



Master's Degree in Strategic Management

Chair of Organizing for Societal Impact

The evolution of women's role in work: gender as a lens for inequality

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Introduction

The role of women in the labor market today represents one of the central themes in academic, social, and institutional reflections concerning structural inequalities. The female presence in the employment context is not only a statistical or economic issue, but more deeply reflects the tenacity of cultural, social, and symbolic dynamics that continue to determine the degree of fairness and inclusiveness of our societies. The transformation of the role of women in the world of work, although having recorded significant achievements over the last decades, continues to be hindered by persistent phenomena of discrimination, gender stereotypes, and invisible barriers that limit women's full access to positions of responsibility and professional recognition.

The objective of the present research is to inquire whether and in what ways gender remains an excluding factor in the entry and advancement processes into professions. The query is explained through the adoption of a qualitative approach, through the analysis of the actual experiences of the female workforce in large multinational firms, paying special attention to the development process and opportunities. The methodological approach is motivated by the need to understand the complexities and personal meanings that statistics cannot capture, looking into the underlying forms of inequality through the testimony of those directly experiencing it.

In a context in which organizations formally declare their commitment to gender equality, it becomes necessary to explore whether this commitment is actually translated into inclusive practices or whether a gap persists between declared intentions and the daily reality experienced by female workers. The collected testimonies, in fact, offer a privileged perspective to assess the coherence between diversity and inclusion policies and their actual implementation within corporate settings. Moreover, the focus on large multinational companies, often considered at the forefront in adopting tools for equity, allows for testing the strength of their meritocratic structures and examining the possible reproduction, even in such environments, of more subtle and systemic discriminatory logics.

The research is set within a theoretical framework that views gender discrimination as a multidimensional phenomenon, influenced by cultural, institutional, and symbolic factors. The categories of the “glass ceiling” and “sticky floor” are analytical tools that guide the interpretation of the collected data and allow for the analysis of barriers that, although not always explicit, continue to operate within the mechanisms of selection and evaluation of skills. At the same time, the use of the concept of intersectionality makes it possible to understand how discrimination can worsen for certain categories of women, depending on their social or ethnic background or their family condition.

Through an empirical analysis based on semi-structured interviews, this thesis aims to contribute to the scientific and institutional debate on the issue of gender equality, offering points of reflection for a redefinition of organizational practices and public policies in terms of professional equity. Ultimately, it aims to provide a critical and well-documented look at the working conditions of women today, in the belief that only through careful listening to experiences and systematic reflection on structural factors is it possible to build a truly inclusive and fair labor market.

To pursue this goal, the present thesis is structured into five chapters, each of which contributes to building a path of progressive and in-depth analysis.

The first chapter offers a reconstruction of the historical and cultural context that has marked the evolution of the role of women in society and in the labor market, integrating a review of existing literature and an analysis of the main critical issues, including the wage gap, occupational segregation, and the impact of inequalities in the economic and social spheres.

The second chapter introduces the structure of the research, clearly defining the objectives, the underlying questions, and the methodological framework within which the investigation develops. Particular attention is paid to the choice of the observation context, large multinational companies, considered representative for the verification of the dynamics under study.

The third chapter details the adopted methodology. The use of the qualitative approach is justified, the tool of the semi-structured interview is described, and the application

methods adopted in the case study are presented, including a critical reflection on the limits and potential of the methodological choice.

The fourth chapter, the core of the research, presents the analysis of the data collected through the interviews. The results are organized by macro-themes, in order to systematically highlight perceptions, experiences, and narratives related to access to the labor market, evaluation of skills, career opportunities, dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the impact of potential or actual motherhood.

The fifth, and last, chapter concludes the work proposing a summary of the main results that emerged, reflecting on the theoretical and practical implications in organizational and institutional fields, and suggesting avenues for future research to promote effective gender equity in work.

The thesis is supplemented by the interview protocol, bibliography, and appendix, which enhance the methodological transparency and ensure the comprehensiveness of the research.

Chapter 1: Context analysis

1.1 Women's changes in society: historical background

The changing roles of women over ages would be one of the dramatic changes that occurs not only in family and social spaces, but also in political and economic areas, reverberating as one of the most intricate and sophisticated of evolutionary transformations of modernity. Women's struggles have inspired, since the advent of the first civil rights movements, a number of cultural, social, and political forces to major transformations of gender relations and accessibility enhancement to spheres of public life.

The suffragette movement represented one of the pillars of this process; in the UK it involved aspects of leadership from eminent figures like Emmeline Pankhurst and had a decisive role in the struggle for acquiring the right to vote. That was achieved, however, after years in the making, culminating through years of activism and struggle against the institutions, in legislative measures that eventually resulted in 1918 in the partial granting of the vote to women and, in a later stage, in 1928, of the recognition of electoral equality. In the meantime, in the United States, an analogous vehicle of political emancipation began to travel and culminated in the opening of the Nineteenth Amendment on 18 August 1920: that event pro forma created the right of women to vote and became the most crucial milestone for the global women's movement. In further developments in New Zealand, considered the first country to grant universal women's suffrage in 1893, began anticipation of transformations that would later spread to many other nations. In Europe, while women's rights proceeded in an uneven manner, a direction toward greater recognitions of such rights was being considered from almost any perspective. France, for example, formally recognized full citizenship and civil rights during the period of the Third Republic; women's suffrage would not be granted until 1944. The consolidation of these political achievements extended far into the labor market, where women started to

appear not only as participant observers in a world that was undergoing transformation but as important actors in changes of status.

With a cultural and social upheaval of huge proportion we might say that the 1960s were marked by strong youth protests, thus contributing to a new wave of feminist proclamations about existing inequalities in the world of work, stressing the necessity for a revision of traditional patterns of work organization. The 1963 publication of Betty Friedan's "The Mystique of Femininity", unearthed all tensions surrounding the female situation and initiated deep discussions about how women could be involved incrementally in socio-economic development, marking a turning point for restructuring workplace relations. This period officially marked the onset of a restructuring of labor relations, in which issues of equal pay, work recognition, and work-family balance had become and remained salient on national and international agendas.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 in the United States, banning discrimination in work on grounds of sex, formed another cornerstone of a legislative edifice intended to guarantee more access to opportunities and to fight against historically entrenched exclusion.

In the 1960s, Italy witnessed a period of social and political turmoil; the feminist movement inspired a series of legislative and judicial interventions leading to the landmark recognition of civil rights for women. The divorce law of 1970, confirmed by a referendum in 1974, would appear as a new departure from traditional patriarchal models toward redefining family relations and wider recognition of women's personal autonomy. This was followed by the advent of Law 194 in 1978, allowing voluntary interruption of pregnancies, which further empowered women to take their reproductive choices into their own hands and, hence, engage freely and consciously in the country's economic and social life. These changes, situated in a context of cultural and institutional transformation, had an overwhelmingly positive impact on the labor market, shaping the dynamics of employment and favoring women's entry into previously-male-dominated areas.

To some extent, the advancement of inclusion policies and the slow perpetuation of a culture of equality contributed to the better integration of women's skills into the processes of decision-making, which has undoubtedly assisted in re-defining production

modes and strategies towards human capital valuation. Concurrently, the international feminist movement has called into existence a normative and moral backing, particularly through the adoption of global legal instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) by the United Nations on 18 December 1979, inspiring domestic policies of many countries towards putting measures to reduce the gender gap in all areas. This convention is recognized as an essential tool for the protection of women's rights, and it has played a decisive role in facilitating the adoption of legislative reforms and encouraging a global debate on the need to overcome historical barriers that have limited women's access to equal opportunities, both in the workplace and in society.

1.2 Analysis of literature on women's roles in the workplace

The introduction of the topic of women's role in the labor market necessitates an analysis of the historical and cultural dynamics that have shaped women's participation within that context, as well as an exploration of the persistent gender inequalities that still affect women's opportunities and working conditions today. This topic, which has been extensively discussed in academic literature, not only describes the changes that have occurred over time but also highlights the structural and cultural barriers that continue to limit full gender equality. The transformations affecting the female labor market have been influenced by a lot of factors, such as changing gender roles, access to education, and women's rights movements, all of which have led to increased participation of women in previously exclusively male-dominated sectors. However, as is evident from the literature, these achievements are accompanied by systemic forms of discrimination that persist, hindering full gender inclusion and equality. Consequently, there is a necessity to undertake a comprehensive analysis of extant literature to understand the evolution of women's roles in the workplace and the prevailing challenges.

Historically, the contributions of women in the workforce have been undervalued or confined to roles that society considered to be "natural" for women, such as domestic and care work. This phenomenon can be attributed to the profound influence of cultural norms and pervasive gender stereotypes that have persisted for centuries, relegating women primarily to the roles of mothers and housewives. This perpetuates the notion of an inherent division between productive work, typically associated with males, and reproductive work, reserved for females (Oakley, 1974). With the onset of industrialization, the participation of women in the workforce has suffered a gradual expansion, even if it remained confined to low-skilled, low-paid, and frequently precarious occupations, thereby perpetuating a pervasive systemic subordination to the dominant male role. This sexual division of labor has not only consolidated gender inequalities but also contributed to the formation of a hierarchical labor structure that has historically constrained women's access to positions of authority, recognition, and economic autonomy (Bond, 2013).

As widely documented in the contemporary academic literature, gender inequalities in the labor market persist despite significant progress made by women in terms of education and labor force participation. Gender disparities remain entrenched in various forms, including wage gaps, occupational segregation, and underrepresentation in leadership roles. Blau and Kahn (2017) observe that the gender wage gap remains a persistent issue across most industrialized countries. Their analysis underscores that even when controlling for factors such as education, experience, and occupation, a considerable portion of the wage gap remains unexplained, thereby suggesting the role of implicit bias and discrimination in pay-setting practices.

Occupational segregation, an important feature of gender inequality, continues to confine both women and men in discrete, disparate spheres of work, and in the bargain, reinforce traditional gender roles. As explained by Hegewisch and Hartmann (2014), women over-concentrate in care and service occupations, such as in education, nursing, and domestic work, and such occupations have a predisposition towards undervaluation and underpayment in comparison with male professions such as engineering and technology. Horizontal segregation is then supplemented with vertical segregation, with its barriers to career progression for women into high-paying manager and executive posts. According to Catalyst (2023), women have a 29% of senior management positions worldwide, and in the bargain, expose the infamous “glass ceiling” that restricts career progression for them.

The intersection with other social categories, such as ethnicity, race, and class, multiplies labor market inequalities even more. Crenshaw’s (1989) intersectionality theory postulated that black women frequently suffer compounded discrimination through intersectional expression of racism and sexism. In a collection of studies, such as work produced by Gee and Peck (2018), Black and Latin women in America have been proven to receive less pay compared to white women even when holding constant level of education and years of work experience. In its complex form, intersectional analysis is fundamental to explain gendered labor market discrimination.

Cultural norms and social expectations have been consistently proven to contribute to gender inequality in a significant way. Correll (2004) addresses the problem of the “motherhood penalty” and terms it a negative impact of motherhood for female pay and

career advancement. Her work confirms that mothers are perceived to have less work commitment and therefore have fewer career development options compared to less-committed female workers, but that fathers perceive less work commitment and therefore have a larger career development opportunity, a “fatherhood premium” scenario. Her work identifies a prevalent presence of gender stereotypes in creating work-related consequences.

In response to such imbalances, interventions at both a policy and an organizational practice level have been designed with a view to compensating for such inequalities. Nevertheless, such interventions have proven to have variable effectiveness. Mandel and Semyonov (2005) have examined family-friendly policies, such as parental leave and flexible work, in terms of their impact on working women’s labor market performance. Although such policies can go a long way in compensating some of the disadvantage of working mothers, they fall short in terms of delivering gender equality. For instance, availability of parental leave is not necessarily supplemented with its equivalent use both for and by both men and women, in that cultural conventions demand that it is taken over by women, and such a practice continues to reproduce both at work and at home a gendered labor divide.

Recent data in the 2023 World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report confirms weak progress towards closing workplace gender gaps. According to current trends, it will take approximately 132 years to close the global gender opportunity and economic participation gap, estimates say. That startling reality puts in sharp relief the imperative for a more intersectional and nuanced examination in addressing gendered bias. A comprehensive review of present literature reveals that, in addition to significant improvement in putting more women in work, deep-rooted systemic barriers in terms of work segregation and covert bias, and even cultural values, hinder full gender equality. It is imperative, therefore, to have a deeper understanding of such issues, supported with robust statistics and intersectional analysis, to develop effective interventions for improving gender equity in work settings.

1.3 The problem of the gender gap in the labor market

A more detailed analysis is called for, one that is centered around the labor market as a primary perspective. Despite progress over time, gender inequality in the workforce is a persistent challenge that continues to hinder complete equity and inclusion from being realized. Working women continue to be unfairly treated, getting lower pay and fewer career advancement opportunities compared to men. These disparities reside in their deeply ingrained institutional, cultural, and historical contexts, rather than in qualification or individual decision discrepancies. As previously explained, gender inequality is also linked to a high concern of pay disparity. There are various studies that suggest that even in the same profession, women earn a smaller salary than their male counterparts. The gender equality report of the OECD reveals that in its member states of 36, there is a pay gap of approximately 13% on average. The gap is even more in specific sectors, i.e., in sectors of technology, finance, and engineering, up to a gap of 20%. This wage gap is even more striking when one realizes that in many parts of the globe, women enjoy higher educational attainment than men, indicating a dissonance between educational achievements and labor market outcomes. Wage disparity is not just a question of economics, it is also a question of financial independence and retirement security.

Beyond wage gaps, gender inequality is also expressed in women's underrepresentation in leadership offices and offices of power. Despite constituting half of the working force of the world, women remain grossly underrepresented in managerial offices and political offices. The process is referred to as the "glass ceiling," a metaphorical yet tangible obstacle that prevents women's career progression beyond a point, despite their capabilities and merit. The "glass ceiling" is more insidious in that it is not explicit in nature but is articulated in terms of preferences and organizational practices that favor certain groups over others, thereby inhibiting women's career progression.

Research, as highlighted in McKinsey & Company's *Women in the Workplace 2022* report, shows that women hold a mere 25% of leadership roles in the C-suite around the globe. The underrepresentation is even more intense for Black women. The explanation for this gap is a mix of implicit bias, fewer chances of getting mentored or guided in their

careers, and work environments that put a high value on traits that are generally linked to men. Numerous studies have shown that women face more intense scrutiny and stricter scrutiny when vying for leadership roles compared to their male counterparts, and their capability and motivation are constantly questioned in a different way to men. In addition, women receive fewer endorsements from high-level managers, a primary career advancement factor in most industries.

The under-representation of women in leadership has been found to perpetuate gender inequality and to have more wide-reaching consequences, such as a high negative impact on organization and innovation. This is attested to by evidence in the Harvard Business Review that gender diverse leadership in firms is linked to higher profitability, higher innovativeness and better decision making. It is therefore a strategic imperative and a moral obligation that firms need to address the under-representation of women in leadership in order to be competitive in a more competitive global economy. The gender gap in the labor market is also exacerbated by the skewed distribution of unpaid caring responsibilities that overwhelmingly burden women. Worldwide, women spend a great deal more time in unpaid household work, such as caring for children, elderly, and housework, in comparison to men. The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Social Norms of Gender Index 2023 indicates that women do on average 2.5 times more unpaid caring work in comparison to men, a gap that is even more skewed in low and middle-income countries. The skewed burden of caring limits women's labor force participation, forcing many to opt between their career or family responsibilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put this issue in the limelight, as school closures and increased demand for family care hit women in particular hard. Most of them have been forced to reduce their working hours or even exit the labor force, causing what has been dubbed the “she-cession” phenomenon, i.e. a recession that has hit women in particular, in sectors in which they are most concentrated, such as in commerce, hospitality and caring services. The pandemic has exposed the weakness of progress towards gender equality, and has shown that there is a need for urgent action to facilitate work-life balance and to value unpaid work in caring for families. Paid parental leave, accessible and affordable childcare, and flexibility in working arrangements are crucial to enable women to balance their professional and family commitments. In addition to that, it is also

required to challenge prevailing social norms that equate family care to women in order to get a more even distribution of work in homes and to open up a more inclusive labor market. The gender gap is also exacerbated by intersectionality, in that women belonging to marginalized groups suffer even more disadvantages. Black women, women of color belonging to the LGBTQ+ group, and women with disabilities, for example, experience higher rates of joblessness, lower earnings and higher job discrimination in the professional sphere. The migrant and ethnic minority women, in line with the EIGE's 2022 report, face serious challenges in accessing employment and are more likely to be employed in low-paid, precarious work. The transgender women also face serious challenges in accessing regular, better-paid employment. These intersectional challenges highlight the need for a more integrated and inclusive response to close the gender gap that addresses the unique challenges of different groups of women. To this end, policymakers and employers must take action to meet the specific needs of marginalized women, such as anti-discriminatory laws, affirmative action programs, and inclusive work practices that favor diversity and equity. Closing the gender gap in the labor market demands a coordinated and multifaceted effort, involving active engagement of policymakers, employers, civil society and individuals. Governments at a policy level must enact and implement laws that favor pay equity, ban discrimination in workplaces and enable work-life balance. An example is Sweden and Norway that introduced progressive reforms such as liberal parental leave, subsidised day care and transparency in pay that helped close gender gaps in the labor market. Employers must also facilitate gender equality by providing inclusive workplaces, offering sponsoring and mentoring opportunities and introducing programs of diversity and inclusion. Social norms and stereotypes that favor traditional gender roles must be challenged to facilitate transformative change. Education programs, media representation and community engagement can influence public behavior and attitudes, thus creating a more just society for generations to come. Despite improvement in recent times, there is a wide range of inequalities in pay, representation, and access to opportunities. The entrenched gaps can be attributed to systemic inequalities that result from historical, cultural, and institutional contexts, coupled with intersectional issues and unequal distribution of unpaid care work. The removal of gendered structural barriers to women's entry into the labor force is key to unleashing half of society's untapped potential to create a more prosperous and more

equitable future. The path to gender equality in work is complex, but it is a realistic goal that must be realized through combined efforts of all concerned.

1.4 Analysis of the current situation: global and local data statistics

The analysis of women's employment in the labor market in Italy shows a deep geographical divide between different areas of the country, with a clear-cut separation between northern and southern regions. The geographical imbalance is one of the structural features of the labor market in Italy and is strongly emphasized in women's employment. If, at a national level, women's employment is lower in respect to men, this is even more striking in the South of Italy, in which women's employment in working life is decidedly lower in respect to northern regions.

According to ISTAT statistics, in 2017 over 60% of women in Northern Italy were employed, with peaks of over 65% in some of the provinces of Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy and Trentino-Alto Adige. In Southern Italy, on the contrary, women's employment was below 35%, with a low of some of the lowest in Europe in places such as Calabria, Campania and Sicily. This is not a new trend, but is a result of a set of historical, economic and cultural circumstances that have conditioned women's employment in the southern regions over decades.

One of the key reasons for this gap is the different economic structure of the two halves of the country. The more dynamic and diversified productive structure of the North offers a more open labor market to women, with a more even distribution of high-tech tertiary sectors and knowledge-intensive services, in which employment is more characteristically higher for women. In addition, a higher concentration of large companies and a more developed industrial system allows women to gain entry to the labor market more easily, in many instances with more permanent employment contracts and better working conditions than in the South.

In contrast, the southern economy is largely based on sectors that have a lower need for women's work, i.e., agriculture and low specialization manufacturing. Moreover, in the northern regions a principal employment sector for women, the tertiary sector is in the South generally less developed and characterized by a high percentage of irregular and

precarious employment. The diffusion of the informal economy is yet another obstacle to women's complete labor-market engagement, in that many women work in informal employment arrangements, without protection and often unreported in official statistics.

Another decisive aspect of the fragmentation of the territory is the lack of services for work-life reconciliation, to a greater extent striking the Mezzogiorno. The low supply of crèches and support services for early childhood in the Mezzogiorno is a strong discouragement to women's employment, especially to mothers of small children. Where in northern Italy children up to three years of age frequently constitute more than 30 per cent of users of childcare services, in the Mezzogiorno it drops to below 10 per cent in many areas. The consequence is a higher home and caring burden for women, often forced to give up their job to take care of their children.

Finally, cultural and social aspects also account for the employment gap between the North and the South. In the South, a more conservative family system and a less established gender equality culture limit women's access to the labor market. In large areas of the South, a more conservative view of women's role is dominant, in that home-work and caring for the family continue to be viewed as women's work, in a manner that discourages their work outside the home. This territorial gap has heavy social consequences, yet also has serious economic implications, in that low female employment in the Mezzogiorno is a limit to the expansion of the entire region. Greater labor participation of women would be a key lever to the expansion of the South, in order to increase household earnings, restrict the risk of poverty and increase home demand. For this reason, gender gap-reducing labor market policies in Italy cannot disregard targeted interventions to close the North-South gap, through investments in social infrastructures, employment incentives to women, and expansionist strategies that support a higher inclusion of women in the economic system of the south.

A comparison of women's employment in Italy to that of their EU counterparts is of interest, in that it shows a large gap that is unchanging over time. The employment of women in Italy between the age of 20 to 64 is at 55%, making it bottom of the EU member states, according to Eurostat statistics in the fourth quarter of 2022. The percentage is approximately 14 percentage points lower compared to that of the EU average, standing at 69,3%.

When analyzing in a European perspective, it is visible that Germany's use of females is at a percentage of 77,4%, that of France is at a percentage of 71,7%, both of which is higher in percentage compared to that of Italy. Spain's presence of females in the labor market is at a percentage of 65,7%, also higher in percentage compared to that of Italy.

A further indicator of gender disparity in the labor market is the employment gap between men and women. In Italy, it is 19,5 percentage points, close to twice that of the European Union's 10,3 points. This is one of the European widest gender gaps in employment, beaten only by that of Greece's.

The situation is exacerbated even more when employment of working mothers is considered. In Italy, one in five women quit work after having a child, largely due to the challenge of balancing professional and family duties. Of those that quit work, 52% of them report that a need to balance professional and family responsibilities is their primary reason, whereas 19% report that financial needs constitute their primary reason.

Furthermore, Italy also boasts a large overall gender salary gap between men and women. The men's to women's average annual salary gap is 43% in accordance with the latest statistics issued by Eurostat, higher than that of the EU's overall average of 36,2%. This data indicates that there is a particular serious problem in Italy when it comes to employment of women, in terms of lower labor market participation compared to the EU average and more steep gender gaps. Such evidence indicates a demand for gender pay gap-reducing interventions and policies to support gender equality in employment to allow women to be integrated in the labor market to their potential.

1.5 Economic and social implications of the gender gap in employment

The gender employment gap in Italy has a deep impact on the economic system of the country, not only on personal welfare, and on the society in general. As indicated in evidence in this study, Italy is a trendsetter in having one of the lowest employment ratios of women in Europe, significantly lower compared to that of the European Union (Eurostat, 2022). Such underutilization of human capital in women is a structural inefficiency that inhibits the economic growth of Italy and restricts its productivity in general.

The closing of the gender labor gap in the EU would generate a boost in economic growth of approximately €3,15 trillion in 2050 (EIGE, 2021). In Italy, where the gender labor gap is more pronounced, potential increases in national wealth deriving from higher labor force participation of women are significant. The chronic underutilization of women has been demonstrated to result in lower earnings per household and diminished potential for consumption, consequently impeding economic growth.

Furthermore, the gender pay gap between men and women has been shown to exacerbate financial disparities, leading to lower lifetime earnings and reduced pensions for women (ISTAT, 2017). According to ISTAT statistics (2017), the gender pay gap in Italy, measured in terms of the gap between men's and women's gross annual earnings, is high, in high-level occupations. Not just do women earn less on average, but also more frequently work in fixed-term or part-time employment, thus having fewer career prospects of advancement and financial security, perpetuating long-term financial gaps. Moreover, the impact of the gender gap is also apparent when observing its consequences in terms of effects on pension systems. Due to lower lifetime earnings and career breaks, women earn lower pensions than men. According to ISTAT (2021), the average pension of women in Italy is approximately 36% lower compared to men's. Such a gap increases older women's exposure to poverty and economic dependence, thus making them more vulnerable to financial insecurity in old age.

Beyond the economic impact, gender employment gap also has profound social consequences. One of the key drivers of women's labor force participation is the challenge of balancing work and family. Italy is one of the lowest in Europe in terms of provision of childcare services, with just 26% of children aged three or younger in formal childcare centers, compared to more than 50% in such countries as Sweden and France (OECD, 2020). The unaffordable and inaccessible nature of such services disproportionately impacts women, given that they take on the primary caring role in the home.

This imbalance in caring responsibilities is one of the explanations of the so-called "motherhood penalty" that is found when women experience a loss of career progression and earnings after having children. Save the Children (2019) estimated that nearly 30% of Italian women leave work two years after having a child, a percentage that is higher compared to other EU member states. By contrast, men do not experience a comparable employment penalty after fatherhood, indicating a lingering expectation that women place family responsibilities over professional ambitions.

The consequences of the gender employment gap spill over to affect more general social institutions. The higher levels of women's labor force participation in a society, the more social cohesion, higher birthrates, and better overall welfare there is likely to be. Sweden and Denmark, two of the more robust work-life support systems in place in terms of paid leave for parents and universal childcare, enjoy high employment of women (above 75%) and low volatility in their birthrates (Eurostat, 2022). Low employment of women in the labor force in Italy is, in contrast, causing a demographic decline, one of the lowest birthrates in Europe (1,24 children per woman in 2021, ISTAT).

Chapter 2: Introduction to the research

2.1 Introduction to the research: objectives and main questions

The main objective of this thesis is to analyze whether gender constitutes an element of discrimination in the labor market, both at the initial stage of recruitment and in career advancement opportunities. More specifically, the research aims to understand to what extent and in which modalities gender can influence the decision-making processes of companies in the selection of personnel and in the subsequent management of careers, with a specific focus on the experiences of women already in the professional world. In order to investigate these aspects, this research adopts a qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews with female workers from different industries and occupational levels, in aim of collecting direct evidence on the gender dynamics that underlie career paths.

The core research question is whether gender is a discriminatory factor in the labor market. This research question is articulated in additional questions designed to explore the different dimensions of the phenomenon: are there meaningful differences in employment opportunities between men and women with the equivalent level of qualifications and experience? Which barriers do women face in their professional development compared to their men counterparts? What strategies are taken by companies in order to ensure gender equality and what are the perceptions of female employees regarding the effectiveness of these policies? Additionally, this study proposes to examine the role of gender biases, both conscious and unconscious, in organizational decision-making processes and in individual performance assessment, in determining whether and under which conditions these factors affect women's possibilities for professional growth.

The qualitative analysis performed through interviews will provide a comprehensive and detailed view of the subjective experiences of the interviewees, revealing possible common trends and divergencies between sectors and occupational positions. The selected method enables to explore both the objective data on gender inequalities and the

personal experiences, their perception of the unfairness that they have suffered and the approaches they have adopted to overcome the obstacles created by possible discrimination. This research also intends to contribute to the debate on corporate and institutional policies designed to narrow the gender gap in the workplace, offering key considerations on possible solution to foster equal opportunities and a more equal career path.

This study is located in the overall theoretical framework in which it is integrated within the study of gender discrimination against women in the labor market. “Glass Ceiling”, an invisible barrier preventing women from reaching top leadership positions, and “Sticky floor”, a tendency for women to remain caught in lower-paying, lower-status positions, are fundamental concepts that will be through this research. The perspectives thus provided will act as a basis for interpreting findings towards understanding the systemic mechanisms disfavoring women in career advancement.

Concerning this aspect, the issue on gender unfairness in employment is very pertinent today, both in the socio-economic context and against the fact that many institutions and policymakers are usually undertaking empowerment initiatives to eliminate gender inequalities at all levels. The European Union and other international organizations further develop measures to increase female participation in the workforce, reduce pay gaps, and promote gender-balanced leadership. This research aims at taking in direct testimonies from female workers with a view to contributing to this ongoing discourse in highlighting salient areas needing further intervention efforts.

From a methodological standpoint, this study adopts a qualitative approach, chosen to capture aspects that are often overlooked by quantitative analyses. Statistical evidence may illustrate the extent to which men and women differ, but qualitative interviews will explore more deeply into their lived experiences, perceptions, and ways of coping. It is hoped that, through this technique, the researcher will expose those hidden biases and informal workplace dynamics which perhaps cannot be vividly or indeed very precisely captured by numerical analyses but do shape career currents.

Ultimately, the study could yield significant implications for organizations seeking to enhance their diversity and inclusion policies, as well as for policymakers aiming to

develop more effective regulations to promote gender equality in the labor market. This research aims to pay attention to the impediments and challenges that women face in their careers in order to hopefully contribute towards a better understanding in the broader picture of how gender can be considered as an influential discriminating factor and what might be done to promote a more just and inclusive labor market.

2.2 The research protocol: approaches and guidelines followed

Given the exploratory and theory-generating aims of this study, which are focused on understanding the convoluted and nuanced experiences women have in the workplace, a qualitative inductive research design was adopted. Qualitative methods are more suitable to unveil meanings, interpretations, and social processes that are deeply situated within organizational and cultural contexts (Creswell, 2013; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). In this study, the qualitative approach allows for a thick exploration of how women in the workplace perceive, negotiate, and respond to gendered structures, organizational practices, and professional dynamics. Instead of testing predefined hypotheses, rich empirical data were gathered from the insights generated through in-depth individual interviews.

The choice to use interviews for the retrieval of data is in keeping with practices in qualitative research, where interviews are viewed as robust tools for searching into subjective experiences, interpretations and sense-making processes of participants (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Specifically, semi-structured interviews were employed, because this represents a medium between the standardizing power of interviews and the flexibility necessary for in-depth exploration of emerging themes (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Interviews allow participants to present their personal narratives and reflections, while allowing the researcher to define the flow of the interview according to the particularities of each case. The semi-structured format has the flexibility and yet the purposefully defining structure necessary to garner rich, nuanced data while tightening the coherence across interviews. Such flexibility is particularly essential in areas like gender and work issues, where the interviewee's sense of comfort, trust, and perceived safety impacts the depth and authenticity of the responses she will give.

In studies dealing with issues of gender and labor issues, semi-structured interviews shine brightly, paving pathways toward individual stories which otherwise might not have been unobscured by rigid methodologies (Oakley, 1981; Acker, 1990). This is a complicated story of experiences shaped instead by micro-offers of unequal power, informal organizational culture, and subtle socially structured expectations that quantitative ones

do not usually catch. The mixed nature of dialogue allows interviewees spaces in which they can put their feelings, contradictions, or ambivalences that become central in understanding gendered organizational experiences (Reinharz and Chase, 2003). The flexibility of semi-structured interviewing allows for the exploration of unexpected themes, probes into significant cues, and involves the interactional co-construction of meaning through clarification, reflection, and elaboration within context (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

Interviews do not just serve as data collection tools in gender and work research; they can also become sites for meaning making in which socially grounded narratives can be unfolded and critically confronted (Gherardi, 1995). Women's narratives of their working lives are often mediated by intersectional constituents such as age, class, ethnicity, or motherhood, and semi-structured interviews provide the openness required to accommodate this complexity without forcing predefined analytic categories upon it.

The procedural guideline followed the principles set by Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013) to provide a systematic yet rigorous framework for inductive qualitative research. This sort of research would allow the migration from first-order concepts tied to the participants' language to second-order themes and theoretical dimensions, thereby circumscribing the way for new insights. Also, data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively where constant comparison and coding were done after each interview, thus informing the development of further interviews and refinement of the analytical categories that were emerging. As an example in practice, this recursive process strengthens both depth and credibility of research findings (Charmaz, 2006).

2.3 Research context and delimitation

The research on gender differentials in the labor market, in general, and, in particular, on the early careers of young women in multinational corporations, provides a basis for this study. This particular context was chosen because multinational enterprises have an influence on labor markets and the setting of corporate policy domains within which organizations across the world can diversify management practices. These companies proclaim their commitment to gender equality, yet it remains uncertain how many of these commitments offer actual career development opportunities for women. The focus on this particular group will show how gender influences organizational structures, decision-making processes, and career advancement mechanisms at the very early stages of professional careers.

The study's qualitative design equips it to delve deep into the lived experiences of the individuals interviewed and appreciate those nuanced, and sometimes systemic, patterns that might be hidden through any quantitative means. In-depth interviews are projected to be the key data collection instrument, giving room for the respondents to articulate their perceptions as well as individual stories toward some general implications of gender within their professional settings. This method thus created the flexibility for data collection while adhering to and maintaining the integrity of the central research questions. The approach builds on academia that endorses a subjective narrative as crucial for understanding social phenomena, especially for field studies like labor and gender studies.

According to theoretical lenses that illuminate how gender determines career pathways, women's career outcomes have been illuminated through frameworks such as the concepts of occupational segregation, gendered career paths, and workplace biases. These frameworks in conjunction with the glass ceiling effect are widely utilized theoretical constructs in analyzing barriers that women face in attaining promotions in corporate hierarchical settings while, in addition, the leaky pipeline model illuminates losses at various stages of the career ladder. Theories of gendered social capital suggest also that

differences in professional networks and opportunities for mentorship underlie the different paths of advancement traversed by men and women.

Organizational culture and implicit biases also come into play in the construction of professional experiences. Gender stereotypes, influenced by the culture of prejudice and bias, direct hiring decisions, performance evaluations, and assessments of leadership in competitive corporate cultures: literature suggests these very criteria also ultimately work to the detriment of women. Furthermore, many diversity and inclusion initiatives are said to thwart themselves; most of the time, they are contingent on implementation and hence come in conflict with the prevailing culture of the organization. The study seeks to evaluate through women's own narratives whether these existing mechanisms are actually considered by them as effective in countering gender differentials or merely symbolic attempts.

The dissertation proposes an intersectionality framework to conceptualize the gendered labor market experience. The interaction of gender and multiple identities, including, but not limited to, ethnicity, nationality, and socio-economic background, can add more complexity to the career advancement process. Multinational corporations differ in this respect, as they operate on an international level and, for the most part, transnationally; thus, the intersections occurring within them will further show their effect on access toward professional development opportunities and workplace interactions.

The qualitative study was not intended to provide for statistical generalization but aspires toward analytical generalization through pattern identification and trend recognition in discussions for gender inequality at the corporate level. The research is, thus, poised to make contributions to not just academia but also to stakeholders in the corporate arena and policymakers wishing to put in place effective measures to foster gender equity. The research has also interrogated voices and experiences of young female professionals against the structural and cultural backdrops that still characterize the gendered career pathways in multinational organizations.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research method: theory and models

In order to introduce the research method used in this research, it is fundamental to give an introductory discussion on the different research methods that exist with special attention to the differences between qualitative and quantitative methods so as to establish why the specific method employed here is deemed most appropriate for the subject matter.

Qualitative and quantitative research methods are fundamentally distinct paradigms for investigating social phenomena. They derive from oppositional assumptions in pursuit of different but often complementary research objectives. These methods contribute toward generating knowledge and understanding, but diverge with respect to their conceptualization of data, the framework of inquiry, and interpretative approaches.

Quantitative research is rooted in the context of positivism, and it holds that there is an objective, stable, and measurable reality. Since quantifying variables, testing hypothesis, and discovering generalizable patterns through structured methodologies characterize a quantitative research methodology approach, it is therefore based on the assumption that an observable fact and a statistical relationship may explain a real phenomenon. Typical methods in the field are surveys, structured questionnaires, and controlled experiments. This method allows researchers to make inferences about larger groups of people based on sample data. Bryman (2012) elaborates that “quantitative research highlights quantification in the collection and analysis of data and entails a deductive approach to the relationship between theory and research”. Thus, concepts are operationalized as measurable variables in this framework, and the research is evaluated in terms of reliability, validity, and replicability.

In contrast, qualitative approaches draw upon an interpretivist or constructivist epistemology that regards reality as socially constructed and contextually concerned. By definition, qualitative research is not focused on testing either a theory or a hypothesis

that is pre-defined; instead, it seeks to explore the inner subjective experience, meaning, and interaction of individuals and groups. In the words of Denzin and Lincoln (2018), “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them”. Such methods include in-depth interviews, participant observation, and the analysis of textual or visual materials. Thus, qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for exploring under-researched or sensitive topics because they emphasize understanding the richness, complexity, and nuances of lived experience.

One of the main differences between the two paradigms is about their approach to generalizability. Quantitative research usually aims for statistical generalization, where findings from a representative sample can be generalized to the population on large scale. This is aided by probabilistic sampling techniques and large sample sizes, which improve the external validity of the results. Against, qualitative research pursues what Lincoln and Guba (1985) termed as “transferability”, the extent to which insights gained from a particular context can inform understanding across other contexts. Qualitative studies do not claim universality; indeed such studies provide “thick description” by which readers or researchers may decide whether and how findings might hold relevance for their own context.

Quantitative data are numerical, and therefore capable of statistical measurement, permitting researchers to compute such metrics as means, standard deviations, correlations, and regression coefficients. These outputs are typically presented graphically or in tables, and in statistical models. Conversely, qualitative data are the non-numerical kind: interview transcripts, field notes, audiovisual recordings, and images. Qualitative techniques interpret data mostly in terms of coding, categorization, and thematic or narrative analysis. Thematic analysis is a technique, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), for “identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data”, addressing the more subtle and elaborate aspects of complex phenomena.

Another fundamental difference between the two methodologies is their responsiveness to the research process. Quantitative studies work with a fairly structured and fixed design, specific variables, and standardized instruments. This characteristic enhanced consistency and comparability across cases; however, it can also somewhat hinder the

researcher's ability to engage with emerging insights. On the other hand, qualitative research is flexible and adaptable. Research questions can change while the study design can be modified to accommodate preliminary findings. Such flexibility could be particularly advantageous in a complex or fluid setting because the researcher cannot expect to know in full what is happening with the phenomena being studied by the beginning of the inquiry.

Despite of the differences between qualitative and quantitative approaches, there is no intrinsic incompatibility between these two. Rather, the growing acceptance of mixed-methods research has led to an increased appreciation of their complementary nature. Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007) define mixed-methods research as “the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative approaches... for the purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration”. The rationale for such integration is to exploit the advantages of both paradigms while compensating their limitations.

In marketing, sociology, and education mixed-methods designs find great application. The qualitative step may elicit consumer motivation arising from interviews or ethnographic observation that show consumers connect some brands with social identity. These insights now guide a quantitative survey that focuses on examining how widely and strongly this association resonates across different demographic groups. This interplay between qualitative and quantitative methodologies allows both sets of findings to be fine-tuned or expanded upon, adding to the scientific rigor and relevance of the research in question.

So, qualitative and quantitative methodologies are two totally different traditions in the social sciences, but both have their equally big importance. Quantitative methods can be defined in terms of precision, generalizability, and replicability, so they are most suitable for hypothesis testing and for drawing statistical inferences. Qualitative methods give contextual depth, interpretative richness, and conceptual insight so that they are indispensable for understanding complex social realities. Rather than seeing them in juxtaposition, it is much better to see them as having potential synergy in their unique contributions to a more holistic view of phenomenon under investigation. In light of the intricate nature of the subject of inquiry, namely the condition of women

in the labor market, which is characterized by multiple, intersecting, and often uncontrollable variables, the most suitable research methodology to ascertain whether gender constitutes a real discriminatory factor is the qualitative approach, specifically through in-depth interviews. The qualitative method of interviewing is particularly effective in revealing more subtle forms of discrimination that tend to become ingrained in social practices, institutional settings, and interpersonal transactions. These are not easily quantified but require depth of interpretation for comprehension.

Qualitative research, while being undeniably powerful in bringing forth generalizable insights on the basis of structured and statistically valid samples, comes with a number of limitations in this particular case. Quantitative methods mainly aim at the identification of patterns and description of phenomena using numerical indicators obtained from representative samples. Although quantitative research provides an opportunity for external validity, the very limitations of quantitative research arise from its inability to yield subjective dimensions of discrimination, such as lived experiences, emotional impact, and context-specific nuances. More so, quantitative data collection design assumes a reasonable level of clarity and measurability that may be ever so lacking within the complexities of social reality that engender more gender inequalities in employment.

3.2 Tool used: interviews

For this thesis, we're going to use interviews as our main research method.

Interviews as a method of qualitative research is one of the strongest ways to understand the subjective dimensions of human experience. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) contend that interviews are not designed to create quantifiable data but rather to tap into meanings, feelings, and perceptions that lie below observable behavior. This approach enables respondents to articulate their viewpoints in their own terms and thus offer information not normally available with standardized instruments such as questionnaires. Unlike survey methods that emphasize completeness and uniformity, interviews extract dense and context-rich information, allowing themes, contradictions, and processes to emerge spontaneously (Charmaz, 2014).

Particularly in sociology, anthropology, marketing, and gender studies, methodological strength is important in understanding phenomena that are not easily quantifiable. Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf (1988), for example, indicated that qualitative interviews open up hidden consumer needs and symbolic brand associations in a consumer study. Gender and work studies similarly use interviews as a method that applies different form of methodology to help researchers to access lived experiences in terms of inequality, discrimination, and identity negotiation, typically connected with power and the way it manifests both organizationally and societally (Acker, 1990; Oakley, 1981).

An important advantage of interviewing, especially in its semi-structured form, is the flexibility of methods used. Semi-structured interviews, according to Patton (2002), are closely guided by a flexible protocol that keeps thematic consistency, while allowing for exhaustive follow-up questions and narrative elaborations. This interactive nature facilitates the co-construction of knowledge and fits inductive research designs where theory is constructed from data rather than being imposed beforehand (Bryman, 2016). Furthermore, the rapport built between the interviewer and participant might provide greater encouragement for an interviewee to talk about deeply personal issues or sensitive issues, which is most relevant in research dealing with trauma, exclusion, or social stigma (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Concerning interview and interview-based research strengths, there are many weaknesses believed to constrain the research. More often mentioned in the limitations is the lack of statistical generalizability. As Silverman (2013) acknowledges, qualitative samples are typically small and purposively selected, and one cannot, therefore, extrapolate outside the studied group in any probabilistic sense. The qualitative research, then, is more about transferability (Lincoln and Guba 1985), which is the degree to which knowledge acquired in a particular context can be applied to other similar contexts through in-depth description and contextual relevance.

The subjective nature of both the participant's testimony and the researcher's interpretation entails an element of bias and selective understanding. As Mishler (1986) maintains, interviews are dialogic and co-constructed; therefore, both parties shape the context and tone of the talk. Researcher bias is the first source of concern within this. It may be shown in ways of questioning, likeness of responses, or priority in themes in the analysis. To recommend ways and means of minimizing the risks mentioned, it is possible to cite Malterud, who advocates methodological rigor (reflexivity, triangulation, and member checking) as means of improving the credibility and transparency of qualitative findings.

Logistical and operational constraints also present considerable challenges. Braun and Clarke (2013), for instance, note that the mere organizing of interviews, transcription, thematic coding, and interpretation is an immensely laborious and time-consuming affair. An even greater demand is posed whenever such research is conducted across multiple sites or with different teams, where efforts must be made to ensure consistency and coordination. The development of reliability across interviews, especially when differing interviewers are involved, is not an easy task and requires much advance planning and training.

However, interviews are a strong methodological option for analyzing complex human behavior and subjective meaning-making. They provide access to phenomena beyond direct observation and assist in understanding how people make sense of their actions or social worlds. For instance, in market research, interviews are especially valuable during the exploratory phase, in which findings serve as an important input into further

quantitative testing and model-building endeavors (Carson, Gilmore, Perry, & Gronhaug, 2001).

Finally, to conclude, interviews are the best criterion in research contexts not because they serve to quantify or simplify, but because they understand and interpret. The very fact that they evoke, and do so effectively, context-sensitive knowledge anywhere, anytime, makes them attractive to those who wish to delve into the finer aspects of human existence, both at the individual and structural levels.

3.2.1 Interviews in my research

Interviews were specifically chosen to adequately represent current discussions regarding gender issues at the workplace. Hence, I held semi-structured interviews with ten women who are currently employed in multinational corporations large enough to provide a context for reflecting effective work-related gender dynamics.

This selection was designed to allow some variation across women at different organizational levels so as to adequately represent different angles and perspectives, and to explore how experiences pertaining to a gender may be different from one seniority or career stage to the other.

The sample was therefore intentionally made heterogeneous: participants were sorted into three categories; there were five women at entry level (two from Accenture, two from Deloitte and one of them work at KPMG), three women at the managerial level (all from the Ernst&Young) and two at partnership level, one from KPMG and the other from Ernst&Young.

All interviews were conducted in April 2025, which helped ensure uniformity in the time frame and minimize risks of contextual shifts that could otherwise affect the comparability of responses.

Each interview was approximately 45 minutes long, for a total of 450 minutes (7.5 hours) of audio material. To retain as much of the richness of the narrative as possible while still

providing rigorous grounds for analyzing the content, interviews were audiotaped with the consent of the participants, then fully transcribed. Transcription, although labor-intensive, became indispensable for gaining insight into the explicit themes as well as the hesitations, stops, or emphasis presented in qualitative research, often hinting at another layer of meaning.

The transcription produced an estimated 50 pages of text, which became the primary data for thematic analysis. These transcripts vividly illustrated and presented the challenges, perceptions, and traverse women experiences in their world of work. In addition to contributing primary data, the interviews provided spaces for reflection and co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participant, thus delving deeper into the ways gender shapes access to opportunities, experiences of evaluation, and trajectories of advancement.

By contrasts in the voices of women actors at different levels of organizational seniority across all firms in the sector, this research was able to distill similarities and divergences. These voices not only feed the analysis, but vividly expose at times the complexities and contradictions surrounding actual areas of gender inclusion whereby these themes directly touch the lives of women interviewed. Ultimately, the interviews provided this thesis not only with empirical content, but also a space for reflection on how gender still shapes, permeates, and is sometimes used to undermine career paths, organizational culture, and professional recognition even within firms that formally espouse principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

3.3 Practical application: implementation of the method in the case study

A qualitative methodology was used to carry out the research, through the use of semi-structured interviews with a selected group of professional women. The participants are currently employed in large multinational companies, including the so-called Big Four, Ernst&Young, PwC, Deloitte and KPMG, and major consulting and technology companies such as Accenture. The decision to focus on women working in these particular companies is justified by several interconnected arguments that are related to the central research question, i.e. whether gender constitutes a discriminating factor in the labor market, in particular with regard to the entry phase and, subsequently, to career advancement.

The principal motivation for the selection of these companies is their impressive size and global influence across the world economy. Each of these companies employs tens of thousands of people, all over the world and in up to a dozen sectors, rendering themselves very pertinent cases in the studies of labor market effects at a larger scale. They are also under great publicity and, hence, under reputational pressures, which normally push companies to pour large resources into establishing and disseminating internal policies on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. These include structured women-targeted mentorship schemes, diversity quotas, leadership development initiatives, and gender sensitivity training. Consequently, these companies present themselves as being formally engaged in the elimination of gender-based inequalities while constructing work environments where merit and competence become the sole criteria for such advancement. Nevertheless, the existence of these policy frameworks does not, in itself, guarantee complete effectiveness or universal application. Hence it is imperative to investigate the extent to which such formal mechanisms appear to also deliver equitable outcomes at the ground level with regard to facilitating women's access to greater responsibility and influence.

Another relevant reason for selecting these corporations relates to their inner structure concerning promotion opportunities. In these companies, the rules of engagement are

founded on clear, and most likely, accelerated career paths. Promotion criteria are regularly defined and correlated with certain performance measurements, allowing considerable career mobility, especially at the entry levels. These fast-track pathways present an excellent opportunity for checking whether women have access to these openings on the same basis as men. The very existence of fast-track provisions would provide mapping frameworks for promotion differences, strategic role access, and high-visibility project participation over a very short time span. The very structure of these systems would thus allow isolating any induced gender disparities to determine whether the differences are a function of systemic discrimination, informal organizational dynamics, or wider cultural and social expectations imposed upon women in the professional world.

The support and rationale behind the selection of the research method must also be legitimate in order to aid the understanding and explanation of the topic. Semi-structured interviews were therefore picked as the best strategy able to capture even more depth and subtlety about an individual's experiences within the organizations. The quantitative ones would give background statistical information about common trends, such as how many women are there in leadership positions, but they would not be able to penetrate into the more subjective aspects of discrimination or exclusion. Such perception can have some informal lines or may manifest through subtle ways.

Interviews also facilitate the exploration of the most concrete yet ephemeral aspect of workplace dynamics: culture. The culturally sanctioned behavior that turns into unwritten rules, informal networks, leadership styles, and interpersonal relations could constitute either a major hindrance or a great help to one's ascendance. Thus, listening to the lived experiences of women in these spaces would point out forms of inequality that are inscribed not into formal structures but into everyday interactions and manners within institutions. This methodological approach serves as a bridging link to strengthen the analysis of this research by coordinating formal policy with actual practice.

3.4 Methodological constraints

Starting from the premise that my research is grounded in the use of semi-structured interviews, it is necessary to acknowledge both the methodological limitations and the practical disadvantages that such an approach entails. It is generally agreed that qualitative interviews are interestingly the best possible way to gain access to deepest and most nuanced understandings of individuals' lived experiences within multifaceted organizational contexts. However, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) noted that the very data produced in interviews are more interpretative than predictive, and therefore cannot be generalized beyond the sample originating in the specific context. This is even more serious in instances of non-probabilistic sampling, which is quite common in qualitative research that aims at analytical depth instead of statistical representation (Patton, 2002). Consequently, the results can only be viewed as contextually bound constructions engendered by time, space, and the interactional dynamics of the research process, not generalizable truths.

Another limitation identified by Seidman (2006) pertains to the criteria of participant selection. In this study, the participants were purposefully sampled based on being women in large multinational corporations with structured systems of career advancement and progressive diversity and inclusion policies. Although purposive sampling is an appropriate and often used method in qualitative research (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013), it clearly limits the generalizability of the findings. The accounts presented by the interviewed women, although rich and insightful, constitute only a small fraction of a larger population. According to Hammersley (2008), no account exists in isolation, but rather can be contextualized and structured by variables such as organizational culture, positionality, geographical location, and even personal background. Therefore, these narratives ought not to be considered as representing the experiences of all women in somewhat comparable or completely different professional settings.

In practical terms, qualitative data collection takes a lot of time, money, and analysis from interviewing to reality. As cited in Weiss (1994) and Rubin & Rubin (2012), the whole process of interview that comprises planning, conducting sessions, transcription, coding,

thematic analysis, and interpretative synthesis carries a high degree of precision and critical reflexivity. This is especially so for sensitive topics and emotional themes such as gender bias. Moreover, as Coffey and Atkinson (1996) posit, qualitative data analysis is by nature amenable to researcher bias owing to its interpretative nature. The researcher in this sense is an active meaning-giver to data, necessitating continuous and conscious transparent engagement with his positionality. Pillow (2003) points out that reflexivity itself must be paramount, insisting that researchers put their assumptions to the test and reveal how the epistemological stand they take feeds into their analysis outcomes.

Another important consideration refers to the relational dynamics established in the particular interview situation. Since interviewing is never wholly free from interference with symbolic and social cues constituting the interview interaction (Fontana and Frey 2005), those very dynamics acquire much greater relevance with regard to researching sensitive issues. For example, response biases, such as social desirability (Podsakoff et al. 2003), may compel participants to distort their responses according to what they think the interviewer wants to hear or to censor certain opinions for fear of reprisal on the grounds of confidentiality, emotional discomfort, or reputation. Such factors, if not consciously acknowledged, can interfere with both the authenticity and completeness of the data thereby collected.

Finally, the interpretive nature of qualitative research necessitates a rethinking of conventional evaluative criteria such as reliability, validity, and replicability. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) say, qualitative research must instead be justified on the basis of credibility, transferability, and confirmability - these standards are more consonant with the constructivist paradigm. These criteria, however, will demand that the researcher make explicit his or her methodological choices and aware that the process by which the knowledge is produced is dialogical and co-constructed. So, even though these limitations are methodological/practical, the use of semi-structured interviews does seem justified, given what is required by the research question. Participants' narratives are relatively rich in depth, complexity, and context, allowing researchers to understand how gender relations are understood and negotiated within corporate settings. It also allows the observation of both overt and covert mechanisms through which inequality continues,

even in organizations that profess to promote equality and inclusion.

Chapter 4: Analysis of findings

4.1 The research process: data collection and organization

In my thesis, I addressed a highly salient and intricate issue by exploring the potential endurance of gender as a form of discrimination within the contemporary labor market. The central research question guiding this study focuses on analyzing the contemporary role of gender in determining opportunities for access, permanence and professional growth. The present study focuses on the status of women, with the aim of understanding whether women, in the current context, still face obstacles and limitations related to their gender, despite the many formal advances in equality and equity. The interview was guided by a logical approach that distinguishes two fundamental moments of professional life: firstly, the phase of entry into the world of work, which corresponds to the selection and recruitment processes; and secondly, the phase of career advancement, i.e. the internal growth path that can lead to obtaining management or leadership positions. This distinction enabled the decomposition of a complex phenomenon into two specific areas, each of which exhibited its own dynamics and criticalities, yet was also closely interconnected.

The qualitative approach was taken to answer the research question by collecting direct testimonies through semi-structured interviews between two groups of women differing in positions within the world of work and their experience.

A fundamental criterion in the selection of interviewees was the fact that all the women involved are presently working for large multinational companies or have previously been employed with them, such as the Big Four or even Accenture. Notably, the motivation for this particular orientation is rooted in the particular organizational structure of the entities in question. It is indeed accepted that they are very well known for the development of highly codified selection processes and for providing formalized internal career paths with clear level steps based on pre-established metrics. It is in this kind of corporate context that one may speak most clearly about possible effects of gender in the

early entry stages and later stages in professional development. Such environments, precisely because of their formalization and apparent transparency, provide an ideal framework for testing the hypothesis that gender may still constitute a discriminating variable, beyond official norms and declarations of intent.

The initial group of women interviewed comprised young female professionals who had recently entered the world of work and successfully navigated the selection processes to secure roles in prominent multinational companies. The subjects' experiences enabled the collection of significant data on the subjective perception of possible inequalities during interviews, assessments and the early stages of induction.

The testimonies of these young women workers provided significant insights into contemporary recruitment dynamics, the presence or absence of gender bias – both explicit and implicit – and the impact that gender can have at an early stage of the career path. The voices of the subjects were of the utmost importance in determining whether, despite the existence of inclusion-oriented corporate policies, cultural resistances or stereotypes still condition women's access to professional opportunities.

In the second part of the research, I turned my attention to women occupying executive or managerial positions within the same types of companies. These are professionals who, in the course of their careers, have gone through numerous organizational transitions and have been confronted with internal dynamics of promotion and evaluation. Their experiences, more articulated and stratified over time, have allowed to analyze in depth whether and to what extent gender has been an obstacle in professional growth, in the possibility of holding positions of responsibility, or in the recognition of merit. The reflections of these women provided a broad and critical point of view, enriched by the awareness deriving from experience, and allowed me to identify possible more subtle mechanisms of exclusion, which do not necessarily manifest themselves in explicit forms of discrimination, but which insinuate themselves into the logic of evaluation, group dynamics, or recognized and valued leadership models.

The comparison between the two types of interviewees was particularly helpful for seeing this phenomenon diachronically and for tracking continuities or changes in women's experiences at different career stages. The interaction between the data from the two

sections of the research also enabled reflection on the coherence between the equality policies promoted at company level and the actual experiences of employees.

The research process that was followed sought to return an articulate and well-founded vision of the reality of women in the world of work today, with particular attention to multinational contexts, in the awareness that only by listening to direct voices and analyzing concrete dynamics is it possible to understand whether and how gender continues to represent, today, a barrier in the full recognition of merit and professional skills.

4.2 Analysis of results

What follows is an analytical exploration of the interviews conducted with women at different organizational levels. Each section explores a key theme, highlighting recurring patterns, individual experiences and direct quotes that illustrate how gender continues to influence career paths in today's labor market.

A total of ten women, belonging three distinct professional levels (which are entry level, managerial level, and partner level), were interviewed for this research. The interviews were conducted anonymously in order to ensure that the participants felt entirely free to share their experiences openly and without reservation.

The table below shows the main themes that emerged in response to the interviews and represents the trends manifested in the women who participated in the study. Thus, to conduct the analysis, a comparative study of all interviews was undertaken, comparing responses to determine if there were major similarities or repetitive patterns across respondent participants. These comparisons would help identify common experiences, perceptions or feelings, and also narratives that could be found across the interviews. The findings of this analysis are summarized below and represented in the table that follows by a visual representation of the major qualitative findings of the empirical research.

Themes	Common insights from interviews
Access to the labor market	All interviewees found employment through conventional channels (LinkedIn, internships, online applications), often considering value alignment with employers.
Perception of gender in recruitment	Many participants noticed efforts to achieve gender balance in hiring. Some saw this positively; others perceived it as symbolic.
Gender-related challenges	Challenges were rarely explicit but emerged in subtle forms: comments, stereotypes, or questions about family and motherhood.
Differences in evaluation criteria	Women are often judged by different standards: more on soft skills and less on technical merit or leadership potential.
Sector - or role - based gender access	Technical and consultancy fields are seen as less accessible to women, while HR / communication roles are more open but offer fewer growth opportunities.
Career progression	Younger women are just starting, but many already perceive cultural barriers. Managers often experience slower or more conditional progression.
Barriers or bias in promotions	Implicit bias affects leadership opportunities, project access, and performance assessments. Women feel the need to prove and justify themselves more.

Strategies for advancement	Younger professionals are developing strategies (assertiveness, networking), while senior women describe gender-neutral approaches or building internal support.
Impact of (potential) motherhood	Motherhood—or its prospect—heavily influences perceived availability, access to opportunities, and long-term career planning.
Company policies and perception	Most companies have policies, but they are often seen as superficial. Videos, trainings, or quotas don't suffice without real cultural change.
Cultural and implicit bias	Organizational culture and unconscious bias operate subtly but significantly, limiting female advancement, especially at higher levels.
Suggestions for improvement	Common ideas: effective mentoring, anonymized CVs and evaluations, gender KPIs, bias coaching, flexible hours, and parental support for all.

The table above presents a summary of the main themes addressed during the interviews. A more in-depth analysis of the different interviews conducted will follow. The present study aims to understand how gender influences women's experiences and perceptions in the working world by directly analyzing the words of the women interviewed. Each thematic section is designed to draw attention to recurring patterns, personal reflections and structural dynamics. The sections do not seek to generalize, but rather to provide a voice for personally experienced realities.

4.2.1 Access to the labor market

Although the participants were at different career stages, they all used conventional channels such as LinkedIn, official company websites, internships and graduate schemes to describe their entry into the labor market. Despite this procedural uniformity, it masks a deeper truth for women entering the labor market for the first time. In fact, they are the ones who have worked the hardest and most sophisticated ways to get their first job. One young woman recruited by KPMG said: *"I applied for jobs that I thought were interesting and went through the interview process.... In an effort to be strategic, I focused on companies whose values matched my own"*. This perspective pertains to the pursuit of meaningful employment, whilst concurrently acknowledging an implicit awareness of the potential gender dynamics that may be in operation within the workplace.

Another entry-level participant stated: *"I would search for jobs on LinkedIn, I would browse through company websites, and I would actively apply for jobs that I'm particularly drawn to"*. Women demonstrate a clear awareness of what constitutes an appropriate fit, as they navigate this middle path, especially in sectors that are predominantly male-dominated.

Access to employment opportunities appears to be structured for women. Many of the participants had already completed internships or graduate programs, which are commonly recognized as the main entry points into the labor market. One of the

participants interviewed, who currently works for EY, said: *“I entered the labor market through a placement program for new graduates. This allowed me to develop my professional career step by step, up to the point where I am today”*.

Entry into the partner level was characterized by an initiative - and performance -based approach. Referring to the case of a partner working at KPMG, she said: *“I sent a CV in response to an advertisement and conducted an internet search. I was doing an internship in a different organization at the time, and I pursued interviews because I was highly drawn to their results-oriented approach”*.

While taking a balanced stance on the topic, her response highlighted an important discussion regarding the level of initiative women must take in order to access and maintain positions within the sector.

P1: *Although women access the labor market through conventional and standardized entry channels, such as internships and online applications, their experience is characterized by a higher degree of strategic self-positioning and initiative, reflecting an underlying need to demonstrate fit and legitimacy within male-dominated professional environments.*

4.2.2 Perception of the gender in recruitment

While recruitment processes tended to fall within standard language describing positive terms in the formal sense, the majority of participants, particularly at entry and middle levels, admitted that gender played a latent but real part in determining their early work experience. One junior analyst at Accenture commented: *“Sometimes there’s a questionnaire, and it could be pretty clear that they were leaning towards female candidates... It almost felt like recruiters were trying to avoid being biased”*. This tension between inclusion and tokenism captures the fine balance women tend to discern in diversity-based recruitment.

Another interviewee for an entry-level role, who also works in Accenture, reported, *“I believed that female candidates would only be a consideration and ultimately hired in order to meet the organization’s required [quota] of women in the workforce”*. While diversity efforts may open doors, it risks eroding confidence when are not backed by the honest acknowledgment of merit. This reflects a larger attitude: being included because of gender might not feel as empowering as it would have without the weight of justification.

In managerial contexts, gender emerged in more veiled forms. One interviewee said, *“I sometimes got the impression that there were lower expectations for my availability or ambition levels as a female candidate in comparison to men”*. Such presuppositions in terms of future family responsibilities indicate that recruiters are still working within gendered narratives, even in an unconscious way. Another stated, *“As a woman, recruiters tended to look more strongly for qualities such as adaptability or the potential for family responsibilities”*.

P2: *Although recruitment processes in multinational firms are framed in formally inclusive terms, women often perceive their selection as influenced by gender-balancing logics or diversity quotas, which can undermine their sense of legitimacy and reinforce implicit biases related to availability, ambition, and family responsibilities revealing a persistent tension between symbolic inclusion and genuine merit-based recognition.*

4.2.3 Gender related challenges

Although none of the women reported overt hostile or discriminatory acts, nearly all recognized gender-related barriers that were subtle, cultural in nature, and even hard to define but which still made their impact. These barriers were most common among women in entry positions and management positions, wherein the chasm between formal equal opportunity and real life was greatest.

Most of the beginning participants detailed how stereotypes and bias arise in indirect manners, for instance through tone, assumption, or offhand conversation, instead of through formal ways. One lower-ranked employee remembered: *“I did catch some comments about it towards the end of a few interviews”*, implying that unrecorded and offhand interactions sometimes reveal biases that formal protocols seek to keep in the background. These incidents, albeit circumstantial, add up to a larger environment in which women consistently sense being monitored and slightly inspected in a different way than their male colleagues.

Others felt frustrated to be routinely underestimated or stereotyped, in male-dominated fields in particular. A woman working previously in the sport sector recalled: *“I got the feeling that the recruiters underestimated my ambition or willingness to step up to leadership jobs”*. Such misrecognition need not always be blatant but feels deeply ingrained: the message being that ambition and leadership do not usually go for women but need to be explicitly demonstrated.

At the management level, gendered expectations became institutional. Some women reported being questioned about the family’s intentions, not overtly, but unequivocally revealing a gender bias. One of them told: *“I was sometimes asked veiled questions about family status or childbearing plans... something none of the male candidates are ever asked”*. Even when framed as polite or hypothetical questions, they express a hidden distrust about whether a woman will, or can, prioritize her job as much as a man.

In addition to recruiting, these presuppositions influenced day-to-day life in the workplace. As a manager reflected, *“There’s a quiet pressure to prove you’re all in all the time... as though there’s always a shadow of a question in the back of your mind”*. This feeling of being under trial of having to prove not only competence but also endurance, reliability, and devotion, is emotionally draining and structurally unfair.

The partner-level interviewee reported no gender-based barriers early in her career but indicated a clear shift as she progressed. *“When I got to higher-level positions, I experienced a shift... being a woman began to matter, more in the form of unconscious biases”* she clarified. These biases weren’t written into human resource policy but were strongly ingrained in the workforce culture. Women who expressed assertiveness or

leadership, for example, were criticized more strongly than men exhibiting the same qualities. *“There’s still this perception that a woman being direct is abrasive and a man is just being decisive”* she added. In addition, caregiving expectations disproportionately influenced the perception of availability and dedication in women in senior positions: *“The assumption remains that if you have to stay home with a sick child to take care of the child, it is the mother who has to stay home”*.

What was revealed through these interviews was not a tale of overt exclusion, but of insidious erosion, which refers to small everyday responses added up to structural disadvantage. As was expressed by one participant *“It’s not about one big thing... it’s about the atmosphere, the tone, the assumptions you constantly feel you’re working against”*. These insidious pressures, such as tone of voice or frequency of interruptions or exclusion from strategic meetings or lack of eye contact in conversation, are all forms of cultural codes that send quiet signals as to which person or group is being trusted, heard, and belongs.

Significantly, these barriers not only manifested themselves as external but also as internal. A number of women reported how they changed their own behavior as a result of these tacit pressures — tempering ambition, resisting the urge to talk, or second-guessing themselves in leadership conversations. One junior consultant told *“Sometimes I won’t speak up, not because I don’t have a thing to say, but because I fear how it’ll sound”*. In total, the gender-based challenges reported by the women interviewed capture the way gender bias in the present tends to cloak itself in politeness and professionalism and becomes more difficult to spot, to challenge and to counter. They are not random individual incidents but part of a system, part of the quotidian fabric of work life, that women must navigate ongoing.

P3: *In contemporary corporate environments, gender-related challenges often manifest not through overt discrimination but through a pervasive and subtle cultural bias, embedded in daily interactions and organizational norms, which leads women, especially in entry and managerial roles, to navigate an ongoing burden of implicit scrutiny, self-*

monitoring, and behavioral adaptation, thereby reinforcing systemic disadvantage under the guise of professionalism and neutrality.

4.2.4 Differences in evaluation criteria

One of the strongest and most ongoing themes that emerged in all the interviews was the feeling that men and women are judged by separate, and in few cases unequal, standards. This was not only the case in promotions or performance reviews but also in day-to-day tasks and everyday feedback. For women in their first post-graduate jobs, this usually meant that women would be highly valued for their interpersonal skills rather than technical ability. As a woman interviewed recalled: *“Women are sometimes judged more on softer skills or personality characteristics, as opposed to outcomes and results”*. This made many of the women feel that they must work harder to receive the same acknowledgment.

At the management level, women realized how these varying standards impacted advancement in their careers. *“Leadership and authority are linked to male-coded behaviors... and that puts a limit on how women are seen when going for promotions”* a manager reported. Qualities such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and a certain degree of detachment are often seen as essential for effective leadership. However, some participants noted that while these traits are generally well-received in men, when exhibited by women, they may at times be perceived differently, occasionally interpreted as signs of coldness or excessive rigidity.

The partner-interviewee went on to explain how this imbalance becomes institutionalized in senior ranks: *“An assertive or commanding presence comes more easily to men than to women”*. Because of this, women tend to have to work hard to balance demonstrating competence and remaining approachable in their work—something that does not seem to be asked of their male counterparts. These conflicting expectations have a way of influencing both how women are judged by others and how women themselves judge

their performance, possibly imposing a second, often tacit, burden on their work experience.

P4: *Despite formal claims of meritocracy, women in multinational corporate settings are often evaluated according to distinct and gendered standards that emphasize interpersonal and relational traits over technical competence, leading to a dual burden in which they must balance competence with likability, particularly in leadership roles, thus reinforcing unequal expectations and constraining access to advancement and recognition.*

4.2.5 Sector - or role - based gender access

A recurring theme across the interviewees was the presence of gender-specific or role-based barriers within the sector or within their specific job. Women tended to get pushed into departments that were themselves seen as more “feminine” such as communication, human resources, or support functions; technical leadership or highly visible positions stayed male-held.

Entry-level colleagues often cited experiencing gendered barriers even prior to their first job. *“There are certainly areas that are less open to women, particularly very technical areas or ones that have a historically male-oriented work environment”* said one. Another entry-level participant remarked, *“Communication or human resources types of jobs do appear to be more welcoming to women”*.

For managers themselves, the impact of these cleavages was more institutional. *“I still haven’t found a women-majority organization in which women fill the bulk of the more strategic jobs”* a manager reported. What ensues is the possibility of occupational segregation: women might work for companies in substantial numbers but in jobs that lack significant decision-making capacity.

A partner interviewed reported *“consulting is usually a sector more masculine because you have to commit a tremendous number of hours to it... there’s still this bias about women”*. She added that *“if leadership positions are dominated by men, women feel it becomes harder to imagine a career path that allows both professional achievement and a good life outside work”*. These quotes validate how representation, or the lack thereof, not only serves as a reflection of bias but helps to perpetuate it as well, defining women’s ambitions and possibilities both entering or transitioning in the workforce.

P5: *Persistent gendered segmentation within organizational sectors and roles leads women to be overrepresented in supportive or “feminized” functions and underrepresented in technical and strategic positions, reinforcing occupational segregation and limiting both their decision-making power and their capacity to envision sustainable leadership trajectories in male-dominated fields.*

4.2.6 Career progression

Career progression was also one of the strongest areas of divergence in the interviews, as women everywhere outlined how gender impacted their rate of advancement, visibility, and access to opportunity. For beginning participants, the scarcity of women in visible leadership already determined outlook. *“One of the first things I do when I’m considering an organization is how many women fill leadership slots and I still have not found one in which the women dominate”* a participant revealed. The lack of female models contributed to a perception of constraint, which was internalized early.

At the management level, women faced more overt barriers. One said *“Despite having a chance to develop internally, I’ve done so at a relatively slower rate than some males”*. Another cited the challenge of negotiating pay and respect following taking on new responsibilities: *“I went through a role change, receiving more responsibilities, but found it hard to properly negotiate salary changes”*. A third manager stated bluntly: *“Male*

colleagues received leadership opportunities more easily than I did; I had to prove exceptional skills in order to qualify”.

These accounts indicate that women need to perform in excess in order to earn the same path as their male colleagues. The approach to promotion becomes highly biased in that it places a myriad of extra expectations for hitting milestones and proving competence.

The partner-level experience brought long-term view. One managing director recalled: *“When I was within the first decade of my working life, I didn’t have kids and was very focused. My upgrades after that followed a predictable pattern. But when I began to pass through the managerial and executive ranks, the equation changed”.* At the later stages, performance was about visibility, sponsorship, and fit within the organization’s culture; areas in which women, particularly mothers, were less visible. She continued *“Oftentimes women do start to have more reserved approaches or a need to explain absences that need not be explained”.*

In each instance, advancement was as much a matter of perception as of merit, of relationship and of staying power. The path upward for women was apparently filled with extra hurdles spoken and unspeaking ones.

P6: *Women’s career progression in multinational corporations is shaped by systemic disparities in visibility, evaluation, and access to leadership roles, where advancement is less a function of merit alone and more dependent on relational capital, cultural fit, and sustained overperformance, factors that disproportionately disadvantage women, particularly in the absence of female role models and equitable recognition frameworks.*

4.2.7 Barriers or bias in promotions

Promotion opportunities, although formally available to all, were not on a level basis on gender grounds to most of the interviewees. Women managers were the ones to assert most strongly about this issue having experienced personally the impact of implicit bias

and informal gatekeeping on their own promotion. One of the managers talked about the imbalance: *“Male colleagues were having leadership positions openly presented to them, and I’d have to prove myself highly skilled to even be in the running”*. Another agreed: *“I’d have to struggle for baby steps when in reality I have recently switched jobs wherein I assumed more responsibilities”*.

The expectations for advancement also varied. *“Women had to explain their results more than men”* reported one of them. Being required to over-justify or “prove” oneself despite real achievement was a common complaint. These acts of power both inhibited career advancement but also undermined self-confidence in the longer-term as well.

At the partner level, one executive reflected *“A man away for family reasons is seen as dedicated; a woman under the same conditions may be viewed as less committed”*. These reflections illustrate how gender bias can influence not only the outcomes of decisions, but also the underlying assumptions that inform them, leading to differing interpretations of qualities such as ambition, availability, and leadership depending on gender.

P7: *Despite the formal availability of promotion pathways, women often face implicit bias, informal gatekeeping, and unequal evaluative standards that compel them to over-justify their achievements and prove their commitment, barriers that not only slow advancement but also erode self-confidence and reinforce gendered interpretations of ambition, availability, and leadership potential.*

4.2.8 Strategies for advancement

In response to these pressures, women in a range of positions in their careers employed a range of individual strategies in order to survive and succeed. For entry-level women in the study, many reported learning to assert themselves and get noticed. *“I’ve had to adopt specific strategies, such as building strong professional alliances, continuously investing in my education, and working on assertive communication to make my contributions*

visible, especially in male-dominated environments” said one. Another one said “I worked a lot on my assertiveness and develop a strong internal support network to reinforce my position”.

Managers having faced more complicated dynamics usually focused on developing support relationships. One of them said *“I worked a lot on my assertiveness and develop a strong internal support network to reinforce my position. Another underscored the value of mentoring: “Having a woman as a mentor truly made it clearer to me that I wasn’t seeing bias”.*

The partner-level respondent reported a very different tactic. *“I maintained a ‘gender-free’ stance to be treated as a professional only”.* Though this tactic advanced her to the partner level, afterward she remembered: *“In so doing, I now realize that I might have suppressed being a woman”.* This observation underscores the psychic cost of suppressing gender and the compromises that women necessarily make in order to succeed in institutions and organizations.

P8: *In navigating gendered organizational dynamics, women adopt diverse advancement strategies, ranging from assertiveness, alliance-building, and mentorship to the suppression of gender identity, with each approach reflecting both a response to structural inequities and a set of trade-offs that often require emotional labor and identity negotiation to gain legitimacy and visibility in male-dominated professional environments.*

4.2.9 Impact of (potential) motherhood

Of all the themes that emerged in the interviews, motherhood, or even the potential to have a child, was among the most significant and emotionally charged variables that affected women’s work lives. The subject cuts across almost all other themes: recruitment, advancement, job performance evaluation, and organizational climate. What

was so compelling about the topic was the extent to which it played out both overtly and tacitly, shaping not only tangible choices but the tone and expectations that surrounded women's work.

For women in early-career jobs, the experience of motherhood was not yet lived but already dreaded. Even childless women discussed its potential as a limiting circumstance. One participant stated *"Honestly, I'm discouraged about the prospect of having children or even discussing it in the workplace"*. This quote illustrates a pervasive fear: that motherhood could be a professional liability. A few young women avoided openly talking about family intentions to managers for fear of being judged a "risky investment" or not a worthy candidate for long-term investment.

Women managers, several of whom were working through or having worked through parenthood themselves, presented real-life examples of being assessed for their potential through a motherhood prism even when their work performance was stellar. One mid-to-senior manager explained, *"Even the potential for future motherhood impacted how some of the supervisors saw my availability for higher-responsibility work"*. One commented *"Sometimes it's not even a matter of whether you have children; it's the fact that you might have someday"*.

At the partner level, the conversation became more complex, mixing fulfillment and critique. A top leader in the organization said a positive thing: *"Motherhood has brought more balance and humanity to the way I approach work... It enriched both my professional and personal vision."* But the same woman also admitted on going structural imbalance: *"Absences are more likely to be questioned when filled by a woman than a man"*. This double standard tracks the broader social division of labor and caregiving expectation that still falls more heavily on women, even in senior leadership.

Recurrent in the interviews was the imbalance in how gender influences the way in which family responsibilities are viewed. When male colleagues stepped out for family, they were generally lauded as caring and even-handed; women were more frequently understood as distracted or lacking in commitment. As one participant said, *"When a man leaves to help tend to his child, it's admirable. When a woman does the same thing, it's expected, and also a weakness"*.

The net impact of these dynamics isn't only fewer opportunities, but a profound psychological cost. Women feel that they have to make a choice between being a "good employee" or a "good mother," and that both are only possible through ongoing emotional trading off and compromise. One manager summarized perfectly: *"You're constantly negotiating trade-offs, between your child and your team, between your aspiration and how it will look"*. In the end, what the interviews uncover is that motherhood works not as a discrete event but as a long shadow that affects the way women are valued, the way women value themselves, and the way women are located in organizational systems.

P9: *Motherhood, and even its mere potential, functions as a pervasive axis of professional bias, influencing recruitment, advancement, and daily perceptions of commitment, and imposing on women a continuous emotional negotiation between professional aspiration and maternal identity, ultimately shaping their visibility, credibility, and self-worth within organizational systems.*

4.2.10 Company policies and perception

Though all of the women interviewed who worked in corporations utilized some policy of gender balance or diversity, participants saw these as symbolic but in a certain way useful. For the low-rank workers, these efforts commonly did not have a personal impact. *"The only thing I have even experienced firsthand was a brief and pretty worthless welcome video on gender balance and harassment"* a participant reported. Another said *"These efforts feel more like branding and not real structural transformation"*.

There was guarded optimism among the managers. One said *"They are a good starting point, but tend to remain symbolic rather than really transformative"*. Others emphasized that despite good intentions, without enforcement or cultural transformation, even good policies do not suffice.

The partner in the study recognized that these types of initiatives exist but cited that their success relies on implementation: *“They work, more can be done... but yes, they do help”*. What consistently emerged was that relying solely on policy is not enough; without genuine accountability, transparent data, and active managerial engagement, such efforts risk being ineffective.

P10: *While gender equality policies are formally present in many organizations, their perceived impact remains limited when not accompanied by genuine cultural transformation, managerial accountability, and measurable implementation, leading employees, especially at junior levels, to view them as symbolic gestures rather than effective instruments of structural change.*

4.2.11 Cultural and implicit bias

The most insidious of the barriers faced by almost all interviewees was the implicit bias and the male-favoring workplace culture that accompanies it but often goes unrecognized. It was very much on display in the way that women’s performance and potential were assessed.

In its early stages, this translated into a lack of credibility. One woman remembered, *“It really does create a little bit of a ‘hostile’ atmosphere”* Another recounted the way male colleagues were presumed to have higher ability in client-facing positions: *“I was expected to prove that I was good in a high-pressure situation, while my male colleagues got the benefit of the doubt”*.

Managers cited the following patterns: *“Even in the most apparently neutral settings, there are usually underlying unconscious biases that benefit men when it comes to leadership potential or technical competence.”*

The partner looked closer at organizational behavior: *“Naturally, people are drawn to others who are similar to themselves by style, by communications skill, and yes,*

sometimes even by gender.” These micro-preferences add up and have an impact on the people getting mentored, getting promoted, and getting heard. The conclusion: organizational cultures replicate themselves unless disrupted, and gender neutrality does not necessarily mean fairness.

P11: *Implicit bias and male-oriented workplace cultures operate as pervasive but often invisible barriers to gender equity, shaping perceptions of competence, influencing access to mentorship and leadership, and reinforcing self-replicating organizational norms that privilege similarity over merit, demonstrating that formal neutrality does not equate to actual fairness.*

4.2.12 Suggestions for improvement

All of the participants had specific, well-considered suggestions for making workplaces fairer, not just in policy, but in practice. Junior responders were keen on technological fixes: *“Fully anonymized job applications and promotion processes... using AI to minimize bias”*. Others suggested early fixes such as *“mandatory bias training for team leads and hiring managers”*.

Managers who emphasized structure and visibility proposed *“We require mentoring, measurable KPIs, and career development initiatives tailored to females”*. Others demanded visible metrics: *“Salary audits, gender splits in promotions... things to make disparity visible and undeniable”*.

The interviewee at the partner level underscored the importance of coaching and accountability: *“Coaching for gender balance is extremely important... It doesn’t take an investment of massive proportions some guiding questions can actually have strong impact”*. She also underlined the role of leadership: *“If executives don’t internalize the diversity value, all of these policies are empty”*.

What brought all the voices together was an aspiration for genuine change, not tokenistic gestures, but structural, cultural, and tangible interventions to bring about equality, not merely as an aspiration, but as reality.

P12: *Achieving genuine workplace gender equality requires moving beyond symbolic initiatives toward integrated strategies that combine structural reforms—such as anonymized selection processes, gender-sensitive performance metrics, mentoring, and inclusive leadership training, with a deep cultural commitment from top management to embed equity as a lived organizational value rather than a formal aspiration.*

4.3 Discussion of key findings

The qualitative findings of the interviews underscore the intricate and multi-layered gendered configuration of the current labor market. Formal recruitment and appraisal processes are widely regarded as being both gender-neutral and based on merit, but the experiences of women at all levels within the organization illustrate the continuing presence of strongly ingrained gendered expectations, which are implicit within workplace structures and cultures.

One of the main themes to come out of the data is ongoing occupational and functional segregation of men and women. Women, even entering the workforce through the same formal channels as their masculine counterparts, still tend to cluster in roles viewed as “supportive” or “relational” like human resources, administration, or communication. Functions, although critical, are normally linked to lower levels of strategic visibility and diminished mobility. This gendered labor segmentation is supported by what Ryan and Haslam (2005) have named the “glass cliff” in the form of the propensity to put women into jobs with less security or authority, especially during organizational risk or transformation.

Directly related to this is the differentiated manner in which performance and potential are evaluated. Women at all levels of seniority indicated they were expected to live up to higher standards, specifically in pursuing leadership roles. Whereas men were typically assessed in terms of their leadership potential, technical proficiency, or assertiveness, the evaluation of woman typically included relational skills, flexibility, or perceived emotional intelligence. This is consistent with long-standing concerns within gender and organizational studies, which have illustrated how the attributes of leadership are culturally coded as masculine and hence put woman at systemic disadvantage (Powell and Butterfield, 2015).

A further salient finding concerns the motherhood penalty, both anticipated and real. The interviews revealed explicitly that even without children, women often face suspicion or diminished access to opportunities due to the anticipation of one day becoming mothers. This aligns with literature concerning the “maternal wall” and the existence of

motherhood (or potential motherhood) among the strongest determiners of workplace bias directed at women (Correll, Benard, and Paik, 2007). When motherhood does arrive, its impact runs deep. Women spoke of feeling left out of projects, bypassed for promotions, or forced to rebuild credibility following maternity leave. By comparison, male colleagues embracing caregiver roles tended to earn praise or be viewed as extraordinarily dedicated, demonstrating a culture of asymmetry in interpreting parental commitments.

At the organizational level, implicit bias appeared as a persistent and elusive force. Even in organizations with diversity and inclusion initiatives, the women interviewed characterized cultures that reiterated traditional gender hierarchies through implicit behaviors, unwritten expectations, and leadership templates that still reward traditionally masculine values. This is reminiscent of Joan Williams' (2000) critique of the "ideal worker" norm, a model of continuous availability and linear advancement which discriminates against those, most often women, whose lives and commitments have different rhythms.

Additionally, while numerous organizations have enacted explicit equality policy or gender initiatives, members at all levels regularly criticized these as tokenistic or inadequate. They were doubtful about one-shot training and awareness videos and were adamant about the need to have tangible, structural reform. More transparency in promotion criteria, anonymized reviews, parental leave policies available to both genders, and mentorship schemes were some of the most common recommendations for reform. They are consistent with scholarly consensus today that gender equity in the workplace cannot only require formal policy implementation, but must have cultural accountability and deep commitment to systemic reform as well (Ely and Meyerson, 2000).

What the findings really imply is that workplace gender inequality is no longer supported by overt exclusion but by an intricate system of implicit, additive disadvantages, ranging from how ambition is interpreted, to whom is mentored, to how commitment is inferred. Each of these processes is hard to identify in and of itself, but each, in combination, comprises an environment in which women are forced to negotiate their very existence, justify their aspirations, and modify behavior to legitimate themselves as leaders.

4.4 Reflections on the gender gap revealed by the research

This research provides a rich and thoughtful analysis of the state of the gender gap within the labor market at present. Although evidence of gender-based gaps remains, it is just as certain that substantial progress has occurred. The interviews uncovered that women are no longer limited to fixed functions or structural constraints as rigidly as they had previously been. Many of the respondents have gained entry into men-dominated professions, accessing functions and duties previously unavailable to them. This represents a major shift in the story of gender and work, particularly within industries like consultancy, technology, and finance, which have long remained resistant to women at higher levels.

What surfaces from the evidence is a simultaneous coexistence of advancement and opposition. On the one hand, women of the present have increased access to schooling, career advancement, and ambitions for leadership. They evince a decided consciousness of their rights and are better prepared on average to seek out high-responsibility jobs. The cultural acceptability of women's ambitions has made gains, and organizations, broadly speaking, endorse diversity and inclusiveness. On the other hand, insidious forms of injustice still prevail, which often take the form of unarticulated bias, uneven standards of judgment, and the assumption that women always have to overachieve to be deemed as good as men. These dynamics indicate a gender difference that has not been eradicated but changed in form.

One of the most profound insights that emerges from this duality is the way women undergo and negotiate their professional setbacks differently. As opposed to the overt discrimination of previous eras, which was often explicit and systemic, the modern gender disparity is more likely influenced by cultural norms, tacit bias, and institutional momentum. This transition, although a positive indicator of progress, also reflects new barriers: women have to negotiate a professional world that has become inviting on the surface but remains based on norms and habits that subtly disadvantage women. The emotional labor that goes into modifying one's demeanor, navigating perceptions, and showing "likeability" when claiming authority is a common leitmotif across interviews.

Despite of those obstacles, the long-term trend for women's empowerment within the labor market is positive. The interviews evince a shared recognition by women that a professional success is not only probable but is becoming expected and normalized. Interviewees at all levels (entry, management, and partner) brought forth specific aspirations for their career and had faith that they could make them happen.

What is especially different from earlier generations, when those dreams were liable to be viewed as subservient to family obligations, is the fact that that they exist at all reflects a cultural shift that is still being written but is certainly being made.

Also present throughout the interviews is the appreciation of resilience, solidarity, and flexibility. Women have learned to adopt a strategy, ranging from assertive communication to coalition building, that allows them to deal with forms of exclusion that may not be open but instead insidious and subtle. Unlike victimhood discourse, the women interviewed were observed to take a pragmatic and assertive stance. They accept that there is exclusion, but they also demand a recognition of their own agency when dealing with and dismantling the barriers. Ownership is a telling indicator of transformation itself. Empowerment has become a shared vocabulary, particularly for younger professionals who see themselves not as exceptions, but as part of a broader equity movement.

In addition, acknowledgment of slow but invigorating progress for younger generations was shared by senior professionals as well. They recognized that though their experience had involved gender-based challenges, times have changed. A few commented that the extent of openness, support, and flexibility that exists within organizations nowadays would have been unimaginable when they began their career paths. Their thoughts are a bridge across generations, relating challenges of the past to opportunities of the present and toward a future where professional achievement is less dependent on gender.

However, the study is not indicating that the gender divide is a problem that has been solved. What the study is pointing to is the complexity of advancement. Formal obstacles have been overcome, yet informal assumptions still subsist. The interviews indicate that women professionals are still called on to account for their tone, emotionality, and availability on a different basis from their male colleagues. Motherhood, or the threat of

motherhood, still colors a woman's commitment differently. These findings do not negate the progress that has been made, but they suggest that one should not jump to conclusions that equality has occurred because overt obstacles no longer appear on the surface.

This conflict, between progress and the continuing inequality, provides a telling insight: gender equity is not a linear, but a layered and conditional phenomenon. It is not only a matter of institutional reform, but one of cultural and psychological shift as well. Full equality is not only a matter of opening up opportunities, but of transforming the parameters within which those opportunities are measured, claimed, and made sustainable. The evidence indicates that we are at a transition stage, one at which structural access is becoming more widely present, but at which cultural validation of women as leaders has yet to catch up.

One of the most profound reflections that come with it is the recognition of possibility. Today, women are not questioning whether a career is possible, but how and what career they want to have. The room for women's self-determination has grown. While inequalities exist, they no longer mark the beginning point of a woman's career, instead, they are obstacles to be overcome, not barriers to be avoided. This is a deep shift within culture and desire, one that is a turning point in the history of gender and work.

In the end, the interviews are a representation of a generational shift, both of experience and of perceptual perspective. The modern labor market, though still flawed, is ever more a realm where women may exercise choice, build leadership, and fulfill their professional potential. The gender gap has not vanished, but it has transformed, having become less a matter of denial and more one of disparity of recognition, value, and rhythm. The future challenge to bridging the gap is to mainstream equality not only in policy, but also in perspective, assumption, and common practice.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and future perspective

5.1 Summary of key findings

This thesis investigated if gender is still an important factor of discrimination in today's labor markets. The overarching aim here was to realize if, and through which channels, being female impacts one's labor-market entry and promotion prospects, particularly in hierarchical and high-performance corporate settings like multinational owned consulting firms.

The initial section of the thesis provided an introductory overview of the subject from an examination of academic literature, historical trends, and statistical evidence. This framework enabled the monitoring of the trend of women's roles in society and the labor force, demonstrating how developments in education, civil rights, and societal norms have impacted women's participation in professional opportunities. Yet, the literature reinforced the point that structural imbalances remain with the presence of gaps in remuneration, occupational segregation, and disparate leadership positions. A historical and geographic emphasis of the Italian labor market further showed how regional imbalances and societal mores continue to condition gendered labor market outcomes.

The experimental part of the thesis relied upon a qualitative research design, namely through in-depth interviews with women holding positions at various organizational levels. The interviewees were classified into three categories: entry-level professionals, managerial women, and women at the partnership level. This stratification enabled an intersectional and diachronic examination of the research question: namely, whether or not gender acts as an obstacle at the point of recruitment and along the course of career progression. The interviews were held with women who worked in multinational firms, such as the Big Four, and global consultancy firms, enabling an analytical strategic point of scrutiny of corporate gender dynamics.

The interviews showed that while few overt acts of discrimination were reported, gender is still an active but muted variable in terms of professional experience. Women starting

their careers feared being hired for purposes of gender quotas over talent, while managers frequently talked about being judged with disparate standards compared to men. Some common themes were stereotypes, the need to prove oneself, and limited availability of mentorship and strategic opportunities. The single most prevalent issue at all levels was the effect of being a mother or even the potential to become a mother, which influenced both actual availability of opportunities and the perceived dependability and dedication of women workers. Most of the businesses under study possessed policy statements about diversity and inclusion, but these were seen as symbolic or insufficient to these interviewees.

Overall, the evidence confirms the idea that the gender divide continues to exist as an ongoing reality in the labor market. Although open and overt discrimination have decreased substantially since past decades, more embedded, systemic, and culturally sustained methods of discrimination still affect how women navigate their careers. What the findings of this study are not an absolute difference separating inclusion and exclusion, but a continuum of differential experience influenced by perception, expectation, and unwritten organizational mores.

However, the research also points out that significant improvements have already been made. Women in the present are able to get an education, enter competitive careers, and have avenues into positions of leadership which were in the past out of reach or severely limited. The increased presence of women in decision-making roles, along with rising legal and institutional protections, indicates that the structural environment has changed significantly. The women involved spoke clearly, with confidence, and an expectation of rights, and many spoke of an ability to manage complicated organizational worlds with determination and strategic acumen.

This is an institutional as well as a cultural transformation. Women enter their professions with clearer expectations and more delineated ambitions. They are equipped with tools, such as assertiveness training, mentor support systems, and an appreciation for organizational dynamics, through which they can counteract the obstacles they face. These trends point to a generation's shift in women's conception of the self, away from a survival and accommodation logic towards one of transformation and influence.

However, the evidence of this thesis indicates that progress is neither total nor universal. Although professionalized entry into professional positions is more accessible, actual equality eludes. Double standards created by gendered presumptions about communication style, emotional demeanor, and leadership traits continue to prevail. The motherhood penalty, for one, stood out as a salient and persistent theme throughout all occupational ranks, indicating that even women's potential for maternity can serve to challenge women's professional dependability and long-term dedication.

Additionally, informal relationships and male-dominated networks in organizations commonly function as gatekeepers, impacting visibility in project opportunities, promotion, and channels of informal feedback. Cultural values regarding working, availability, and work-life balance are still unevenly applied, sustaining the idea that women's aspirations and personal satisfaction are antagonistic.

Thus, while great progress has been made in creating the legal and procedural framework of gender equality, achieving substantive equality remains an elusive goal. Actual gender parity cannot be achieved through policy reform or compliance alone. It needs a profound shift in culture: one that redefines leadership, values diversity in form and function, and makes normal the presence of women at all points without questioning their legitimacy or competence.

This thesis adds to that wider debate, however, by shifting not just the emphasis to systemic criticisms, but to the daily reality of women working through these systems. What it shows is that the gender disparity, while less overt, is equally real. Accordingly, the conclusions demand more intensive, multi-dimensional interventions that are more than mere numeric presence and aim towards the qualitative aspects of working space inclusion.

5.2 Implications for the labor market and the role of women

The insights of the women at various stages of their careers lead to a cluster of practical, forward-looking implications for the labor market. Although the existence of gendered asymmetries is deemed a sustained fact, the interviews also identify a straightforward course of action: a series of thoughtful, structural, and cultural initiatives that, if taken, could substantially reshape women's lives at work. These are not theoretical, but rooted in the day-to-day lives of professionals at entry, management, and partner levels.

In order to decrease the power of implicit bias, the interviewed women proposed several strategies, including enhancing hiring and promotion process transparency or anonymizing the processes. Some of the participants even advocated for the adoption of anonymized CVs, in the aim to have objective assessments that are free from the influence of the candidate's gender. Real solutions that can guarantee equal opportunities are the utilization of tools like artificial intelligence, which first evaluate outcomes and even later, after the CV screening, assess soft competences and the personal qualities of the candidate. These systems guarantee equity in the evaluation process and also decrease the internal doubts about equality measures.

Investing in women-specific leadership development and mentorship initiatives helps to construct inclusive career paths that are more than just symbolic. All interviewees of every level stressed the importance of formalized mentorship, especially with the added support of trained senior professionals who are attuned to identify and respond to gender dynamics. These initiatives displace the isolation and underrepresentation of women in strategic positions with a culture where female leadership is the norm, not the exception.

By putting in place gender KPIs and tracking systematically across the organization measures like pay equity, internal mobility, and rates of advancement, firms can measure progresses and hold themselves to account. A number of the participants doubted that initiatives for equality that are not measurable are effective. Gender-specific key performance indicators can provide insight where disparities are not visibly evident, provide assurance that change initiatives are evidence-based, and enshrine equity as an

operational core goal. Combined with transparency and regular public disclosure, these systems create internal trust and also external credibility.

By encouraging mutual responsibility for care and normalizing flexible work arrangements for both genders, organizations can reduce the imbalance that disproportionately falls on women. Being pregnant or potentially pregnant was a common theme throughout the interviews, tending to affect judgments around commitment and reliability. Flexible hours, telecommuting, and equal parental leave policies should be offered and marketed for mothers, but also for fathers. Normalizing men's caregiving roles is an important cultural transformation that can dislodge the notion that women are the default caregivers.

With the introduction of inclusive coaching and sensitizing male managers and assessors, organizations are capable of addressing cultural resistance at the foundation. Training in unconscious bias, communication dynamics, and inclusive evaluation techniques is the way to reconfigure leadership practice and perception. Including the engagement of senior leaders in the pursuit of gender equity communicates dedication to the process and forces the diffusion of inclusive norms across the organization.

By embracing diverse styles of leadership and redefining career success, the labor market can break free from masculine-coded norms. Numerous women described how they felt forced to enact "gender-free" corporate selves or to modify their tone and demeanor to become acceptable. Identifying empathy, teamwork, and flexibility as equally desirable leadership characteristics would allow businesses to tap talent across a greater range, as well as permit women to lead both effectively and naturally.

By moving early, during career paths' inception, and maintaining the gender balance already established at the entry level, businesses are able to foster equality from the ground level. As proposed by a partner-level interviewee, quotas or targets implemented too late might seem forced. Rather, maintaining proportionate representation throughout the entire process of career growth ensures that the pipeline to leadership remains representative of the diversity of early-career talent.

More generally, transitioning to a more equilibrium labor market also calls for a cross-societal redefinition of value, productivity, and success. Redefining these norms,

participants noted, would benefit women but also construct healthier, more human-centric organizational cultures.

Ultimately, the conclusion of this research has immediate applications for the labor market and a deep vision for the future of labor. The future of labor must be founded upon measurable, equitable, and culturally transforming policies. Women are not in a position to require more symbolic initiatives, what they are in sore need of is systems that have faith in their potential, respect their differences, and assist them in the attainment of career fulfillment. The goal is not to insert women into prevailing models of success but to redefine these models to accommodate a more equitable, diverse, and sustainable model of leadership for all.

5.3 Suggestions for further research: future predictions on the gender gap and possible solutions

5.3.1 Future predictions

Looking ahead, the gender gap in the labor market is likely to evolve rather than disappear entirely. Despite growing awareness and policy commitments in favor of gender equity, the dynamics of inequality are shifting in form rather than being eliminated. Structural transformations already underway, such as increasing digitalization, the widespread adoption of hybrid and remote work models, and the gradual redefinition of leadership paradigms, present both significant opportunities and emerging challenges for women. These changes disrupt traditional frameworks of organizational life and create new arenas in which gendered patterns can either be dismantled or reinforced.

In the next decade, the conventional markers of authority and influence, such as physical presence in the office, linear and uninterrupted career paths, and hierarchical management structures, are likely to be replaced or supplemented by more flexible, decentralized, and collaborative models of work. This evolution holds the potential to benefit women, especially those who have historically been penalized for deviating from these linear norms due to caregiving responsibilities or non-traditional professional trajectories. More inclusive definitions of productivity, which means centered around outcomes, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and cooperative leadership, could validate a wider range of working styles and professional contributions.

Moreover, new industries and professional domains that are likely to grow in strategic importance — such as sustainability, ESG governance, digital ethics, and social innovation are spaces where women currently have growing representation and influence. These sectors often value interdisciplinarity, empathy, stakeholder engagement, and long-term vision — all attributes traditionally underappreciated in male-dominated corporate environments. Thus, the dynamic labor market gives women the opportunity to influence not just their function but also the fundamental values of leadership and value generation.

But to achieve this potential is not just a matter of being there but also of having power: access to decision-making arenas, recognition in strategic dialogue, and control of organizational culture.

In order to most effectively seize these emerging possibilities, institutions have to move beyond rhetoric, they should actively create conditions where women can excel. This requires long-term investment in women in leadership, equitable opportunities for high-impact assignments, and the breakdown of entrenched biases, conscious and unconscious, that shape perception, trust, and advancement. There needs to be a cultural redefinition: a redefinition that repositions success from the pursuit of dominance and sameness to the practice of resilience, adaptability, and inclusion. Organizations will have to adopt leadership frameworks that welcome diverse experience, challenge the cult of the ideal worker, and value pluralism of ambition and of career paths.

In this transitional phase, the role of women in the labor market is poised to become not just more visible, but more influential. Yet visibility alone is not enough. The future will depend on whether emerging workplace models are designed inclusively from the outset, or whether they simply reproduce exclusion in more modern forms. Thus, the coming years offer a critical window of opportunity: to embed gender equity into the foundations of the future of work, and to ensure that the transformation of work is also a transformation of power, participation, and possibility for all.

5.3.2 Suggestions for further research

Future research needs to go further than the simple documentation of the continuance of a gender gap and investigate the mechanisms that sustain it in evolving organizational forms. One important aspect to research would be the cross-sectional patterns — looking at how race, class, age, disability, and sexuality intersect with gender in shaping labor market experiences. Too often, studies look at gender in isolation, skipping over the combined disadvantages encountered by individuals embodying multiple marginalized identities. Comparative research could look into the influences of hybrid working models

on the gender imbalance for a longer time: how flexibility is apportioned, how individual performance is tracked remotely, and how informal networks are subtly functioning when currently there is less in-person interaction. These are fundamental questions that may shape the next epoch of workplace dynamics. Further studies into the role of men in furthering gender equality can take place—not just in terms of being allies, but by acting as key players in reimagining work-life balance, fatherhood, and leadership inclusivity. Knowing how men navigate or relate to gender policy creates new spaces for organizational transformation. Longitudinal studies matching women’s career trajectories over decades, sectors, and cultures will document how slow changes in policies and culture translate into concrete outcomes. Additionally, there is a need for qualitative explorations to get at the emotional, psychological, and identity-based aspects of working in gendered workplaces, which have received little attention from established scholars but, in order to grasp the multifaceted nature of inequality, are essential.

5.3.3 Possible solutions

In order to truly innovate in addressing the gender gap, organizations and policymakers must develop audacious and progressive strategies that won’t simply sit within the brackets of conventional diversity and inclusion programs. A conventional setup is good, but usually independent of the institutional structural-make-up and cultural setup, such initiatives find themselves falling short. The more subtle and systemic gender inequalities become, the more that innovations must move beyond just representation and attack the architecture that reproduces exclusion.

One such approach to innovation could be the design and implementation of gender-blind performance simulations specifically aimed at assessing leadership readiness, decision-making skills, and promotion potential—situational task scenarios dealing with genuine organizational challenges from conflict resolution and strategic planning to stakeholder negotiations, with blind evaluations. Such systems would guard against any visual or biographical cues (i.e., name, gender, age, background, etc.), thereby guaranteeing that

candidates are rated solely on the quality of their thoughts, ethical reasoning, and leadership style. In this way, unconscious biases would at least be mitigated, and this will serve to reshape what “leadership potential” might mean through a more diverse and inclusive lens. Such tools could be of great use in high-stakes promotion or succession processes, where decision-making is often colored by subjectivity.

The second avenue is the creation of a reverse-mentoring program, which must be made institutional. The reverse mentoring takes young women employed in particular industries and from fields of lesser representation and educates senior executives, mostly males, on their experiences of inclusion, workplace culture, and systemic barriers. This model disrupts top-down assumptions while establishing empathy, awareness, and accountability in leadership. The power balance in developmental relationships shifts to empower the voices of those often marginalized in organizational discourse. If institutionalized across the company and linked with executive development paths, this can hasten cultural change by embedding equity as a leadership competency instead of one of the marginal issues.

Third, organizations must develop and implement career elasticity programs that offer a modern alternative to the rigid knowledge of career ladders. These programs recognize that careers today span a nonlinear windshield, especially from the perspective of women walking a fine line among roles throughout their life span. A career elasticity framework will allow one employee to temporarily stop and take time off for various activities such as caregiving, education, health, or personal development without suffering any reputational or financial penalty. Reentry would create a platform upon which they can acquire retraining, receive mentoring, and have access to reintegration support. By redefining professional value as long-term impact rather than uninterrupted tenure, such programs acknowledge alternative pathways to success and break the “ideal worker” paradigm that penalizes any form of nonconformance.

Finally, organizations should set up Gender Innovation Labs—dedicated cross-functional teams with the express objective of quickly detecting, analyzing, and addressing gender disparities. These labs would serve as agile incubators for inclusive policy, using behavioral science, organizational analytics, and employee input to prototype new practices. A lab could test out varying formats of performance reviews, assess the

influence of remote work on gendered team dynamics, or execute pilots around inclusive leadership scorecards. Such initiatives would be grounded in real-time experimentation and data-based evaluations, thus making inclusion not an overarching value, but rather an explicitly articulated priority. Gender Innovation Labs could also work with external researchers, advocacy groups, and public partners to build a greater ecosystem of accountability and learning.

Fostering these innovations should elevate gender equity from an obligation on the side of the organization to an organization-wide focus. By infusing experimentation, elasticity, and forward-thinking ideas into diversity strategies, companies can move from simply conforming with the code to a rather meaningful transformation. The future of gender equity isn't about mass campaigns; it is about dynamic, systemic, and contextual mechanisms that are in development along with the labor market. Meaningful change could happen there, where gender equity goes beyond accumulating women in leadership—to a point which asserts itself within those new renderings of who values what and who stands to gain.

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Interview protocol

1. Opening Premise

1.1 This interview is part of a broader research project focused on understanding the role of gender in shaping access to employment opportunities and career development trajectories.

Specifically, the study aims to explore whether and how being a woman influences entry into the labor market and subsequent professional advancement.

We remind you that all information disclosed during this interview and throughout any associated materials will be treated as strictly confidential and used exclusively for academic research purposes.

We kindly ask for your permission to record this interview in order to support the note-taking process and to ensure an accurate transcription and analysis of your insights.

We are interested in hearing your perspective on the following topics.

2. Entry into the labor market

We would like to start by understanding your experience when entering the professional world.

2.1 Can you describe how you accessed your current profession and the path that led you there?

2.2 Do you believe your gender has influenced your opportunities at the moment of recruitment or entry into the labor market? If so, how?

2.3 Have you encountered any specific challenges or barriers in the job-seeking process that you feel were related to your being a woman?

2.4 In your view, are there differences in the expectations or evaluation criteria applied to women and men candidates in the hiring process?

2.5 Have you perceived any advantages or disadvantages in terms of access to certain sectors or roles based on gender?

3. Career progression and professional development

We are now interested in your experience within the organization and the dynamics related to your career development.

3.1 Can you describe your career path within your current or past organizations? Have you experienced career progression?

3.2 In your opinion, have gender-related factors affected your opportunities for promotion, role transitions, or participation in training and leadership programs?

3.3 Have you ever perceived unequal treatment or evaluation criteria in performance assessments, access to internal mobility, or opportunities for visibility?

3.4 Have you ever had to adopt specific strategies to assert your position or advance your career in a context perceived as male-dominated or structurally biased?

3.5 To what extent do you believe organizational culture and implicit biases influence career development opportunities for women?

3.6 Have you benefited from mentorship, support networks, or institutional initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality? How effective have these been in your view?

3.7 Do you believe that motherhood or the prospect of motherhood has influenced your professional experience or the perception of your availability and commitment?

4. Organizational Practices and Policies

This section focuses on your perception of the company's commitment to gender equality.

4.1 Are you aware of any internal policies or practices aimed at promoting gender equality within your organization?

4.2 Do you believe these initiatives are genuinely effective or are they mostly symbolic?

4.3 How do you perceive the organization's openness to diversity and inclusion, particularly in leadership and decision-making positions?

4.4 In your opinion, what additional measures should organizations implement to promote fairer and more inclusive career opportunities for women?

5. Closing Question

5.1 Would you like to add any further comments, experiences, or reflections that you consider important for understanding gender-related dynamics in the workplace?

Appendix

Interview #1

Entry level - Accenture

Interview #2

Entry level – Accenture

Interview #3

Entry level – KPMG

Interview #4

Entry level – Deloitte

Interview #5

Entry level – Deloitte

Interview #6

Managerial level – Ernst&Young

Interview #7

Managerial level – Ernst&Young

Interview #8

Managerial level – Ernst&Young

Interview #9

Partner – KPMG

Interview #10

Partner – Ernst&Young

Table of prepositions

The following is a recap of the propositions used in this thesis.

Number of propositions	Proposition
P1	<i>Although women access the labor market through conventional and standardized entry channels, such as internships and online applications, their experience is characterized by a higher degree of strategic self-positioning and initiative, reflecting an underlying need to demonstrate fit and legitimacy within male-dominated professional environments.</i>
P2	<i>Although recruitment processes in multinational firms are framed in formally inclusive terms, women often perceive their selection as influenced by gender-balancing logics or diversity quotas, which can undermine their sense of</i>

	<i>legitimacy and reinforce implicit biases related to availability, ambition, and family responsibilities, revealing a persistent tension between symbolic inclusion and genuine merit-based recognition.</i>
P3	<i>In contemporary corporate environments, gender-related challenges often manifest not through overt discrimination but through a pervasive and subtle cultural bias, embedded in daily interactions and organizational norms, which leads women, especially in entry and managerial roles, to navigate an ongoing burden of implicit scrutiny, self-monitoring, and behavioral adaptation, thereby reinforcing systemic disadvantage under the guise of professionalism and neutrality.</i>
P4	<i>Despite formal claims of meritocracy, women in multinational corporate settings are often evaluated according to</i>

	<i>distinct and gendered standards that emphasize interpersonal and relational traits over technical competence, leading to a dual burden in which they must balance competence with likability, particularly in leadership roles, thus reinforcing unequal expectations and constraining access to advancement and recognition.</i>
P5	<i>Persistent gendered segmentation within organizational sectors and roles leads women to be overrepresented in supportive or “feminized” functions and underrepresented in technical and strategic positions, reinforcing occupational segregation and limiting both their decision-making power and their capacity to envision sustainable leadership trajectories in male-dominated fields.</i>
P6	<i>Women’s career progression in multinational corporations is shaped by systemic disparities in visibility, evaluation, and access to</i>

	<i>leadership roles, where advancement is less a function of merit alone and more dependent on relational capital, cultural fit, and sustained overperformance, factors that disproportionately disadvantage women, particularly in the absence of female role models and equitable recognition frameworks.</i>
P7	<i>Despite the formal availability of promotion pathways, women often face implicit bias, informal gatekeeping, and unequal evaluative standards that compel them to over-justify their achievements and prove their commitment, barriers that not only slow advancement but also erode self-confidence and reinforce gendered interpretations of ambition, availability, and leadership potential.</i>
P8	<i>In navigating gendered organizational dynamics, women adopt diverse advancement strategies—ranging from</i>

	<i>assertiveness, alliance-building, and mentorship to the suppression of gender identity—with each approach reflecting both a response to structural inequities and a set of trade-offs that often require emotional labor and identity negotiation to gain legitimacy and visibility in male-dominated professional environments.</i>
P9	<i>Motherhood, and even its mere potential, functions as a pervasive axis of professional bias, influencing recruitment, advancement, and daily perceptions of commitment, and imposing on women a continuous emotional negotiation between professional aspiration and maternal identity, ultimately shaping their visibility, credibility, and self-worth within organizational systems.</i>
P10	<i>While gender equality policies are formally present in many organizations, their perceived impact remains limited when not accompanied by genuine cultural</i>

	<i>transformation, managerial accountability, and measurable implementation, leading employees, especially at junior levels, to view them as symbolic gestures rather than effective instruments of structural change.</i>
P11	<i>Implicit bias and male-oriented workplace cultures operate as pervasive but often invisible barriers to gender equity, shaping perceptions of competence, influencing access to mentorship and leadership, and reinforcing self-replicating organizational norms that privilege similarity over merit, demonstrating that formal neutrality does not equate to actual fairness.</i>
P12	<i>Achieving genuine workplace gender equality requires moving beyond symbolic initiatives toward integrated strategies that combine structural reforms, such as anonymized selection processes, gender-sensitive performance metrics, mentoring, and inclusive</i>

	<i>leadership training, with a deep cultural commitment from top management to embed equity as a lived organizational value rather than a formal aspiration.</i>
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