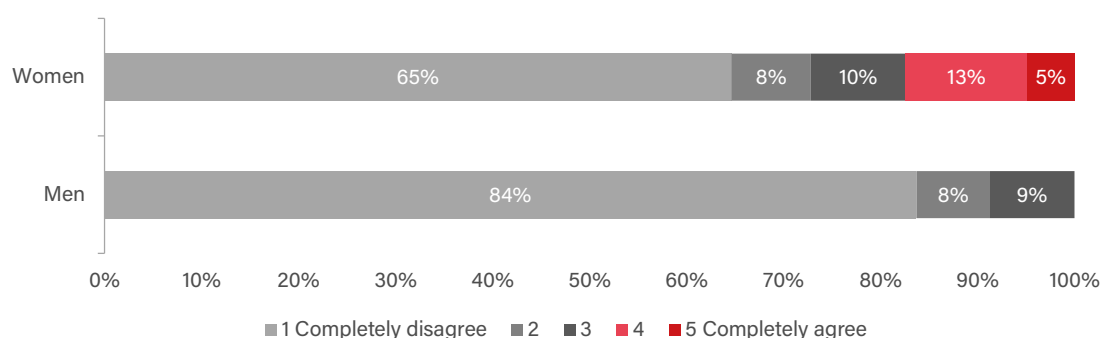
If we look at the frequencies of the responses, we see that although the averages are low, the results do reveal differences between the genders. While around 10% of both men and women display a lack of interest in occupying positions of responsibility, 18% of women compared to 0% of men consider that they have lower expectations of achieving professional success than men.

Below are two tables grouped by gender and professional category (Figures 68 and 69)

//// **FIGURE 68**   **Motivation barriers by position. Women**
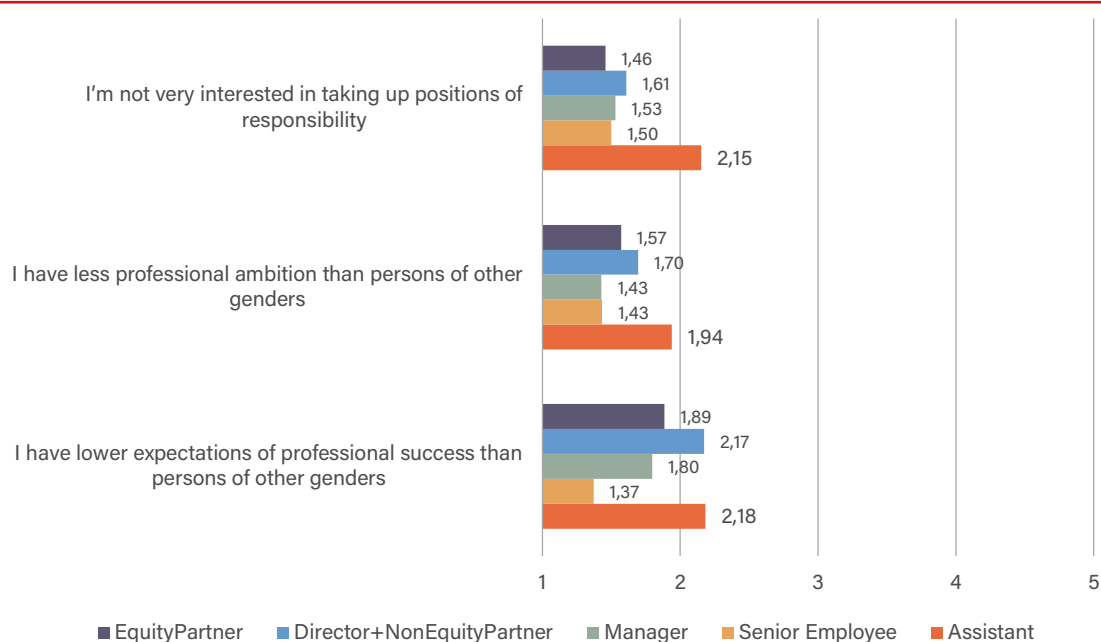
If we analyse the data in the figure for women, we can see that in general, there is no agreement with the issues described in any professional category, although there are differences between women occupying different positions in the firms. Thus, female assistants are less interested in occupying positions of responsibility, and it is also women who are more likely than men to feel that they have less professional ambition and lower expectations of achieving professional success.

The figure also reveals that female directors and female non-equity partners are the second lowest in terms of their expectations of professional success compared to men.

//// **FIGURE 69**   **Motivation barriers by position. Men**

I'm not very interested in taking up positions of responsibility
- EquityPartner: 1,47
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 1,75
- Manager: 1,67
- Senior Employee: 1,90
- Assistant: 1,88

I have less professional ambition than persons of other genders
- EquityPartner: 1,35
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 1,25
- Manager: 1,40
- Senior Employee: 1,17
- Assistant: 1,17

I have lower expectations of professional success than persons of other genders
- EquityPartner: 1,35
- Director+NonEquityPartner: 1,29
- Manager: 1,53
- Senior Employee: 1,21
- Assistant: 1,04

■ EquityPartner   ■ Director+NonEquityPartner   ■ Manager   ■ Senior Employee   ■ Assistant

Men (Figure 69) in all professional categories disagree with the questions raised concerning motivation barriers to promotion. Even so, there are differences between men in different professional categories. Thus, it is the male senior employees and assistants who in spite of disagreeing, show higher values related to their lack of interest in occupying positions of responsibility. They are also the ones who disagree the most with the idea of having less professional ambition and having lower expectations of achieving professional success than women. There is a clear difference with the youngest women who were more likely to perceive themselves as having lower expectations of professional success than men.

8.3 Professional future

Turnover in the audit sector is a matter of concern for both the profession and the firms (Gertsson *et al.,* 2017; Herda & Lavelle, 2012; Nouri & Parker, 2020). Although traditionally there has been a variable turnover in the sector, in recent years it has increased significantly, including female turnover, which may jeopardise the availability of sufficient professionals to execute this activity.

This last section seeks to capture the intention to remain or, where appropriate, to leave, as demonstrated by the people working in the audit sector, both their intention to remain in the sector and/or in the same firm, and their intention to move to a larger or smaller firm or to leave the sector. Respondents were asked to answer six questions, choosing between Yes, No, and I don't know/no answer.

Thus, Figures 70 to 72 below display the results in relation to participants' expected professional future within the next 5 years, specifically, their intention to leave the profession.
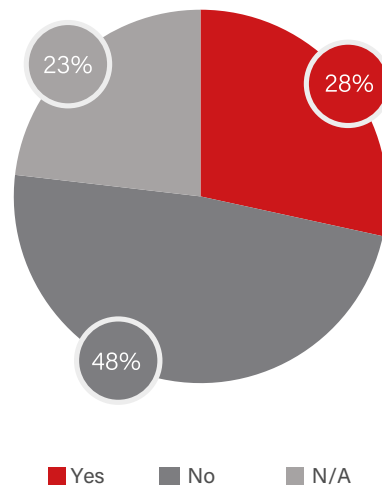
//// **FIGURE 70**   I intend to leave the audit sector

21%   23%   56%

■ Yes   ■ No   ■ N/A
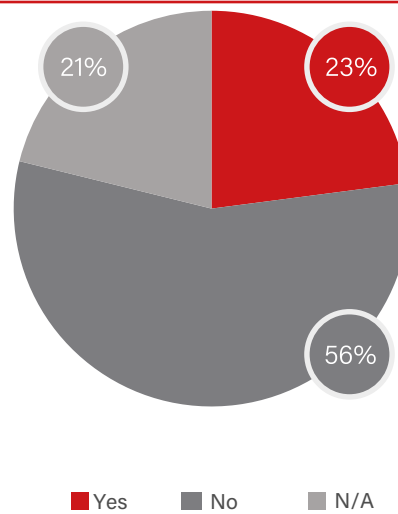
//// **FIGURE 71**   I intend to leave the audit sector. Women

20%   20%   60%

■ Yes   ■ No   ■ N/A
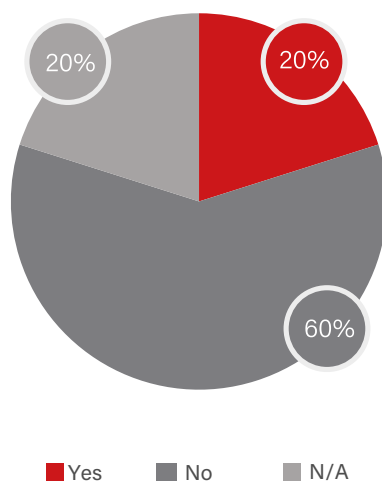
//// **FIGURE 72**   I intend to leave the audit sector. Men

23%   28%   48%

■ Yes   ■ No   ■ N/A

As may be seen in the figures above, 23% of all audit professionals intend to leave the sector within the next 5 years. If we look at this intention based on gender, we see that women have less intention of leaving at 20%, while in the case of men it rises to 28%.

Figure 73 below displays the intention of female auditors to leave the profession, according to professional category.

//// **FIGURE 73**   I intend to leave the audit sector. Women
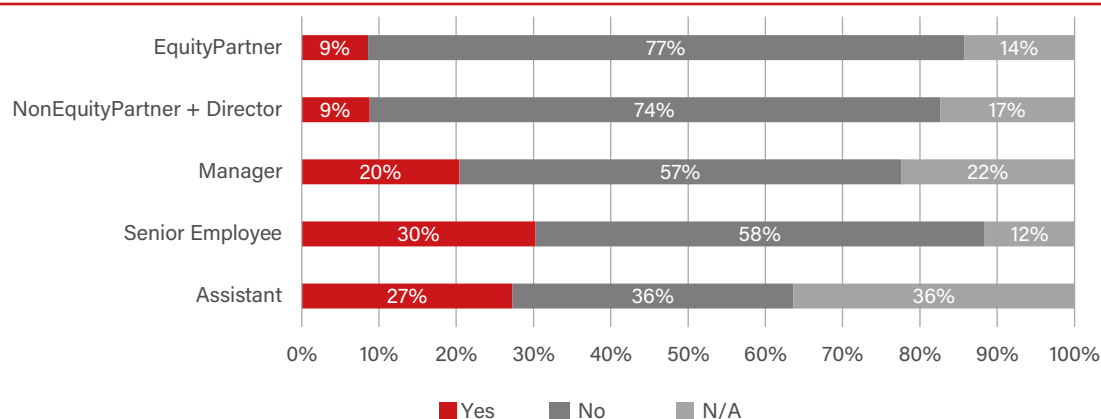
With regard to female auditors who intend to leave the sector, it may be observed that this decision weakens as their professional category increases. Thus, only 9% of female partners and directors wish to leave the profession, compared to 20% of female managers, 30% of senior employees and 27% of female assistants. In the latter case, it is necessary to highlight the high percentage of undecided respondents (36%).

The following table displays the intention of male auditors to leave the sector, classified by professional category.

//// **FIGURE 74**   I intend to leave the audit sector. Men
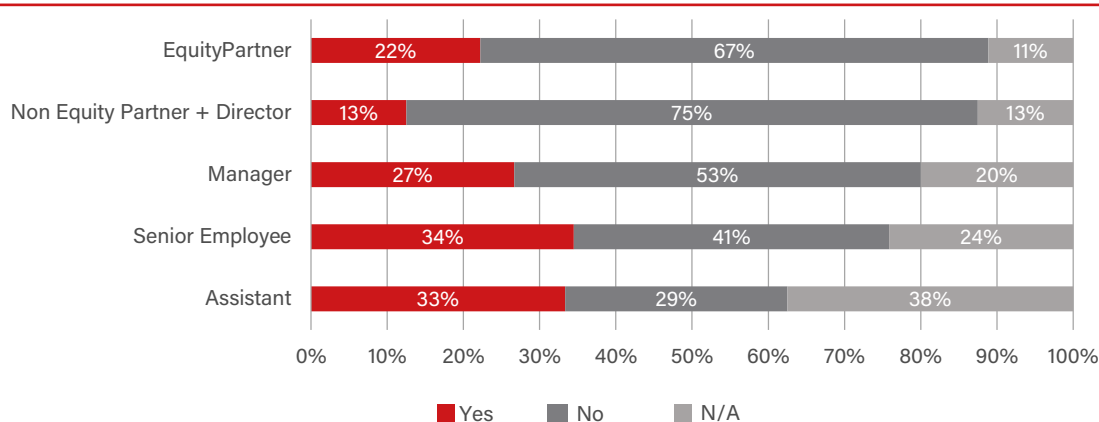
As may be seen in Figure 74, leaving the audit sector in the next 5 years is an option contemplated by 22% of male equity partners, a much higher percentage than that of female equity partners (9%). In the case of male non-equity partners and male directors, this figure falls to 13%. However, the percentage continues to increase in inverse proportion to the professional category, at 27% for managers, 34% for senior employees and 33% for assistants. In the category of male assistants, there is also a high percentage of undecided respondents (38%). It is noteworthy that in all cases the leaving rate of men is slightly higher than that of women.

Next, the results regarding the professional future of those who do not wish to leave the audit sector are shown. Persons who did not give an affirmative answer to the statement "I intend to leave the audit sector" were asked if they intended to remain in their current firm where they were working, remain in the same firm but change to another department, or move to a similar, larger or smaller firm. The results are displayed in Figures 75 and 76.

//// **FIGURE 75** How I see my professional future in auditing in the next 5 years. Women
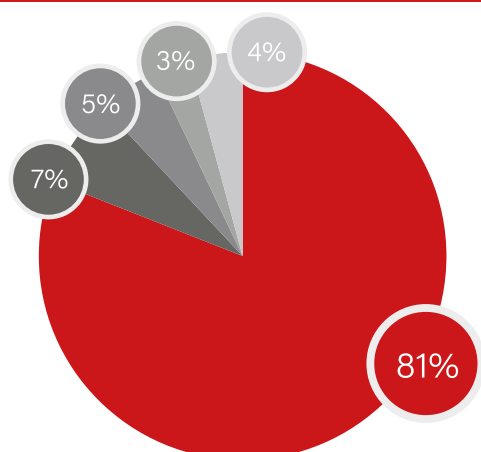
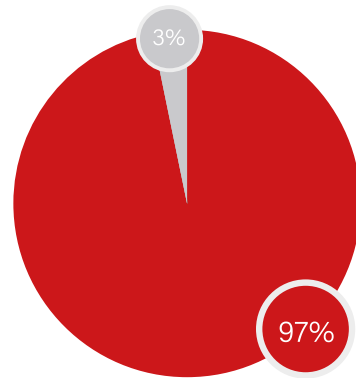//// **FIGURE 76** How I see my professional future in auditing in the next 5 years. Men
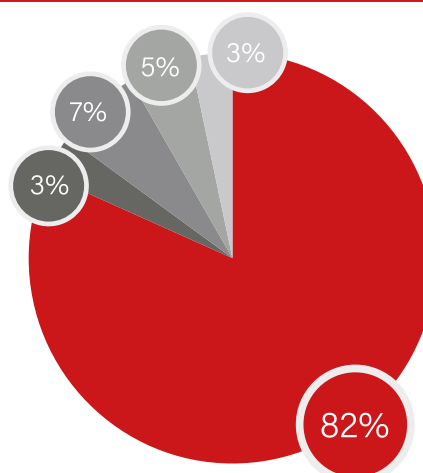
- I intend to remain in the firm where I am currently an auditor
- I intend to change to another firm of similar size to the current one
- I intend to move to a larger firm
- I intend to switch to a smaller firm
- I intend to remain with my current firm but in another department/area

As may be seen in the figures above, the majority of auditors who intend to stay in the profession intend to remain with their current firm. Specifically, 81% of female auditors and 82% of male auditors state their intention to remain with their current firm.

The data show slight differences in the preferences of auditors when it comes to switching firms. 7% of women would consider moving to a firm of similar size, while 5% would like to move to a larger firm, 3% to a smaller firm, and 4% intend to remain in their current firm, but in another department. In the case of men, the most popular option is to move to a larger firm (7%), a slightly lower percentage (5%) to a smaller firm and, finally, they similarly value staying in the current firm but in another department (3%), or moving to a firm of similar size (3%).

The data on the professional future of those professionals who wish to continue in auditing are displayed below, grouped by professional category (see Figures 77 to 86).

//// **FIGURE 77**   How I see my professional future in auditing in the next 5 years. Equity Partners Women

- ■ I intend to remain in the firm where I am currently an auditor
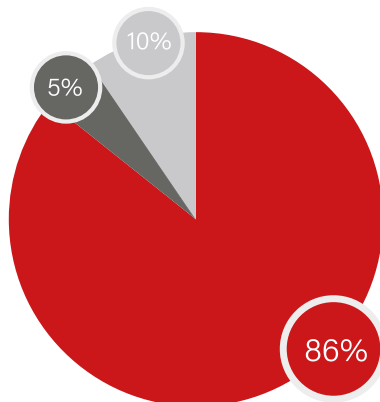- ■ I intend to remain with my current firm but in another department/area

//// **FIGURE 78**   How I see my professional future in auditing in the next 5 years. Equity Partners Men
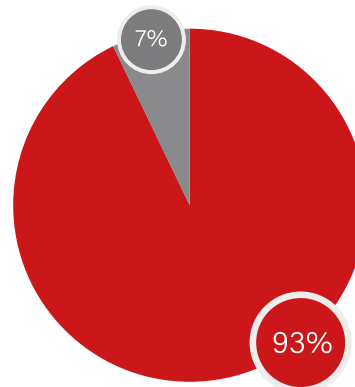
- ■ I intend to remain in the firm where I am currently an auditor
- ■ I intend to move to a larger firm

The vast majority of female and male equity partners wish to remain in their current firm, specifically, 97% of women and 93% of men. However, 3% of female partners are considering moving to another department within their firm, while 7% of male partners are considering moving to a larger firm.

//// **FIGURE 79**   How I see my professional future in auditing in the next 5 years. Female Non Equity Partners and Female Directors

- ■ I intend to remain in the firm where I am currently an auditor
- ■ I intend to change to another firm of similar size to the current one
- ■ I intend to remain with my current firm but in another department/area

//// **FIGURE 80**   How I see my professional future in auditing in the next 5 years. Male Non Equity Partners and Male Directors
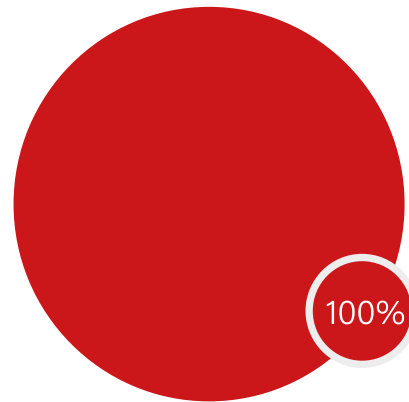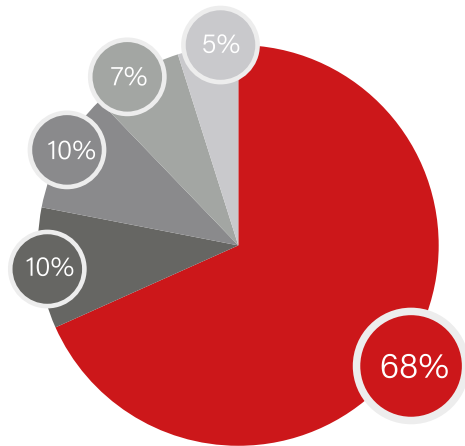

- ■ I intend to remain in the firm where I am currently an auditor

The data in Figure 79 show that the vast majority (86%) of female non-equity partners and female directors who intend to remain in the profession seek to continue in their current firm, while 10% are considering moving to another department within their firm. Only 5% are considering a change of

firm, choosing a firm of a similar size to their current one. In contrast, Figure 80 shows that all male non-equity partners and male directors who intend to remain in the profession seek to continue in their current firm in audits, and are not considering moving to another firm or department.

//// **FIGURE 81**   **How I see my professional future in auditing in the next 5 years. Female Managers**

//// **FIGURE 82**   **How I see my professional future in auditing in the next 5 years. Male Managers**

68%

7%
5%
10%
10%

■ I intend to remain in the firm where I am currently an auditor

■ I intend to change to another firm of similar size to the current one

■ I intend to move to a larger firm

■ I intend to switch to a smaller firm

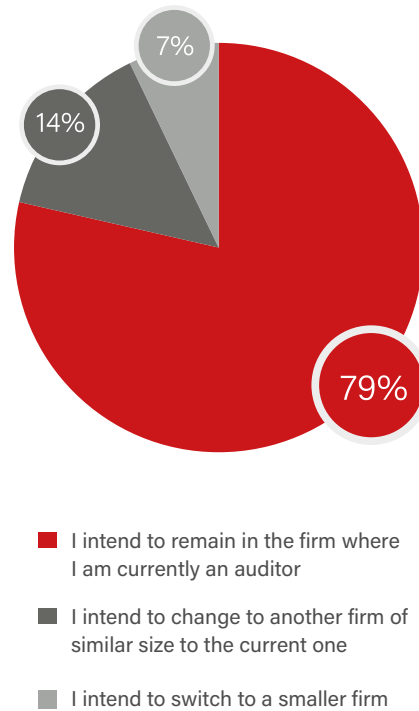■ I intend to remain with my current firm but in another department/area

91%

9%
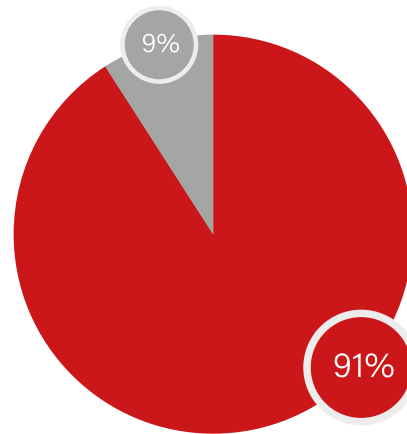
■ I intend to remain in the firm where I am currently an auditor

■ I intend to switch to a smaller firm

According to Figures 81 and 82, of all managers who intend to stay in the profession, 68% of female managers wish to remain in their current firm compared to 91% of male managers. Female managers who wish to move from their firm are considering changing to another firm similar to their current one (10%), to a larger (10%) or smaller (7%) one in the next 5 years, and even staying in their current firm, but in another department. Male managers, on the other hand, are only considering moving to a smaller firm.

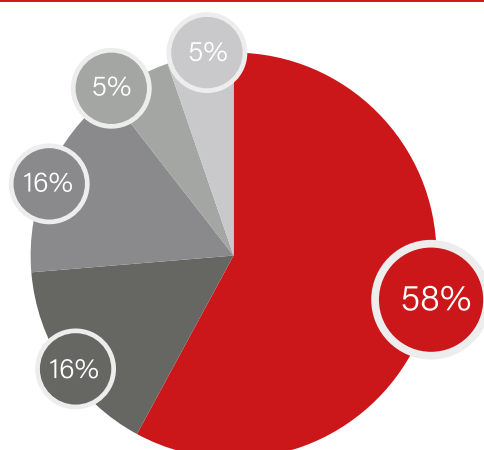//// **FIGURE 83**   How I see my professional future in auditing in the next 5 years. Female Senior Employees

//// **FIGURE 84**   How I see my professional future in auditing in the next 5 years. Male Senior Employees

7%

93%

■ Mi intención es seguir en la firma
en la que estoy actualmente en auditoría

■ Mi intención es cambiar
a otra firma de tamaño similar a la actual

7%

14%

79%

■ I intend to remain in the firm where
I am currently an auditor

■ I intend to change to another firm of
similar size to the current one
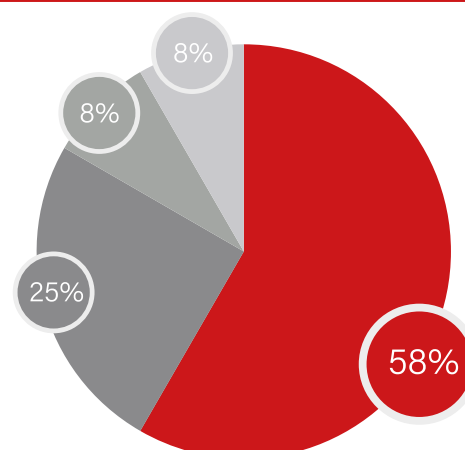
■ I intend to switch to a smaller firm

In relation to senior employees, Figure 83 reveals that 93% of female senior employees who intend to continue in the profession wish to remain in their current firm, while 7% would consider moving to another firm of similar size. In contrast, Figure 84 shows that 79% of male senior employees wish to remain in their current firm, while 14% intend to move to a firm of similar size and 7% to a smaller firm.

- I intend to remain in the firm where I am currently an auditor
- I intend to change to another firm of similar size to the current one
- I intend to move to a larger firm
- I intend to switch to a smaller firm
- I intend to remain with my current firm but in another department/area

- I intend to remain in the firm where I am currently an auditor
- I intend to move to a larger firm
- I intend to switch to a smaller firm
- I intend to remain with my current firm but in another department/area

The figures above display data on the assistants' perception of their professional future in the next 5 years amongst those who wish to remain in the profession. This is the category that demonstrates the least intention to remain in their current firm (58%). Female assistants would consider moving to another firm of similar or larger size (16%) and to a lesser extent (5%) to a smaller firm. Only 5% of female employees consider staying in the same firm in another department. Male assistants, on the other hand, would prefer to move to a larger firm (25%), and to a lesser extent consider moving to a smaller firm (8%) or to another department within their current firm (8%).

8.4 Professional expectations

In addition to analysing participants' intentions with regard to remaining or leaving the profession, it was also deemed relevant to find out how audit professionals see themselves in relation to the highest professional category, that of partner in the firm. Respondents were asked to answer the question *Do you see yourself as Partner in the firm?* choosing between Yes, No, and I don't know/no answer.

The following figures display the results to this question.

//// **FIGURE 87**   In relation to your professional career, do you see yourself as Partner in the firm?

- 31%
- 51%
- 18%

■ Yes   ■ No   ■ N/A
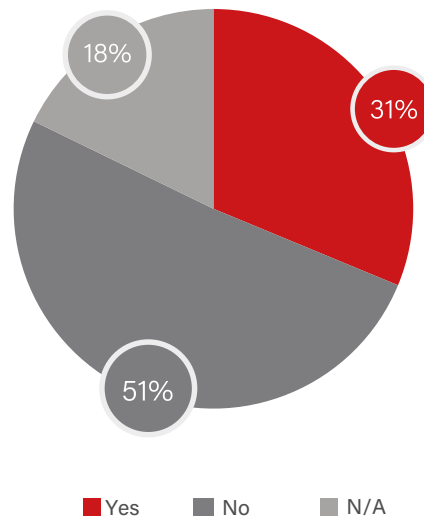
//// **FIGURE 88**   Do you see yourself as Partner in the firm? Women

- 35%
- 49%
- 17%

■ Yes   ■ No   ■ N/A
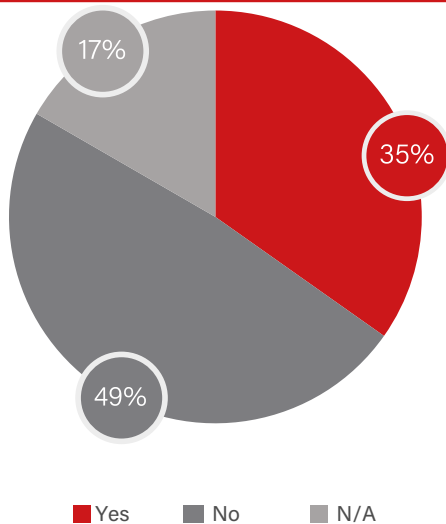
//// **FIGURE 89**   Do you see yourself as Partner in the firm? Men

- 24%
- 56%
- 20%

■ Yes   ■ No   ■ N/A
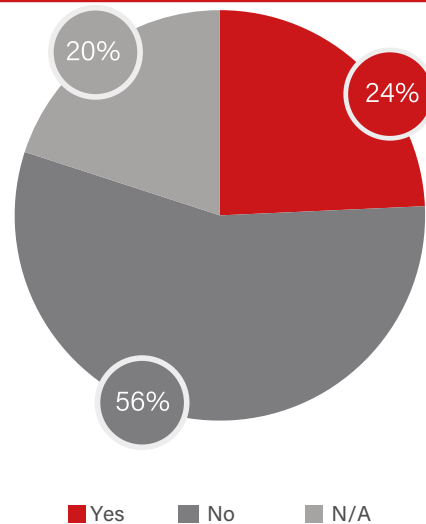
The results reveal that 31% of the participants see themselves as partners, while 51% do not. In terms of gender, surprisingly, almost 35% of women, compared to 24% of men, state that they see themselves as a partner in the firm.

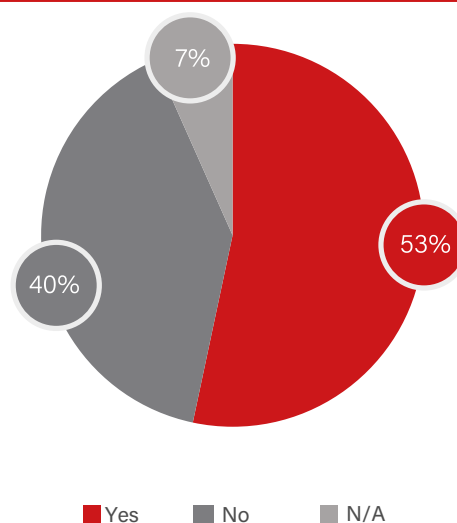The results are displayed below according to professional category and grouped by gender.

//// **FIGURE 90**   **Do you see yourself as Partner in the firm? Female Managers**

Yes   No   N/A
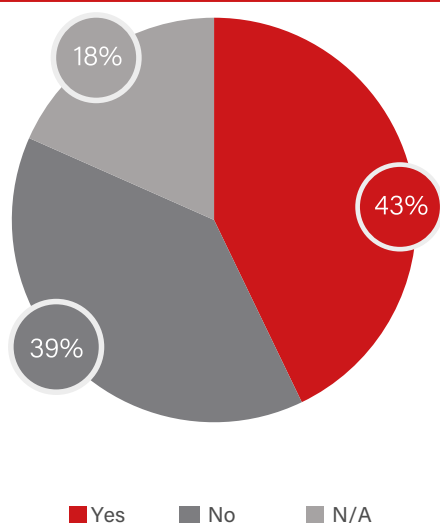
//// **FIGURE 91**   **Do you see yourself as Partner in the firm? Male Managers**

Yes   No   N/A

The figures show that, within the category of managers, there are differences between women and men. Thus, the majority of male managers (53%) see themselves as a partner in their firm in the future, compared to 42.9% of female managers. The latter, on the other hand, show a high percentage of undecided respondents (18%). The percentages of both male and female managers who clearly reject this option are similar (39% and 40%).

//// **FIGURE 92**   **Do you see yourself as Partner in the firm? Female Senior Employees**

Yes   No   N/A
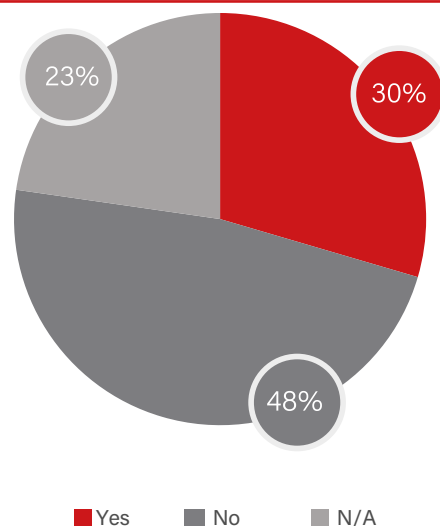
//// **FIGURE 93**   **Do you see yourself as Partner in the firm? Male Senior Employees**

Yes   No   N/A
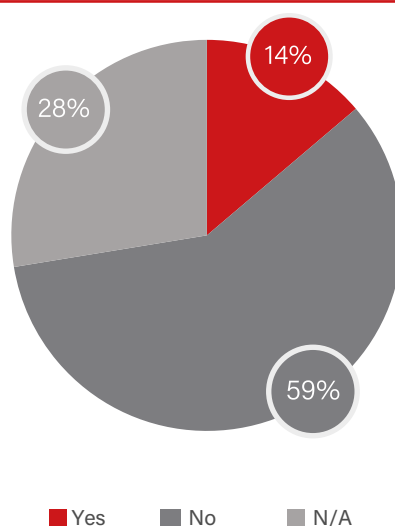
In the case of the senior employee category, 29% of female senior employees see themselves as a future partner compared to 14% of male senior employees. Both the percentage of undecided women and men in this category is high. In the case of men, 59% state they do not see themselves as a partner in the future, compared to 48% of women.

The figures for the assistant category are displayed below.

//// **FIGURE 94** Do you see yourself as Partner in the firm? Female Assistants

12%

24%

64%

■ Yes ■ No ■ N/A
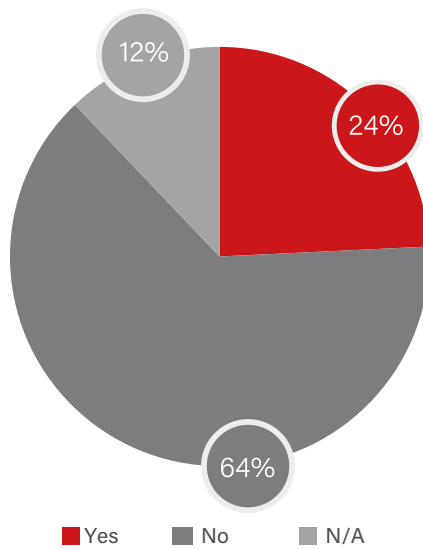
//// **FIGURE 95** Do you see yourself as Partner in the firm? Male Assistants

13%

21%

67%

■ Yes ■ No ■ N/A
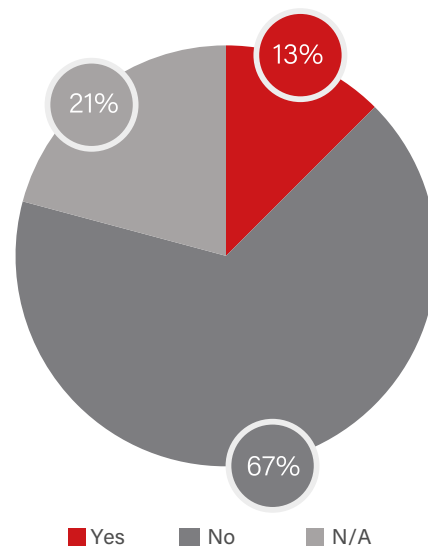
If we compare the representation of prospective male or female partner in the firm among assistants, we see that the percentage of women who see themselves as a future partner is double that of male assistants (24% compared to 13%), i.e. female assistants see themselves as partners to a greater extent than male assistants. This is also true, and to an even greater extent in the senior employee category, with almost 30% of women compared to almost 14% of men who state they see themselves in the highest professional category. It is worth noting, however, that in the category of manager, the situation is reversed, with male managers being the ones who see themselves as partners to a greater extent.

9 Conclusions and final considerations

Previous chapters of this report have analysed employee perceptions regarding the usefulness of existing measures to promote female talent and on existing potential obstacles, as well as contributing factors to the career success of female professionals. The study also analysed people's job satisfaction and their intention to stay or leave either their current firm or the audit sector altogether, both of which are key issues for the future of the profession.

To this end, this report presents the views of professional auditors of both genders. Specifically, the sample consists of 280 professionals from different firms and occupying different positions within these firms.

The diversity of the sample has made it possible to observe and present possible differences in the issues analysed according to different criteria such as gender and position in the firms.

This study has analysed the persistence of gender stereotypes and the audit professionals' perception of social and cultural pressures to behave in a certain way owing to their gender. Promotion and performance appraisals may be influenced by these gender stereotypes, and therefore it has been deem relevant to analyse them. It may be assumed that, in today's society, these stereotypes have disappeared or at least have been considerably reduced, but it is also possible that they still exist. For this reason, this paper asked male and female participants whether they felt that, because of their gender, others attributed certain qualities, roles and expectations to them in various organisational aspects such as leadership or decision-making skills.

The results show that many women still feel that, because of their gender, they are attributed a number of qualities or deficiencies which affect their work. Specifically, even today, 25% of female audit professionals feel that others consider them less suitable for leadership positions and 20% feel that others perceive them as more insecure or too emotional and sensitive for positions of responsibility than persons of other genders.

These gender stereotypes are perceived by all professional categories, although it is women in the higher categories of non-equity partners and directors who perceive these gender stereotypes to a greater extent. It is worth noting that assistants are the second most likely to perceive these stereotypes. This is an unexpected result that seems to indicate that society is not changing at the expected pace.

However, in addition to gender stereotypes that attribute specific qualities or characteristics that may influence talent promotion, this work has also addressed the existence of social and cultural pressures in relation to gender roles, which may affect the behaviour of women and men mainly in relation to their careers. The results show that, in general, it is women who feel social and cultural pressures to a greater extent. In fact, as well as gender stereotypes, 40% of women feel the pressurised to put family obligations first, and over 30% feel the pressure to fulfil their traditional gender role which relegates women to the private sphere. However, it is also worth noting that some women also feel pressurised to put their professional obligations before their family obligations, especially those in leadership position. This result highlights how women, especially in leadership position, feel pressurised in both directions, likely leading to increased stress.

But what about men? do they also feel gender-related pressures? Men do not feel that others ascribe certain qualities to them just because they are men. Nor do they feel the social pressure to be ambitious or to have to choose between family and professional obligations.

Professional expectations, organisational projection and the desire to advance to the highest positions in audit firms may also be influenced by the organisation's own environment which promotes or enhances a certain culture, whether or not there is access to networks of influence, a human resources policy that is committed or not committed to diversity, and which does or does not evaluate men and women equally. How do audit professionals perceive the environment in which they work?

This project has sought to identify the type of culture that exists in audit firms. It is noteworthy that both women and men in all categories state that the culture in their firm favours mutual support, collaboration and empathy, and that this is the prevailing climate in all firms. This result is highly relevant for talent retention, since a work climate that fosters these values is a precursor to job satisfaction and commitment to the organisation, which increases the desire to remain with the organisation. However, the results show that audit professionals also perceive their firm's organisational culture as being conducive to competitiveness, authority and control. This perception is in line with the traditional image of audit firms as being characterised by hierarchical structures.

Additionally, the analysis shows that, in general, male and female auditors feel that in their firms permanent availability is encouraged, although not to a high degree, and that flexible working hours are not, or at least not to a large extent, provided. It may also be seen that both male and female partners have a more positive view of these aspects related to work organisation than the other professional categories, while in the case of women, it is the categories of director and non-equity partner, together with assistants, that have a more critical view. In the case of men, the lower categories perceive the least flexible working hours. This is an important result that offers firms room for improvement given the importance attached by new generations to work-life balance and given the benefits of flexible working hours in terms of talent retention.

Another aspect included in this study is access to networks of influence within the profession, as well as the existence of role models which enable female professionals to positive view female success and leadership. Here, there are relevant differences in perception between men and women. While more than half of men believe that there are currently enough male directors, only 20% of women believe that there are enough female directors. It is also worth noting that in no professional category do women agree that power groups are made up of persons of their gender, nor that there are sufficient female directors to serve as role models for them. The lack of female role models continues to be an organisational problem that has a negative impact on women's career advancement.

On the other hand, in general, professionals of both genders do not have difficulties in accessing networks of influence, although men have fewer difficulties than women, nor do they consider networking activities to be gender discriminatory. This result suggests that important changes have taken place in firms, as in earlier years, access to networks of power and networking activities were generally limited to men.

Potential barriers or difficulties faced by women in their career advancement may have different origins, one of them being possible discrimination in organisations' human resources practices. The practices analysed, such as client allocation, performance appraisal, salaries or the facilitation of work-life balance, affect issues of vital importance in promotion and are measures that, in turn, have a great impact on the permanence of professionals in the firm.

In this case, the results indicate that neither women nor men perceive discrimination in the firms' human resources policies. However, there are differences according to gender. Women feel more strongly than men that the policy of complete availability for clients as well as the client allocation policy does not favour them. Women also feel that their salaries are lower and believe that firms are less receptive to family reconciliation measures compared to men. It is worth noting that female directors and non-equity partners, in general, have a more negative view of human resources practices, as they consider that the policy of complete availability for clients is more detrimental to women; that they receive lower salaries because of their gender; and that they perceive that work-life

balance measures are more frowned upon in the firms. This result suggests the existence of a "glass ceiling" which limits the promotion of women in audit firms and which is mainly evident for female professionals close to reaching partner status. Moreover this happens at a time which, in many cases, often coincides with motherhood. These barriers result in female professionals remaining in positions below partner level, which is the highest position within the firm's hierarchy.

With regard to the promotion of measures for work-life balance, it is worth noting that female partners have a more positive opinion that is clearly different from that of the other professional categories, as they consider such measures to be promoted. This in turn may reveal a lack of communication regarding the existence and enjoyment of these work-life balance measures.

The category-by-category analysis also shows that female equity partners disagree the most with the statement that performance appraisal takes into account aspects that do not benefit women, and perceive that there are fewer human resources practices that discriminate against women, such as client allocation. This result suggests that once they have achieved professional success, female partners feel that they have not been at a disadvantage in their career advancement because of their gender, although those in lower categories do not feel the same. Thus, female partners display a more positive and equitable view of the firms' human resources practices.

In the case of men, they broadly disagree that human resources practices are detrimental to them. The provisions of work-life balance measures is the only issue where there are also differences of opinion according to professional category.

Thus, it is senior employees, followed by managers, who perceive to a greater extent that measures for work-life balance are frowned upon in their firm.

For both women and men, this result may indicate the existence of certain conflicting messages. Firms are increasingly introducing initiatives and policies that favour work-life balance, however, it is necessary that the messages transmitted through more informal channels are aligned with these formal policies. Given the importance of work-life balance for talent retention in recent years, it is vital that people at senior levels as well as the company's culture encourage the adoption of the measures put in place.

Another relevant aspect of the organisational environment is the firm's promotion processes and performance appraisal. The results in this regard show that more than men, women feel that more is demanded of them, are evaluated more rigorously, and have to demonstrate their abilities to a greater extent because of their gender. In fact, 19% of women feel that more demands are placed on them and 22% feel that they are evaluated more rigorously than men. It is also striking that 30% of women feel that they have to demonstrate their abilities more than men. Importantly, this perception increases in the categories of female directors and female non-equity partners, followed by female managers. This result may also suggest that when firms are recruiting professionals, the numbers of women and men recruited are similar, so that professionals in lower categories perceive greater equality of opportunities. However, when it comes to accessing positions of power in organisations, barriers and difficulties arise.

Finally, comparing the opinion of male and female assistants, the results show that the youngest female auditors, while not perceiving gender-based obstacles to a large extent overall, do so to a much greater extent than their male counterparts. This situation may lead to women lacking career aspirations in firms in the face of perceived difficulties at the start of their careers.

One of the most important issues in recent years has been work-life balance. Achieving this balance improves commitment to the organisation and job satisfaction, emotional well-being, and the intention to remain within an organisation. Moreover, this aspect is essential for attracting talent, as studies reveal that new generations prioritise work environments that offer them the possibility of balancing their careers with their family, personal and social lives.

Traditionally, women who have had the greatest difficulties in achieving work-life balance, given that they were largely responsible for looking after the family. However, it is true that today the situation is changing. A decline in the number of children, greater sharing of family responsibilities, progress towards a more equal society, legislative changes regarding maternity/paternity leave, or

the professional expectations of new generations are all factors that may affect the importance and achievement attached by both men and women to work-life balance.

The results of this study show that women continue to have greater difficulty in achieving this work-life balance. One in three women experience difficulties balancing their career with their personal life, compared to three out of every hundred men. Almost half of female respondents consider that it is more difficult for them to achieve work-life balance and more than one in four consider that family responsibilities make it more difficult for women to devote themselves to their career and be promoted. The results show that these difficulties are not experienced by men.

In general, audit professionals (women 59% and men 41%) consider that motherhood interrupts and delays their opportunities for promotion, while this is not the case for fatherhood. This perception is shared by all professional categories, including assistants. Furthermore, professionals perceive that achieving work-life balance becomes more difficult as one moves up the career ladder.This implies, on the one hand, that life becomes more complicated for women as they get older and that younger women are aware of and perceive the greater difficulties they will have as women compared to men, a highly significant aspect to take into consideration for talent retention and promotion policies within firms. The results suggest that women perceive the difficulties associated with motherhood and the lack of work-family balance in career advancement. However, they do not consider that their commitment to their professional obligations is less than that of men due to their family responsibilities rather that, even though they perceive greater difficulties, they make greater efforts not to neglect their work. This study provides current data showing that change has not yet occurred, or at least not at the expected levels.

Another objective of this study is to analyse the most effective measures to promote female talent. The lack of parity in senior positions in audit firms is of concern not only to female professionals themselves but also to the audit firms and the profession as a whole. Thus, this study has addressed the perceived effectiveness of measures to promote female talent to leadership position.

It is worth noting that both women and men positively assess the measures for promotion established by the firms, highlighting the need to hire more women, to promote more women to the higher professional categories and to establish awareness, visibility and training programmes on equality.

Career success may be marked or driven by various factors, related to both individual and organisational factors and those of the environment in which the activity is carried out. It is interesting to learn the professionals' assessment of the factor or factors with the greatest influence on their professional success. This research demonstrates that flexibility and adaptability, tenacity and perseverance, personal sacrifice, teamwork, high levels of education and experience, ethics and responsibility, confidence and professional ambition, as well as family and peer support are the most relevant factors for both genders. On the other hand, other factors such as the line manager's gender, luck, network of contacts, or business ability are ranked last in the order of importance.

Finally, this study looks at job satisfaction amongst auditors. Awareness of job satisfaction is a relevant clue regarding commitment to the organisation and turnover intention.

The results show that, in general, both male and female auditors like their work and are satisfied with it. For women, this satisfaction increases with as their career advances.

Assistants were the least satisfied with audits. Notably, female assistants as well as female directors and non-equity partners show lower job satisfaction than their male counterparts. As stated in the conclusions above, these professional categories have been the most critical of existing policies on flexible working hours and, in the case of female directors and female non-equity partners, also of human resources practices and performance appraisals, both of which are important aspects of job satisfaction.

Motivational reasons have often been put forward to justify the lack of women in leadership positions in organisations. Statements such as "they don't want to", "they have no ambition or interest", "they prefer to take care of family tasks" or "they remain in middle positions with less responsibility which allows them to have a better work-life balance", amongst others, have been made to justify the lack

of parity in the management of firms. In this study, it was deemed relevant to analyse the presence of motivation barriers and their effects on women and men, and according to professional category.

Specifically, we analysed whether professionals are really interested in accessing positions of responsibility, their professional ambitions, and their expectations of achieving professional success. These questions are relevant, as individual expectations, ambition and interest will determine their intention to continue their career and to strive for the highest professional ranks.

In this sense, the professionals disagree that such motivation barriers exist. Thus, both women and men show an interest in occupying positions of responsibility. However, the analysis also reveals gender-based differences, in particular, almost 1 in 5 women, compared to no men, consider that they have lower expectations of achieving professional success than men.

On the other hand, it is worth noting that there are differences according to professional category. Thus, female assistants are less interested in reaching positions of responsibility and they also feel that they have less professional ambition and lower expectations of achieving professional success than men.

It is also interesting that, even though they do not show a lack of interest in occupying positions of responsibility or consider themselves as less ambitious, it is the female assistants, followed by female managers and non-equity partners, who feel that they have lower expectations of achieving professional success than men. This result appears to indicate that there is a glass ceiling here which is experienced to a greater extent by women. Achieving equity partner status is complicated for many reasons, but gender should not be one of them. However, the results reveal that women perceive their possibilities to be lower than those of men.

We also consider it relevant to highlight that young women themselves are perceiving, from the start of their career, lower expectations of achieving professional success, as opposed to men, which may affect their interest and their intention to continue their careers in the firm. This situation may harm female talent retention and, consequently, reduce diversity in senior positions in audit firms.

This study has sought to capture respondents' intention to remain in the sector and/or in the firm, as well as their intention to move to a larger or smaller firm or to leave the sector altogether.

Turnover in auditing is an issue of concern to the profession and firms. Although, traditionally, turnover has been variable in the sector, in recent years it has been higher, and this includes female turnover. This may jeopardise the availability of sufficient professionals to carry out the activity, in addition to high replacement costs. The results of this study reveal that the vast majority of participants wish to remain in the profession, with a higher percentage of women than men intending to continue: 60% of female auditors compared to 48% of male auditors. However, it is worth noting the assistants' perception of their professional future, as only 36% of female assistants and 29% of male assistants clearly intend to continue in the profession, which is food for thought.

Also, amongst those who seek to continue as auditors, a large proportion wish to remain in their current firm (81% of women and 82% of men).

In addition to analysing the participants' intentions with regard to remaining in or leaving the profession, it was also deemed relevant to understand how audit professionals see themselves in relation to the highest professional category, that of partner in the firm. Thus, 31% of the participants do see themselves as partners, while 51% do not. With regard to gender, surprisingly, almost 35% of women compared to 24% of men, state they see themselves as a partner of the firm.

With regard to the younger people who occupy the category of assistants, we observe that the number of women who see themselves as partners is double that of men. This is also true, and to an even greater extent, of the senior employee category, with almost 30% of women compared to almost 14% of men who state that they see themselves as occupying the highest category positions. It is worth noting, however, that in the category of manager, the situation is reversed, with male managers being the ones who see themselves as partners to a greater extent. This is an important result for moving towards parity regarding senior management in audit firms, as the lower aspiration of women to reach partner status may lead to them dropping out of the sector and perpetuate the higher representation of men in positions of responsibility in the firms.

Both female and male auditors like their work, but 20% of women and 28% of men intend to leave the profession. Despite the greater difficulties perceived by female auditors in their careers, the majority of them wish to remain in their current firm. Firms should value the commitment of professionals who, even when faced with more perceived difficulties, are committed to continuing in the profession.

This study reveals important changes taking place in Spanish auditing firms, which now offer much friendlier and more favourable environments for women, and where many of them do not feel discriminated against due to their gender. Moreover, firms have ceased to be masculine environments where access to power networks and networking activities especially favoured men. Audits have been shown to be a satisfying activity for practitioners.

However, the reality is that we are not yet in a situation of parity. It is not just a question of numbers rather, as demonstrated by this study, the situation is not equal at the social and organisational level. Women continue to perceive social pressures and biases that attribute lesser abilities to them and which influence their professional expectations. It is true that audit firms cannot change this social environment, but they can change their organisational environment, and especially the practices analysed here. Women continue to feel disadvantaged by a culture that encourages continuous availability, where they are under-represented in leadership position, where they are unable to achieve a work-life balance, and where they feel that

Audit firms face the challenge of achieving parity in all organisational sectors, creating an egalitarian, diverse and inclusive culture, and making visible changes so that the expectations of female auditors are not diminished.

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