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"Gender Bias in the Luxury Industry: An Empirical Study"

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INTRODUCTION

The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles remains one of the most enduring forms of inequality within organizations. Even in industries perceived as culturally feminine, such as fashion and luxury, executive positions are still predominantly held by men. This contradiction makes the luxury sector a compelling case for examining how gender bias continues to shape access to senior management roles.

This study opens with a thorough examination of the psychological and sociological roots of gender inequality. It extends beyond traditional management literature to draw on key theories from social psychology, including Social Role Theory, the Stereotype Content Model, Ambivalent Sexism, and Stereotype Threat. Together, these frameworks help explain how stereotypes are formed, internalized, and expressed through evaluations of competence, warmth, and commitment, laying the theoretical background for the experimental model at the core of the research.

Another key section of the thesis focuses on the governance structures of the luxury industry. An analysis of leading conglomerates' board compositions and diversity efforts revealed that gender disparities remain prevalent. Official corporate declarations were cross-referenced with third-party benchmarking reports, many of which confirmed the persistence of leadership gender gaps, despite public-facing commitments to inclusion.

To specifically examine whether equally qualified male and female candidates for board positions are evaluated differently, the study employed an experimental design. Participants were asked to assess identical résumés, with the only gender indicator being the name of the applicant. Using a consistent set of evaluation questions, the experiment isolated the effect of gender on recruitment decisions. Quantitative analysis—through mediation and moderation models—highlighted the influence of gender on judgment outcomes, while qualitative analysis of written comments exposed the subtle linguistic cues through which stereotypes are expressed.

By integrating theoretical frameworks, industry-specific analysis, and experimental data, the thesis reveals that bias in recruitment often manifests not as exclusion but through nuanced criteria and coded language. The findings underscore the importance of evaluating the candidate as well as the recruiter. Ultimately, this work contribution involves bridging insights from social psychology with organizational research, offering actionable guidance for companies aiming to build fairer and more inclusive evaluation processes.

1. Women representation in leadership, gender and decision-making biases

1.1. Gender gap in the workforce: a global perspective and the Gender Gap Index

The issue of gender inequality in the workforce has deep historical roots, with women's participation outside the home being significantly limited until the early 20th century. In the United States, for instance, only about 20% of women were part of the labor force in 1920, primarily in roles such as domestic service, textiles, and teaching (CEPR, 2021). In Europe, more specifically, in Italy, the situation of women was poor as well, and their contribution to the workforce was limited to the agricultural sector, textile mills, domestic service and teaching. In addition, their position was worsened by the rise of Benito Mussolini, who introduced policies such as marriage loans and maternal incentives due to the traditional view of gendered roles, emphasizing women as mothers and homemakers rather than workers (Gabbuti & León, 2023).

The bursting of World War II marked a radical shift, as women were called upon to fill positions traditionally held by men, leading to a temporary increase in female employment. However, it wasn't until the 1960s and 1970s, during the second wave of the feminist movement, that systemic challenges like workplace discrimination and unequal pay garnered significant attention in academic and policy discussions (Gabbuti & León, 2023).

Researchers have found out global employment gender gaps persist nowadays despite men and women being nearly equal in the world population at present times. In fact, the disparity in employment rates for men and women has remained consistently high over the past three decades, with men being over 50% more likely to be employed (Gomes & Dharana, 2024).

Gender imbalance is more evident when looking at leadership positions. In fact, globally women hold only about 37% of leadership positions, and the gender pay gap remains around 20% due to women employment majorly in lower-status, lower-paid roles (Ryan, 2023), a phenomenon known as horizontal segregation (Bettio & Verashchagina, 2023).

Furthermore, regional and industry-specific differences contribute to the variation in gender disparities. In Nordic countries, where gender equality policies are more robust, women's workforce participation exceeds 75%, while in regions such as South Asia and the Middle East, female labor force participation remains below 30% (International labour Organization, 2023). Similarly, while education and healthcare sectors have seen greater female representation, corporate boardrooms, technology, and luxury industries remain predominantly male-led (International labour Organization, 2023).

One of the most comprehensive reports about women representation in the workplace is the *Women in the workplace* report published every year by Mckinsey & Co, the biggest work to study women in corporate America. The report is significative since over 15.000 employees from 281 organizations participated in the study, with the insightful contribution of HR leaders sharing their policies and insights. Last year reports, marks the 10th anniversary of this initiative and not only analyzes key findings from 2023, but sheds light also on data from the past decade, to give a comprehensive view on women's representation in corporate America (McKinsey & Company, 2024).

One of the most relevant facts is that over the past 10 years women make up 29% of C-suite roles compared to 17% in 2015. However, progress has been much slower earlier in the corporate pipeline, when women continue to face barriers, as they are less likely than men to be hired into entry-level roles, and at the critical first step up to manager, women are far less likely to get promoted. Due to this vicious circle, men significantly outnumber women at the manager level, making it nearly impossible for companies to support sustained progress at more senior levels (World economic forum, 2024).

If willing to pursue an analysis of women corporate representation within specific industries, sector-specific disparities will arise. Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (the so-called STEM area) workforces has increased since 2016, yet women remain underrepresented in STEM roles, comprising only 28.2% of the STEM workforce compared to 47.3% in non-STEM sectors, based on a study on 146 economies (World economic forum, 2024).

Another branch suffering from female representation in leadership role is finance. In fact, the financial services sector has witnessed gradual progress in gender representation, yet disparities remain evident at senior levels. According to Catalyst (2024), women now hold 29% of senior-level roles in U.S. financial services, reflecting an increase from 26% in 2022. While this growth signals positive momentum, the pace of change remains slow.

Despite this progress, a significant gender imbalance persists in executive leadership. Women constitute over 50% of the total workforce in financial services, yet their representation declines substantially at higher levels, with only 18% of C-suite positions globally occupied by women (Deloitte, 2022).

To contextualize these disparities on a broader scale, the World Economic Forum (WEF) established the Global Gender Gap Index. This index annually benchmarks the current state and evolution of gender parity across four key dimensions: Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment. Since its launching in 2006, it

represents the longest-standing index tracking the progress of numerous economies' efforts towards closing these gaps over time. The 2024 edition included 146 economies in the analysis, resulting in two-thirds of the world's economies (World economic forum, 2024).

In its latest edition, the Gender Gap Index accounts for 68.5%, meaning that the remaining gap to assess is globally less than 40%. The index has marginally increased, with a 0.1% growth compared to the previous year; the positive yet slow current pace, would lead to 134 years to achieve full gender parity, far exceeding the targets set by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (World economic forum, 2024).

Seemingly, the index varies across different regions. Europe is leading with 75.0% of the gender gap closed, followed by North America (74.8%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (74.2%). Meanwhile, East Asia and the Pacific (69.2%) and Central Asia (69.1%) have achieved moderate levels of parity. However, Southern Asia (63.7%) and the Middle East and North Africa (61.7%) show the most gender disparities, highlighting structural and cultural barriers hindering women's participation in the workforce (World economic forum, 2024).

While 97% of countries have closed at least 60% of their gender gaps, the slow pace of improvement indicates that more aggressive policy interventions and corporate governance reforms are needed to accelerate gender inclusion, particularly in executive and decision-making positions. Addressing these disparities requires a combination of regulatory changes, corporate accountability, and targeted leadership development programs to foster a more inclusive workforce.

1.1.1. Disparities in leadership positions across industries: a comprehensive analysis

To have a clearer understanding of how gender disparities in employment and leadership affect the different industries, it is possible to refer again to The Global Gender Gap Report 2024, which provides a stark assessment of the issue.

The traditionally "feminized" industries in which women are overrepresented are healthcare (62.1%), education (54.4%), and consumer services (53.1%). These areas even though their societal importance, often offer lower wages and limited pathways to top leadership roles. In contrast, industries characterized by higher wages and economic influence, such as technology, finance, oil and gas, and infrastructure, continue to be male dominated, with female workforce representation as

low as 24.1% in oil, gas, and mining, 22.4% in infrastructure, and 31.5% in utilities (World economic forum, 2024).

Scientific literature gave consistent contribution on this topic, with relevant meta-analyses on years of fields experiments on gender and hiring decisions (Schaerer et al., 2023; Galos & Coppock, 2023).

While findings haven't showed any pattern of discrimination favoring male candidates, the type of job matters. Female candidates are more likely to be favored for traditionally female-typed jobs, like nursing or receptionist roles. Another encouraging result is that discrimination against female candidates has decreased significantly over time. Starting around 2009, employers showed no preference for male or female candidates for many types of jobs. In some cases, there was even a slight preference for female candidates (Schaerer et al., 2023). A consequence of this gender segregation is that applying as a woman in (relatively better paying) occupations dominated by men, reduces hiring possibilities, while in the (relatively lower paying) occupations dominated by women, being a woman applicant has a positive effect. In this way, heterogeneous employment discrimination based on gender preserves status quo, gender distributions and earnings gaps (Galos & Coppock, 2023).

The report reveals that the drop to the top trend is ongoing. For example, women comprise 67.4% of the healthcare and social assistance industry, yet when it comes to senior leadership, only 36.7% represent a drop to the top of a 54% drop to the top. Even in real estate and financial services—industries dominated by men—women still experience a drop to the top of 55% and over from an entry-level position to the executive ranks. It's as if the systems are in place to show that success does not suit female talent. Moreover, in government and public administration, where women have increased participation (50.7%), senior levels of responsibility are still men's. (World Economic Forum, 2024).

In addition, a negative development exists regarding who is hired into leadership roles. Emerging Trends from 2024 WGEI/WF find that prior to 2020, women hired into senior leadership increased—37.5% in 2021—but now in 2024 it's down to 36.4%, which is lower than the percentage of hires into leadership prior to the pandemic in 2019. Thus, a recession-based downturn has occurred. Sectors most experiencing downturns are those most associated with men—finance, wholesale trade, supply chain, and transportation; apparently, during a recession, men are more negatively impacted by job losses, but for some reason, gender equity and hiring women executives is less of a priority when it trends downward. Gender equity suffers during a recession despite the number of men losing jobs

outweighing concern for hiring women. Inclusion and diversity hiring seemingly takes a backseat to other challenges (World Economic Forum, 2024).

In addition, STEM is one of the most challenging fields to penetrate gender equality. 28.2% of the STEM workforce is female, while women represent 47.3% of non-STEM occupations, limiting access to some of the most lucrative and rapidly growing jobs. For example, female employment in AI and machine learning has doubled since 2016; however, relative to men, women still only account for a small percentage of the workforce. This indicates that women are lagging in the STEM workforce, which has severe consequences for future work, future economic champions, and future equity. Without targeted interventions, women risk being sidelined in the technology-driven future economy, reinforcing existing gender and wealth gaps (World economic forum, 2024).

The economic consequences of these disparities extend beyond individual careers. The gender pay gap remains structurally linked to industry representation, as fields with higher female participation (healthcare, education, retail) tend to have lower average salaries than those dominated by men (finance, technology, and energy). This pattern underscores a fundamental challenge: women are often steered toward jobs that are undervalued and underpaid, limiting their ability to accumulate wealth and economic power over time. In addition, gender disparities in workforce participation contribute to broader macroeconomic inefficiencies, as studies consistently show that higher female workforce participation correlates with stronger economic growth, increased innovation, and higher productivity. For example, using an international panel that covered over 100 countries between 1980 and 2005, researchers have examined the *gender bonus*, namely an increase in the average living standards associated with increases in Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP) rates (Baerlocher et al., 2021).

Additionally, the economic benefits of closing gender gaps in labor force participation are addressed by the World Bank as well. The report suggests that achieving gender parity in workforce participation could lead to an average increase of 20% in GDP per capita across various economies(Halim et al., 2023). The main barriers to women's participation are identified in lacks skills, assets, networks, time constraints, limited mobility, gender discrimination in hiring and promotion, and restrictive gender norms. It highlights the need for evidence-based policies to address these challenges and enhance FLFP, fostering economic growth (Halim et al., 2023).

It is evident how, the main factor perpetuating gender disparities in employment and leadership is the presence of deeply ingrained stereotypes and workplace discrimination that continue hindering career advancements for women.

While access to leadership is mainly due to structural barriers, cultural biases are responsible for further reinforcing traditional gender roles, making it harder for women to progress in male-dominated industries. To deeply understand this phenomenon, the following section identifies the main manifestations of gender stereotypes in the workplace and the discrimination effects on women's careers progression.

1.1.2. Gender stereotypes: content, evolution and transmission

Gender stereotypes in the workplace refer to generalized views or preconceptions about the attributes, characteristics, or roles that individuals should possess or perform based on their gender (United Nations Human Rights, 2014). These stereotypes often dictate expectations regarding the types of jobs deemed suitable for men and women, as well as their perceived competencies in various professional roles. For instance, women may be stereotypically viewed as more nurturing and thus better suited for supportive roles, while men might be seen as more assertive and fit for leadership positions. Such stereotypes can limit both men's and women's capacity to develop their personal abilities and pursue professional careers of their choice (United Nations Human Rights, 2014).

Importantly, gender stereotypes are both descriptive and prescriptive. Descriptive stereotypes depict what women and men are like, while prescriptive ones entail prescriptions about what they should be. (Heilman, 2001). Both types are central to the psychological processes that form the basis of gender bias and consequent gender discrimination, perpetuating the disparities in opportunity, pay, and status that continue to exist between women and men in the workplace.

Gender stereotyping has its roots in the gendered division of labor, where men typically control the means of production and distribution within a patriarchal social, economic, and cultural framework. (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). That is why academia unpacks the content of gender stereotypes into two categories: agency and communion (Cuddy et al., 2008). Agency, a set of characteristics predominantly associated with men, emphasizes task orientation and goal achievement. In contrast, communion, which is more strongly linked to women, reflects traits related to kindness, empathy, and concern for others. In essence, men are perceived as those who take charge and drive results, while women are seen as relationship builders who prioritize the well-being of others. Accordingly, men are stereotypically described as bold, dominant, assertive, independent, self-confident, competitive, and ambitious, reflecting agentic traits. Conversely, women are typically portrayed as sociable, relationship-oriented, helpful, sensitive, nurturing, affectionate, and sympathetic, embodying communal attributes (Heilman et al., 2025). In addition to being gender-specific, gender

stereotypes tend to be oppositional: women are perceived as high in communality but low in agency and vice versa for men. These shared characterizations of women and men serve as cognitive shortcuts for forming impressions, influencing judgments often without perceivers' awareness. Eventually, how a particular woman is viewed can be determined not by her actual attributes or accomplishments, but rather by beliefs about her gender group (Manzi et al., 2024).

Both descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes have consequences for women in the workplace. On the one hand, descriptive stereotypes that depict women as communal but lacking in agency, disfavor in a severe manner those pursuing careers in male-dominated fields. This is, because professions traditionally associated with masculinity, are believed to require traits that align with stereotypes about men but contradict stereotypes about women. For instance, STEM subjects and executive leadership roles are more strongly linked to masculine characteristics, and top performers in these fields are often assumed to possess stereotypically male traits. This misalignment between societal perceptions of women and the qualities deemed essential for success in male-dominated professions creates a perceived *lack of fit.* As a result, women are frequently seen as unsuitable for these roles, leading to biased assumptions about their competence and potential for success (Manzi et al, 2024).

On the other hand, prescriptive stereotypes influence women also at a personal level. In fact, this category of stereotypes, designates the behaviors that are appropriate and inappropriate for women and men and functions as gender norms, conforming to the content of gender stereotypes. Seemingly, communal behaviors represent "shoulds" for women (i.e., women should be kind) and agentic behaviors "should nots" (i.e., women should not be assertive). The discrimination stemming from prescriptive stereotypes is produced by perceived norm violations. When women are thought to have defied prescriptive stereotypes, their behavior is met with social penalties: they are seen as interpersonally unpleasant and disliked. These social penalties, in turn, result in discrimination against women in terms work-related discriminations and interpersonal violations such as experiencing mistreatment and people reduced willingness to intervene when they are sexually harassed (Manzi et al., 2024).

What also happens to women are negative reactions to success, particularly when the success is in areas deemed "off-limits" for them. For instance, recent research demonstrates that incoming women CEOs are judged more negatively from stakeholders than incoming male CEOs, even when both have received endorsements accentuating their competence. The achieved success in masculine domains can imply the violation of prescriptive stereotypes by behaving agentically, so social penalties and discrimination arise, often deriving in derogatory labels such as "iron maiden", "ice queen", and "nasty woman". Given these findings, it is hardly surprising that women often hide or downplay their

success on masculine tasks, even when their perceptions of competence are at risk. Evidently, for women in male gender-typed occupations, success does not necessarily ensure further success (Heilman et al., 2025).
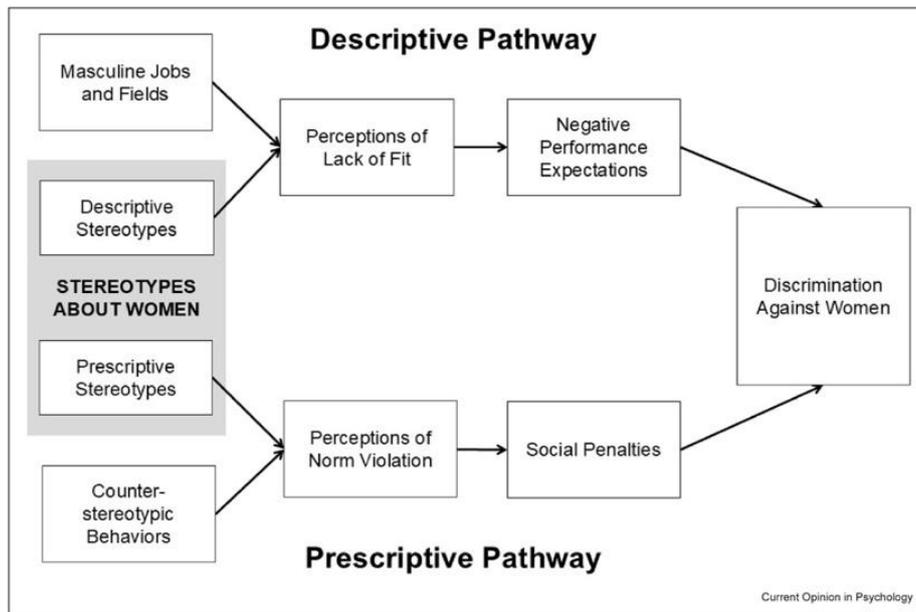
Figure 1 Descriptive vs prescriptive pathways from stereotypes to gender discrimination. Source: Manzi et al., 2024.

Moreover, even though it is often believed that men engage in biases against females in leadership positions, there is also evidence that women who succeed in male-dominated work setting may assume negative attitude towards other women (Baykal et al., 2020).

This phenomenon has been identified as the queen bee syndrome (Staines et al., 1973). The term describes the behavior undertaken by successful women who oppose to other women's movement in an organization by distancing themselves from aspiring women leaders, wanting to be the only "queen bee" in that organization (Staines et al., 1973).

One of the main pieces of evidence of the above-mentioned phenomenon comes from the research Ellemers et al. (2004). She conducted research among women who work in academia and the results showed that female professors are more likely to rate female PhD students as less committed to their careers than male students; hence, women occupying high positions were more likely to criticize the leadership skills, career commitment, and assertiveness of their female colleagues. In addition, female professors define their traits in male characteristics, and they are more eager to distance themselves

from the attributes of their gender. These types of distancing responses are especially seen in women who see their gender as an obstacle to their career (Ellemers et al., 2004).

Because of this distancing attitude, some women are not likely to support policies aimed at promoting opportunities for other women (Cowan et al., 1998). This suggests that it is not uncommon for women to adopt a competitive stance, due to their perception of other women as threats to their own success(Baykal et al., 2020). There are two main types of value threat that can influence female leaders: competitive threat, which arises when they feel challenged by a highly competent female peer, and collective threat, which occurs when they worry that less competent women may jeopardize their own reputation. Therefore, female supervisors may be reluctant to reward female subordinates and, in some cases, may even end up penalizing them (Srivastava & Sherman, 2015).

Queen bees find their leadership role in organizations adapting themselves to the dominant masculine culture. In their position, they may not only adopt masculine ways of behaving but also come to accept and internalize negative stereotypes about femininity. For instance, they might begin to believe that women are naturally more emotional or less driven than men. This internalization goes beyond how they see themselves—it reinforces existing gender hierarchies and helps sustain workplace structures that disadvantage women.

This behavior has not only consequences for the queen bees and their women colleagues, but also for the performance of the organization as a whole. Notably, when women feel pressured to conform to masculine workplace norms to gain career advancements, they may end up suppressing the very qualities and perspectives that make their contributions unique. This self-censorship diminishes their individual voices as well as the richness of thought and experience within the organization. As a result, negative consequences for the development of the organization can occur - such as diminishing creativity, stifling innovation and decreased inclusivity in decision-making processes - leading over time, to undermine the potential benefits of a truly diverse and representative workforce.

Research on the evolution of gender stereotypes over time presents a nuanced landscape. While some studies suggest that gender stereotypes have evolved to some extent, other research indicates that traditional stereotypes persist, albeit with some modifications. The portrayal of gender stereotypes has shifted in response to societal changes, but deep-rooted beliefs and perceptions continue to influence workplace dynamics, resulting in research not providing a definitive resolution of this issue (Heilman et al., 2025).

One of the most relevant contributions to the evolution of gender stereotypes has been made by Professor Sandra Bem with the elaboration of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (Bem, 1974), an index measuring an individual's identification with traditionally masculine and feminine qualities. Since its formalization, researchers have used this index to assess people's attitudes towards sex and gender roles. Even if apparent changes have occurred, with women's self-identification with masculine trait scores has been increasing over time (Donnelly & Twenge, 2017), the differences between genders have remained constant; meaning that the difference between women and men's gender stereotype self-identification has remained relatively consistent for more than 40 years (Dallimore et al., 2024).

Considering the consistent progress made over the past 70 years in narrowing gender disparities—particularly in areas like workforce participation, access to higher education, and evolving public attitudes toward gender roles—it is striking that the core content of gender stereotypes has remained so resistant to change. This raises a critical question: why do these deeply ingrained beliefs about men and women persist, despite substantial social, economic, and cultural advancements?(Dallimore et al., 2024).

One potential explanation is the biasing effect of gender stereotypes on cognitive representation. Gender schema theory suggests that knowledge of stereotypes influences how people attend to, store, and recall social information (Bem, 1981). Numerous studies have shown that people have better memory for stereotype-consistent information and experience stereotype-consistent memory intrusions (Dallimore et al., 2024).

Even small individual biases in memory can have substantial societal influence when they are widely shared, and information is repeatedly communicated. Communication research indicates that people tend to discuss, agree with, and focus on stereotype-consistent information. This could be due to social and communicative biases, but it is also possible that stereotype-consistent memory bias alone could cause information to become increasingly stereotype-consistent as it is passed from person to person, without the need for explicit social or communicative pressures (Dallimore et al., 2024).

Recent research has examined the spontaneous formation and evolution of novel stereotypes using a transmission chain method, where information is repeatedly passed from person to person. Even in the absence of social or communicative pressure, an initially random set of attributes became increasingly simplified and learnable, with categorical features becoming strongly associated with specific attributes. This supports the idea that the formation and evolution of stereotypes can be driven by shared cognitive biases, the effects of which accumulate as information is repeatedly transmitted (Dallimore et al., 2024).

Based in the above-mentioned state of the art on gender stereotype means of transmission, Dellimore et al. (2024) studied whether stereotype-consistent memory bias, in the absence of social and communicative pressures, can shape the evolution of socially transmitted information, leading to the spontaneous re-emergence of societal gender stereotypes that were initially absent from the social environment. Thanks to a "social transmission chain" experimental design, they examined across four experiments whether people's memory for the personality attributes associated with female and male social targets became increasingly gender stereotype consistent as information passed down transmission chains of four generations of participants. Their findings supported the possibility that, in the absence of communication bias, memory bias alone can cause social information to become increasingly stereotype-consistent. In fact, the experiments found evidence of the re-emergence of gender stereotypes, which was stronger in feminine- and masculine-stereotyped occupational contexts but was eliminated in a single-gender context. This demonstrates that small amounts of cognitive bias, if widely shared, can maintain existing gender stereotypes through cultural evolution, though the maintenance of stereotypes is not inevitable, since the way the social environment is structured might reduce the stereotypes persistence (Dallimore et al., 2024).

The re-emergence of gender stereotypes was driven by a bias toward recalling stereotype-consistent information, regardless of accuracy. While there was no initial memory bias, a bias for stereotype-consistent intrusions emerged over the course of the information transmission. This suggests an interactive process where stereotypes bootstrap themselves into re-emergence, exerting greater influence on people's cognitive representations and the evolving social environment (Dallimore et al., 2024).

These experiments involved participants from US universities and encompass the country position on the themes. Moving to the European continent, it is noticeable how the interest on these topics is significantly lower, there are a few pieces of literature about the evolution of gender stereotypes and the scope of these studies is not comparable to the American ones.

An example is the paper from Moya and Moya-Garófano (2021) analyzing the evolution of gender stereotypes in Spain from 1985 to 2018, highlighting the evolving nature of gender stereotypes in the country, demonstrating shifts in perceptions of gender roles, occupational stereotypes, and personality traits. Differing from many US studies, Spanish society has incurred in changes in the perception of gender stereotypes. In fact, the perception of man and woman targets differed in the association of male-linked gender role behaviors, occupations and physical characteristics, and female-linked gender role behaviors, with weaker differences in 2018 compared to 1985. However, other items showed consistent perceptions over time: agentic traits, communal traits, female-linked occupations,

and female physical characteristics have not shown significant difference over the 33-year period. The evolution of women's status in Spain over recent decades has contributed to changes in stereotypes, particularly in gender role behaviors and gender-typed occupations. Notably, there has been a convergence in the stereotypical perceptions of men and women in gender roles and occupations, with men increasingly associated with female roles and women with male roles in 2018 compared to 1985. The findings underscore the influence of social changes on stereotypes and emphasize the importance of continued societal progress in reshaping gender perceptions (Moya & Moya-Garófano, 2021).

If willing to analyze Italian society, the literature is ever scarcer. An interesting contribution comes from a recent analysis, with a survey shared during the 2023 on sociodemographic factors related to gender stereotypes. The investigation included six fields: games, jobs, personality traits, home and family activities, sports, and moral judgments (Carvalho Silva et al., 2024). The results show the persistence of gender stereotypes in any fields investigated, although descriptive statistics revealed most participants being high educational level women living in the North of Italy. This demonstrates that the long-standing gender stereotypes are prevalent, pernicious, and, unfortunately, internalized at times even by successful women push backing and sabotaging them unconsciously (Heilman et al., 2025).

1.2. Barriers to female leadership: a review of relevant theories

To understand the persistence of women underrepresentation in leadership roles, a psychological and sociocultural analysis of the inequalities is needed. The aim of the following sections is to delve into these forces that shape our perceptions, influence our behaviors, and often operate unconsciously in workplaces and institutions.

The main concept is the one of the gender roles, introduced first by sexologist John Money in 1955; this marked the beginning of formal research into the phenomenon, with the scope of understanding how society prescribes behaviors and traits based on one's gender. In the 1970s, scholars began identifying traits traditionally associated with men—such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and leadership—and those associated with women—such as warmth, submissiveness, and empathy—laying the foundation for the understanding of occupational gender segregation.

From a young age, individuals unconsciously internalize these expectations, consequently shaping how they see themselves and others, influencing ambitions, career choices, and perceived leadership

potential. Theories such as Social Role Theory, Stereotype Threat, and Ambivalent Sexism Theory have demonstrated how even well-intentioned perceptions can reinforce implicit biases, subtly steering women away from leadership roles or undermining their authority once in them. Additionally, other phenomena like the glass ceiling, sticky floor, glass labyrinth and expectancy violation Theory further illustrate how women are not only held back from leadership but are often placed in precarious positions when they do defy conventional roles.

Together, these theoretical perspectives highlight how systemic barriers are not always visible but are deeply woven into our institutions and everyday interactions. The sections that follow explore these frameworks in depth, offering a clearer view of the multifaceted forces sustaining gender inequality and the urgent need to dismantle them.

1.2.1. Defining gender bias: prejudice and mediators

Having previously analyzed the content of gender stereotype, the main efforts of this sub-section will be to give an overview on the topic of prejudice, how it is activated, and which factors contribute to mediate this phenomenon.

Prejudices—whether conscious (explicit) or unconscious (implicit)—often serve as the underlying mechanisms that fuel gender bias in various contexts, including leadership, hiring, and social evaluation. Researchers have conducted numerous experiments to measure and explore these different forms of prejudice, showing how implicit and explicit biases shape the way women are perceived and treated in professional and social settings.

To have a clearer idea of the topic is interesting to highlight the difference between *stereotype* and *prejudice*. A simplification would be that the difference comes from the "origin" of these concepts. In fact, the intergroup relations literature on race bias, links prejudice and stereotyping to affect and cognition respectively. Whereas the term prejudice refers to negative affective responses toward outgroup members, the term stereotype refers to cognitive representations of culturally held beliefs about outgroup members (Amodio & Devine, 2006).

Similarly, before delving into the analysis it is necessary to clarify the definitions of implicit and explicit forms of prejudice. Implicit bias refers to unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that influence our understanding, actions, and decisions towards others, often without our awareness. In contrast, explicit bias involves conscious beliefs and attitudes that individuals are aware of and can articulate. Researchers emphasize the relevance of distinguishing between implicit and explicit forms of

prejudice to comprehensively assess individuals' attitudes and beliefs, offering insights into the underlying mechanisms that drive biased behaviors and discriminatory actions (Brauer et al., 2000).

Implicit and explicit components of prejudice are measured in the literature with distinct psychological assessments, the Implicit Association Test (IAT) and self-reported surveys. The Implicit Association Test (IAT) was developed by Anthony Greenwald, Deborah McGhee, and Jordan Schwartz (1998). It is designed to measure the strength of automatic associations between mental representations of objects (i.e., women, men) and evaluative attributes (i.e. good, bad). By measuring the speed with which individuals categorize words or images associated with gender-related concepts, the IAT reveals implicit prejudices that may influence attitudes and behavior (Greenwald et al., 1998).

Explicit biases are typically measured through self-report surveys, where individuals consciously acknowledge their attitudes toward women, often revealing prejudices that are socially accepted or culturally ingrained.

In the existing literature, there are two different major approaches to the conceptualization of implicit and explicit prejudice: the same construct approach and the two constructs approach. In the same construct approach, implicit and explicit measures assess precisely the same thing because what has become automatic is the prejudice that was initially consciously, and perhaps intentionally, learned. In the two constructs approach, the two measures of prejudice assess very different things: cultural prejudices that are internalized and automatized and personal beliefs that are effortfully elaborated and consciously available; implicit measures presumably assess the former, whereas explicit measures assess the latter (Brauer et al., 2000).

Despite these categorizations, it is more plausible to conceive prejudice as a multidimensional construct that involves the automatic activation of prejudice upon perception of a member of the target group, application of these ideas in judgments about a member of a target group, and conscious beliefs and action tendencies toward members of the target group (Brauer et al., 2000).

As previously analyzed, successful leaders are often perceived to have qualities that are stereotypically associated with males, such as being assertive and decisive. This creates a mismatch for women aspiring to leadership positions, as they are expected to exhibit more agentic behavior to counteract the typical female stereotype. Studies show that to challenge gender stereotypes, female leaders need to demonstrate clearly their agentic qualities to combat the prevailing notion that men are inherently better suited for leadership roles. This dynamic implies a double bind for women. As they may adopt agentic traits to succeed in male-dominated environments, society still expects from

them to maintain communal behaviors, including warmth, empathy, and cooperation. This creates a no-win situation: if women are too agentic, they may be perceived as competent but unlikable; if they are too communal, they risk being seen as likable but ineffective as leaders (Rudman & Glick, 2001). As a result, female leaders often walk a tightrope, navigating conflicting expectations that constrain their leadership expression and reinforce gendered organizational norms.

If on the one hand, by providing perceivers with unambiguous information about their counter stereotypical attributes, women can undermine gender stereotypes and enhance their chances of being recognized for their leadership potential, they could, on the other, experience punishment for not conforming to feminine communal characteristics (Phelan & Rudman, 2010).

Therefore, these efforts to challenge gender norms can also have negative consequences: the so-called backlash; defined as social and economic penalties for defying stereotypic expectations (Rudman & Glick, 2001). Gender stereotypes not only act as descriptive beliefs but also as prescriptive norms dictating how men and women should behave. Individuals who deviate from these norms, such as women displaying high levels of agency, may face backlash in the form of social and economic penalties. Backlash effects for disconfirming prescriptive stereotypes can manifest as prejudice and hiring discrimination against women who exhibit agentic qualities. While men who showcase communality traits during job interviews may also face backlash, societal expectations align more closely with the qualities associated with successful leadership, placing less pressure on men to defy stereotypical expectations in the workplace compared to women. (Rudman & Glick, 2001).

Although the clearly documented harmful consequences of female agency, women are not always penalized when they violate gender stereotypes (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Several aspects can moderate the backlash effect and interesting results come from the analysis of women professors in Academia.

Interesting piece of research on the topic by Fisher, Stinson & Kalajdzic (2019) has studied the various moderators on bias against female professors. The scholars wanted to analyze the complex interplay of individual characteristics and social context interact on student evaluations of their professors (Fisher et al., 2019).

Women evaluation in academia is complex and the implications of confirming or defying stereotypical feminine characteristics are various. That is because academia represents a high-status field, but it still harbors status hierarchies within universities, with certain disciplines like Engineering, Computer Science, and Business being more esteemed than others such as English, History, and Philosophy (Fisher et al., 2019).

The gender bias prevalent in academic settings is posited to vary depending on the status of the department in which female faculty members work. It is theorized that gender bias in teaching evaluations is likely to be more pronounced in higher status departments while being less prevalent in lower status departments. This notion constitutes the backlash hypothesis, which contends that backlash against female faculty members is influenced by the status of the department they belong to (Fisher et al., 2019).

The concept of backlash theory further postulates that certain personal attributes of female faculty members can either shield them from or render them more susceptible to backlash stemming from their deviation from gender-role and status expectations in high-status fields. One such attribute is physical attractiveness. Women who conform to societal beauty standards are perceived as more feminine and are accorded higher ascribed status. Beauty ideals enhance one's perceived popularity and success, bridging the gap between ascribed and achieved status, a factor often linked to backlash. Hence, highly attractive female professors might be shielded from status-based backlash due to their conformity to gender roles and increased ascribed status derived from their attractiveness. In contrast, less attractive female professors are anticipated to be more vulnerable to backlash, as per the vulnerability hypothesis posited in the study (Fisher et al., 2019).

The proposed hypotheses aim to shed light on the differential impact of departmental status and attractiveness on the susceptibility of female professors to backlash, elucidating how these factors may influence the evaluation and treatment of women in high versus low status academic departments.

The experiments carried out by the researchers confirmed the hypotheses. In fact, the findings indicate a clear manifestation of gender bias, with female professors in high-status fields receiving less favorable ratings compared to their counterparts in low-status fields. This sheds light on the presence of gender bias, particularly accentuated in disciplines such as Business/Economics and milder in fields like English. The study also highlights the vulnerability of female professors to backlash, with attractiveness playing a significant role in mitigating the impact of status-based bias. Highly attractive female professors experienced significantly less backlash compared to their less attractive peers in high-status departments. Moreover, the research uncovers additional factors that heighten the susceptibility of female professors to backlash in academia, including youth/inexperience, grading strictness, and the academic department's status. An intricate analysis combining these variables suggests a substantial difference in ratings between less experienced, unattractive female professors teaching challenging courses in high-status departments and their experienced, attractive counterparts teaching easier courses (Fisher et al., 2019a).

This disparity not only underscores the diverse experiences of women in academia but also underscores the potential repercussions of backlash in terms of financial losses and hindered career progression (Phelan & Rudman, 2010).

1.2.2. Social Role theory: why women struggle in leadership

One of the key theoretical frameworks for understanding the origins and perpetuation of gender bias is Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012). This theory posits that gender differences and similarities in behavior are not inherent but rather arise from the roles that men and women occupy within society. According to Social Role Theory, societal expectations about gender roles are shaped by both biological factors (such as reproductive responsibilities and physical strength) and socioeconomic structures (such as division of labor). These roles, in turn, influence the behaviors and attributes associated with each gender.

Unlike more focused theories in social and personality psychology, Social Role Theory offers a holistic approach that illustrates the overarching origins of behavioral disparities between sexes. This theory emphasizes how societal structures shape the content of gender role beliefs, which, in turn, influence male and female behaviors. Furthermore, it identifies the psychological and biological processes that serve as immediate determinants of sex differences and similarities, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding gendered behavior patterns in various contexts.

The development of meta-analytic methods in the late 1970s played a key role in advancing this understanding. In fact, a meta-analysis is a research method that involves the combination of results from multiple studies on a specific topic; pooling data from many different studies enhances the statistical power of the subsequent findings. Another strength of meta-analysis is the possibility of studying the heterogeneity between studies, revealing how much the results differ across studies and whether these differences can be attributed to specific study characteristics. Researchers like Eagly used these methods to systematically compare male and female behavior across studies, revealing subtle yet consequential differences between the sexes. These findings challenged the belief that most sex differences are negligible, prompting a search for theoretical explanations to account for these variations.

As previously mentioned, psychological research on cultural stereotypes about men and women highlighted consensual beliefs, with agentic traits being more commonly attributed to men and

communal traits to women. Moreover, studies showed that people tend to infer traits from observed behaviors, perpetuating gender stereotypes. Meta-analytic reviews demonstrated strong correlations between gender stereotypes and actual behavioral differences, which called into question the idea that these stereotypes are inaccurate depictions of groups.

The power of gender stereotypes to influence behavior was underscored by research on expectancies and self-fulfilling prophecies. Additionally, insights from expectation states theory in sociology further illustrated how societal beliefs about gender shape actual behavior, showing that cultural norms significantly impact social interactions and outcomes. Together, these frameworks help us understand how gender stereotypes guide individuals' behaviors, reinforcing sex differences in various contexts.

Eagly's synthesis of sociological role theory, gender stereotype research, and methodological advancements like meta-analysis in the 1980s laid the groundwork for social role theory. The starting point was the concept of role in social sciences. The relevance stands in analytical bridge that role provides between the individual and the social environment. In the context of roles theories, the theoretical basis is the classic work by Parsons and Bales (1955) *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*. They provided an explicit analysis of female and male roles, describing the division of labor between husbands and wives in American families of the '50s as a specialization of men in task-oriented (or instrumental) behavior and of women in socioemotional (or expressive) behavior.

Expanding from traditional role theory, Eagly and Wood integrated a biosocial approach to investigate the interconnected causes of sex differences and similarities. The mechanism of Social Role theory is explained graphically in the Figure 2 below, where a series of causes ranging from ultimate determinants to more immediate factors are studied. Positioned at the top of the causal hierarchy are the ultimate determinants, such as genetic predispositions and evolutionary pressures, which shape the division of labor between the sexes in societies. This division of labor, influenced by physical differences and local conditions, leads to the development of gender role beliefs, subsequently perpetuated through socialization processes.

Gender role beliefs play a crucial role in shaping behavior through three main processes: hormonal regulation, expectations from others, and self-standards. Hormonal changes in individuals interact with gender role beliefs to influence behavior, while external expectations and internal self-standards further contribute to the regulation of behavior in accordance with gender norms. By elucidating the

ultimate determinants and proximal factors influencing female and male behavior, the biosocial approach provides a comprehensive framework for understanding sex differences and similarities.

The biosocial theory posits that ultimate determinants, such as genetic predispositions and evolutionary pressures, influence the division of labor between the sexes. This division of labor is shaped by physical specialization and local conditions, resulting in the development of gender role beliefs. Gender role beliefs, in turn, influence behavior through interactions with hormonal changes, external expectations, and internal self-standards. Through a nuanced exploration of the interplay between biological and social factors, the biosocial approach offers valuable insights into the origins and perpetuation of gender differences in behavior.
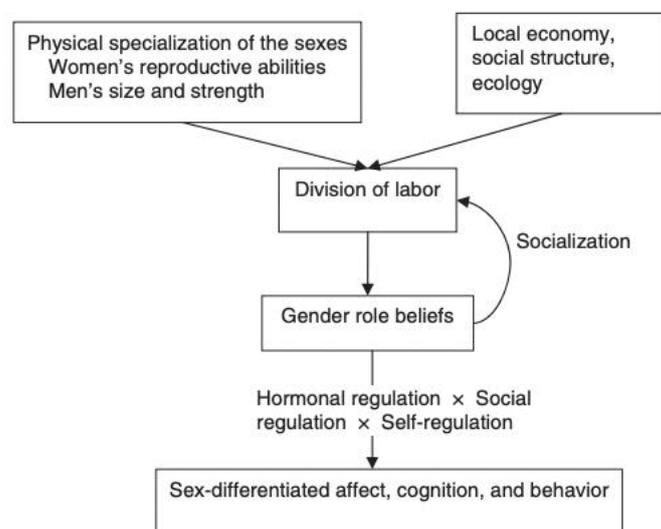
Figure 2 Gender roles guide sex differences and similarities through biosocial processes. Source: Eagly A., Wood W (2021)

The research suggests that specific roles in the workplace are influenced by gender roles. Meaning that in workplaces, individuals like managers or lawyers have specific roles based on their occupations, but they are also subject to the constraints of their gender roles.

The main idea is that specific roles dictate task performance more directly, while gender roles influence discretionary behaviors and communal aspects, particularly in professions like healthcare and management.

For example, physicians, regardless of gender, must gather patient information, make a diagnosis, and develop treatment plans. However, there is room for variation in behavioral styles within these

task rules, primarily influenced by gender roles. Female physicians can have caring and communal behaviors, as well as a participative and team-building approach can be seen in female managers.

Nevertheless, even if the most celebrated skills in modern society are the intellectual over physical ones, resulting in increased educational attainment and access to higher-status occupations for women, men still dominate leadership positions and women bear the brunt of childcare responsibilities even when both partners are employed full-time.

Social role theory elucidates the stability and evolution of gender roles, noting recent changes as women venture into new educational and career domains. Evidence suggests a convergence in male and female attributes due to women's increasing participation in traditionally masculine domains and decreased focus on domestic activities (Haines et al., 2016). While societal perceptions acknowledge the convergence of male and female attributes, men in industrialized nations exhibit slower transitions in their roles compared to women. Men's limited involvement in childcare and reluctance to pursue caring professions hinder their adoption of communal qualities. Overcoming barriers to men's involvement in childcare and nurturing occupations, necessitates a deeper understanding of the roots and constraints of gendered roles, particularly in how male size, strength, and female reproductive activities interact with socioeconomic factors (Coltrane, 2000).

Female socialization, biological factors like hormonal processes, and societal beliefs play a role in perpetuating women's primary responsibility for childcare. Fathers also display hormonal adjustments conducive to caregiving, supported by evolving societal norms accepting men's participation in childcare. However, societal ideologies and beliefs endorsing gender-based inequalities impede progress towards gender equality.

Interesting data comes from the Parenting in America today report by the Pew Research center, where 3757 U.S. parents with children under age 18 were surveyed. The findings show mothers and fathers having different approaches to parenting in many ways, from how they relate to their children to the worries they have about challenges their children may face, to the role being a parent plays in their lives (Minkin et al., 2023). Most important to this research is the perceptions of who does more when it comes to childcare responsibilities which differs by gender among married and cohabiting parents in opposite-sex relationships.

Figure 3 illustrates the share of parents who say the mother or father does more when it comes to manage schedule and activities, provide emotional support, discipline, helping with homework and meeting their children basic needs. Majorities of mothers say they do more than their spouse or partner in each of these. On the other hand, fathers are more likely than mothers to say they do more or that

they share these responsibilities about equally with their spouse or partner. Still, apart from helping their children with homework, only about one-in-ten fathers say they do more than their spouse or partner when it comes to these tasks (Minkin et al., 2023).

Data suggests that fathers themselves perceive their involvement in childcare to be lower than that of mothers, recognizing that their contributions to childcare may be less than those of their female counterparts.
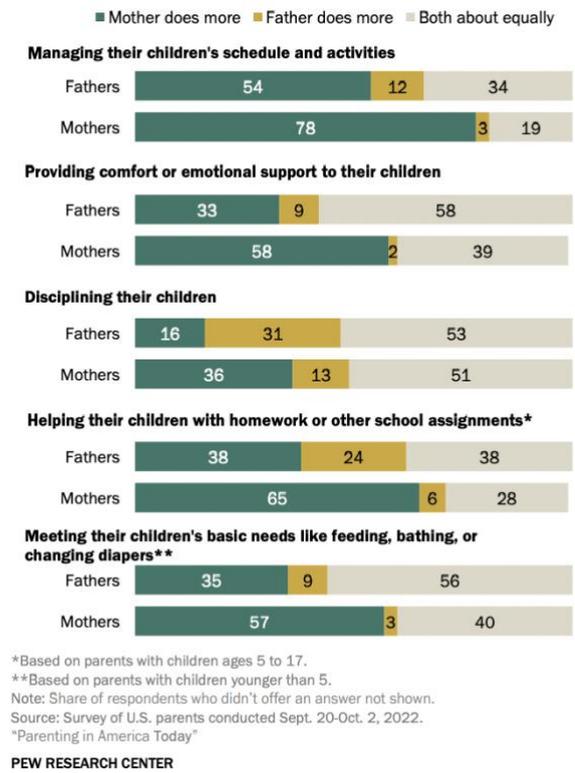
Figure 3 Parenting in America today, Pew research Center (2023)

Moving forward, a crucial challenge lies in understanding the underlying causes of role asymmetries to inform social policies that enable both men and women to access a wider array of social roles. By addressing societal norms, biases, and structural barriers, a more equitable distribution of roles and responsibilities can be achieved, contributing to a more inclusive and diverse society (Brinton, 2013).

In describing the origin and causes of gender bias, social role theory presents itself as a powerful theory, according to which gendered expectations are shaped by both biological and socio-cultural factors. These expectations influence behaviors and perceptions in professional contexts. While women are often associated with communal attributes and men with agentic traits, these stereotypes significantly bias hiring decisions. In fact, women may be rejected for leadership decisional roles, where the candidate is expected to be equipped with agentic attributes, as women are perceived as

more caring but less competent or committed. This theoretical framework highlights how gendered perceptions—rooted in longstanding role expectations—continue to shape organizational behavior and selection outcomes. It sets the stage for understanding how such perceptions mediate the relationship between gender and employability, providing the basis for the hypotheses examined in the following chapters.

1.2.3. Stereotype Content Model and BIAS map: warmth, competence and emotions

The Stereotype Content Model (SCM), developed by Fiske et al. (2002) identifies warmth and competence as the two universal dimensions of social perception, and the BIAS map elaborates on the SCM considering behavioral outcomes of warmth and competence evaluations, considering emotions as mediators.

Judgments of warmth and competence underlie perceptions of others, driving perceivers' emotional and behavioral reactions, based on social structural relationships. These dimensions are agued to be universal because they assess questions about others that are both basic and adaptive. Firstly, the warmth dimension responds to the basic needs of surviving in a social world, comprising morality, trustworthiness, sincerity, kindness, and friendliness, assesses the other's perceived intent in the social context. Secondly, both in importance and temporal sequence, actors need to know others' capability to pursue their intentions; the competence dimension, comprising traits as efficacy, skill, creativity, confidence, and intelligence, relates to perceived capability to enact intent (Cuddy et al., 2008). In short, actors categorize and "label" individuals according to their likely impact on themselves or their ingroup, with the distinction being determined by the individuals' perceived intentions and capabilities.

The scales defining warmth and competence have different labels but eventually describe the same two dimensions. Cuddy et al. (2008) warmth scales have included good-natured, trustworthy, tolerant, friendly, and sincere. While their competence scales have included capable, skillful, intelligent, and confident. Communion and agency dimensions brought by personality psychologist Bakan (1956), are compatible with the warmth and competence dimensions, although agency does not fully capture Cuddy et al (2008) semantic valence of competence, because agency focuses more on taking effective action. In fact, according to the scholars, competence entails the possession of skills, talents, and

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capability, but it can take the form of potential action as well as actual action. Moreover, gender literature has made extensive use of the communion and agency dimensions, due to their association with femininity and masculinity, respectively, and gender stereotypes, sex differences and other topics that will be explored in the subsequent paragraphs. However, the terms warmth and competence will be used for simplicity (Cuddy et al., 2008).

The underlying topic involved in the discussion of SCM and BIAS map are intergroup bias, which articulate in three principles, describing its functional, motivational, and social-cognitive roots.

The first principle is that *many groups do not receive a one-dimensional, hostile type of prejudice* (Cuddy et al., 2008). In other words, prejudice is both group- and context-dependent, with the potential to include simultaneously both negative and subjectively positive responses. Second, *the contents of the three psychological components of bias—cognitions (stereotypes), affect (emotional prejudices), and behavior (discrimination)—operate in synchrony with one another.* This explains how situations and their corresponding cognitive appraisals elicit discrete patterns of emotions, which in turn trigger specific behavioral responses (i.e., offensive action) adapted to cope with the potential threat the other individual or group poses (Cuddy et al., 2008). The last principle is that *emotions mediate the effects of cognitions on discrimination.* For example, affect often mediates the effects of cognition on behavior, but is not a reliable predictor of discriminatory behavior. The centrality of cognition in Cuddy et al. (2008) work, lies in the fact that the content of stereotypes on warmth and competence dimensions together create distinct bias at the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral level (Cuddy et al., 2008).

Cuddy et al. (2008) research is based on some basic tenets that will be shortly elucidated below.

Firstly, there is the warmth and competence centrality as underlying measures differentiating group stereotypes. Moreover, the universality is based on the research across widely varied target groups, such as occupations, nationalities, ethnicities, socioeconomic groups, religions, and gender subtypes. This means that, even with the presence of some idiosyncratic content (i.e., the notion that Black people are ''rhythmic''), the beliefs associated to each subgroup consist in more general themes organized along warmth and competence dimensions. Another tenet is that many groups will receive ambivalent stereotypes, implying a positive evaluation on one dimension and a negative evaluation on the other. In other words, many outgroups are viewed as competent but not warm or as warm but not competent.

Figure 4 below represents the relative location of various groups in the warmth by competence space, based on a representative survey of American adults.
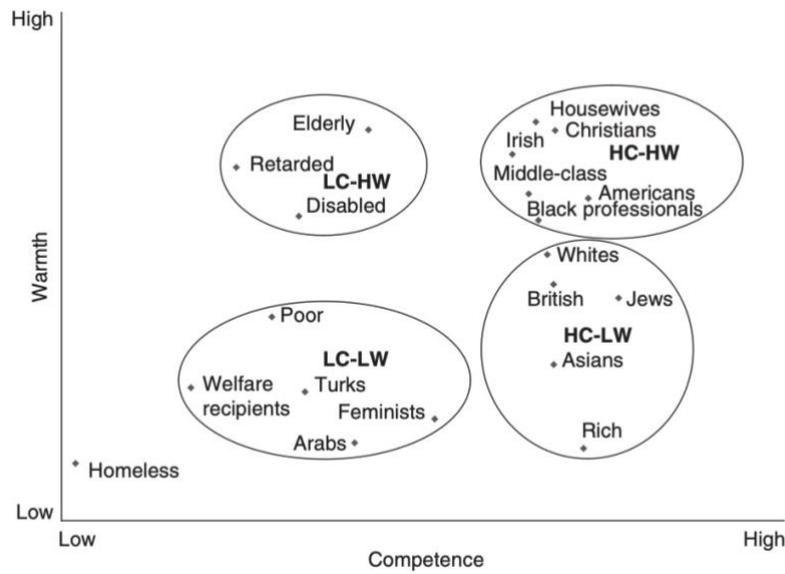
Figure 4 Relative location of various groups in the warmth x competence space. Source: Cuddy et al. (2008)

Another pillar of the SCM is that the origins of perceived warmth and competence lie in social structural variables, namely competition and status. In this view, non-competitive others are judged to be warm, whereas competitive others are not; and high-status others are judged to be competent, whereas low-status others are not (Cuddy et al., 2008). Figure 5 below illustrates the predictions of emotions integrated with the BIAS map predictions of behaviors, whose functioning mechanism will be elucidated shortly.
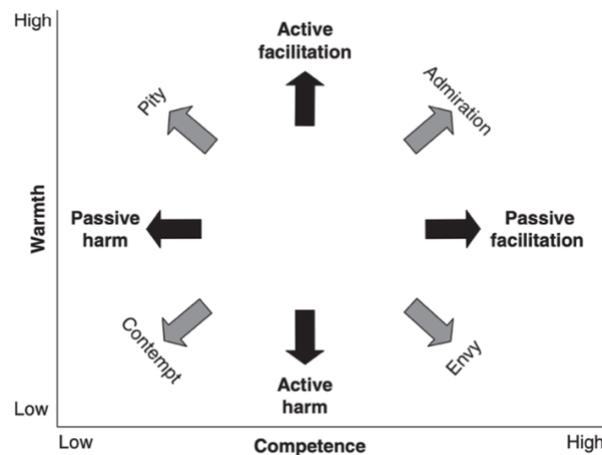
Figure 5 SCM predictions for emotions and BIAS map behavioral predictions. Source: Cuddy et al. (2008)

The BIAS map, as previously stated, extends the SCM by considering the behavioral outcomes of warmth and competence evaluations in social interactions. It proposes that the four combinations of high versus low warmth and competence elicit four unique patterns of behavioral responses: active facilitation (e.g., helping), active harm (e.g., harassing), passive facilitation (e.g., convenient cooperation), and passive harm (e.g., neglecting) (Cuddy et al., 2008). The basis of these prediction is that, since warmth is primary, meaning that is linked to others' intentions, it predicts active behaviors, in fact, groups judged as warm elicit active facilitation (i.e., help), whereas those judged as lacking warmth elicit active harm (i.e., attack). On the other hand, with competence dimension being secondary, (because it assesses others' capability to carry out intentions), predicts passive behaviors: groups judged as competent induce passive facilitation (i.e., obligatory association, convenient cooperation), whereas those judged as lacking competence elicit passive harm (i.e., neglect, ignoring). In summary, discrimination assumes different forms according to the individuals' perceived abundance or lack of warmth/competence.

What is notable about the BIAS map, is the role of emotions in determining the above-mentioned behaviors, it predicts that emotions are the proximal cause of social behaviors because they mediate the link judgments to behaviors. Hence, the four combinations of high versus low warmth and competence perceptions create four unique emotional responses: admiration, contempt, envy, and pity. For completeness reasons all the emotions will be discusses below, even if the subgroup on which this research is about (women) is included in the high warmth, low competence quadrant.

Starting from admiration, it is associated to high warmth high competence quadrant; admiration springs from some high-status groups which do not compete with societal ingroups, either because they are dominant, reference groups or their close allies. An example of such group can be the American middle class. In fact, most Americans identify as middle class or aspire to be, so the middle class serves as a societal reference group. These reference groups, receiving univalent positive regard, elicit pride, admiration, and respect. Pride targets others who attain favorable outcomes (e.g., high status) that also have positive implications for the self, and it results from self-relevant, positive, controllable outcomes. Pride and self-esteem follow positive outcomes attributed to self, and by extension, to one's group or reference group. (Cuddy et al., 2008). This is why people in US admire the middle class, because they assimilate the self to the ingroup, close allies, or societal reference groups, and the success of these larger entities can be an occasion for pride, rather than envy. The predicted behavior towards who the actor feels admiration is active facilitation (help), implying an explicit aim to help the target.

The following is contempt, being the emotion of the low warmth and low competence groups. Some groups elicit univalent antipathy (anger, contempt, disgust, hate, and resentment) because it is believed that their negative outcomes are perceived as their own fault and are viewed as a drain on the rest of society. (Cuddy et al., 2008) These groups are perceived as low-status, competitive free-loaders with hostile and exploitative intent that impacts others (individuals, communities, religious believers…) and thus elicit strong morally justified contempt. This emotion distinguishes itself from ager because it includes more specific emotions, such as disgust, moralistic resentment and indignation. In the case of contempt, the BIAS map predicts actively harming behaviors like insults, bullying, and attack.

The third one, corresponding to low warmth high competence groups is envy. These groups are considered responsible for their own high status they are perceived as cold and with hostile intents. This happens because the self is deprived by others' controllable and positive outcomes and envy is generated by the superior achievements one lacks. The behaviors elicited by envy are the ones of passive facilitations, when is convenient to cooperate with the target and contact is not desired but tolerated in the service of other goals. When choosing to work with a choosing to work with members of a group assumed to be smart (i.e. Asians) on a team project or hiring the services of outgroup members (i.e. domestics) are considered passive facilitation.

Lastly, there's pity, elicited by non-competent and low-status groups. These groups are seen as incompetent but very warm, thus they are the target of paternalistic prejudice. Examples of this cluster include elderly people, disabled people, and traditional women. When confronting group eliciting pity, the actor promotes passive harming behaviors, distancing others by diminishing their social worth through excluding, ignoring, or neglecting. Moreover, passive harm can manifest at the institutional level as well, disregarding the needs of some groups or limiting access to necessary resources such as education, housing, and healthcare (Cuddy et al., 2008).

What is more relevant in Cuddy et al (2008) study, is the presence of both ambivalent emotions and ambivalent behavioral responses to ambivalent warmth-competence judgements (competent but cold, incompetent but warm). In this context, traditional women are assimilated to gender stereotypes and subject to paternalism. This result in women being stereotyped as more positively than men, with the so called ''women are wonderful'' effect. In other words, women characteristics of communality and warmth overcome the advantage men have on stereotypes of agency or competence (also positively valued traits). Thus, traditional images of women place them squarely into the paternalized, pitying category in the SCM's warmth competence space. An explanation for this behavior is given by the Ambivalent sexism theory (Glick and Fiske, 1996) that will be analyzed in the following paragraph.

Briefly, the scholars posit that women are paternalized because they traditionally have lower status and power, yet men are intimately interdependent on them (as mothers, wives, and romantic objects). In other words, women traditionally fit the SCM category of a lower status, but cooperative group, fostering paternalistic sexist attitudes (Cuddy et al., 2008).

At the same time, not all women fit the "traditional woman" category. In fact, considering social changes such as the feminist movement and women's influx into the paid work force, career women and feminists are seen as competitors to men. Thus, if paternalism targets traditional women, nontraditional subtypes of women are subject to hostile sexism. This behavior represents an envious prejudice toward career women and feminists because are viewed as competitors with ''unfair advantages''. What is even more striking is the fact that both hostile and benevolent sexism are psychologically compatible ideologies, meaning that one could feel envious hostility toward feminists and career women, but paternalistic benevolence toward housewives, who conform with traditional types (Glick & Fiske, 1996). For these reasons, different categories of women inhabit different quadrants of the SCM space, with career women typically viewed as competent but not warm, whereas homemakers are usually characterized as warm but not competent. The behaviors involved in this context are seemingly ambivalent but both hinder and harm gender equality, with paternalism providing incentives for women to remain in their cooperative, lower-status traditional roles, and hostile sexism deterring them from becoming competitors seeking higher status roles.

However, in contemporary society many career women are also mothers; paternalistic or hostile treatment may depend on which subcategory is salient. It may seem on the surface that being paternalized is less damaging than being treated with hostility, but paternalistic discrimination creates important negative effects. For example, when working women become mothers, activating a traditional role, they lose perceived competence and gain perceived warmth, but this shift does not help them professionally. In fact, and as might be expected in a work context, only perceived competence predicted positive behavioral intentions regarding hiring, promotion, and education. Such discrimination is consistent with the BIAS map prediction of passive harm; the boost in working mothers' perceived warmth did not help them professionally, whereas their apparent loss in perceived competence hurt them (Cuddy et al., 2008).

Other research demonstrates how women in work contexts receive both active facilitation and passive harm, meaning that they would receive lavish praise for accomplishments, but won't be assigned important tasks or leadership roles (Vescio et al., 2005). This paternalistic combination is particularly frustrating as the praise sets up expectations for tangible rewards that are not forthcoming. Of course, praise is cheap, but tangible rewards lead to higher status and power. Thus, although paternalistic

treatment of women may come as innocent and unthreatening, it harms women professionally, hindering career opportunities and often putting women towards the choice of being mothers or workers.

1.2.3 Ambivalent Sexism theory: the hidden bias behind positive features

Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske (1996) presented a theory of sexism that is formulated as ambivalence toward women and validated a corresponding measure, the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

In fact, if sexism is commonly viewed as a manifestation of hostility towards women, according to the Glick and Fiske (1996), this perspective fails to acknowledge the coexistence of positive sentiments towards women alongside negative attitudes. For this reason, they propose a multidimensional concept of sexism, involving both hostile and benevolent forms. They defined as hostile sexism (HS) the conventional negative beliefs and behaviors towards women, reflecting traditional prejudice. On the other hand, benevolent sexism (BS) encompasses attitudes that are rooted in traditional gender stereotypes and roles but are accompanied by subjectively positive feelings by the holder, often leading to behaviors perceived as prosocial or intimate seeking (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Particularly interesting to this analysis are the consequences of benevolent sexism. Since BS combines positive feelings with gender stereotyping and dominance, despite the seemingly positive nature for the perceiver, its foundations in traditional gender roles often have detrimental effects. For instance, seemingly well-intentioned comments from men towards female colleagues on their appearance may undermine the women's professional credibility. What distinguishes BS is the apparent positivity involved in protective attitudes, helping behaviors, and the pursuit of intimacy. Yet, despite this seemingly favorable tone, it rests on traditional stereotypes idealizing women as weaker and dependent on male protection (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Despite the presence of benevolent sexism, the prevalence of hostile sexism remains a significant concern. Evidence from contemporary society highlights ongoing challenges faced by women in the workplace, but also the persistence of sexual violence against women at alarming rates. This illustrates the darker, more harmful manifestations of sexism that continue to impact women's safety and well-being (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

The ambivalence is labeled as such because BS and HS beliefs entail opposite evaluative feelings towards women. According to Glick and Fiske (1996), hostile and benevolent sexism may be positively correlated, implying the generation of opposing evaluative implications, fulfilling the literal meaning of ambivalence.

For example, a person might hold seemingly consistent beliefs about women (like viewing them as incompetent at work while believing they need to be protected), yet these beliefs can lead to contrasting evaluations. One explanation for why individuals can be ambivalent towards women without experiencing inner conflict is the categorization of women into favored in-groups (e.g., homemakers) and disliked outgroups (e.g., feminists). This approach may help ambivalent sexists rationalize their attitudes as not universally prejudicial towards all women, as they may dislike only specific categories of women, not all.

Although benevolent sexism often presents a positive image of women, it shares a similar foundation with hostile sexism by reinforcing the belief in women's restricted roles and inferiority, ultimately supporting male dominance. These forms of sexism serve to legitimize male power and to mask or justify hostile sexism, further solidifying the notion of male superiority (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

The evaluations of women in subtypes ("career women," "homemakers," or "feminists," rather than identifying all women under the singular category of "woman."), reflect the influence of benevolent and hostile sexism on gender inequality. Benevolent sexism rewards women who conform to traditional gender roles, while hostile sexism punishes those who challenge societal norms, the backlash phenomenon. The combination of rewards for conformity and punishment for nonconformity contributes to the reinforcement of gender inequality, creating a more powerful system for maintaining gender norms (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Tracing back the origins of BS and HS, it is ought to mention both biological and social factors, as previously done in the Social Role theory. Anthropologists widely recognize patriarchy as a common structure across cultures, influenced by factors like sexual dimorphism, social dominance orientation, and gender-specific roles. While physical hostility is common, the biological differences between sexes have created a unique situation where women hold power due to men's dependence on them for reproduction and intimacy. This dependency leads to protective and reverential attitudes toward women, a key feature of benevolent sexism.

Both forms of sexism share three core components: Protective Paternalism, Complementary Gender Differentiation and Heterosexuality Intimacy. These elements reveal the ambivalence society has

towards women, with each component carrying both hostile and benevolent aspects creating the basis for the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, as seen in figure 6 below.
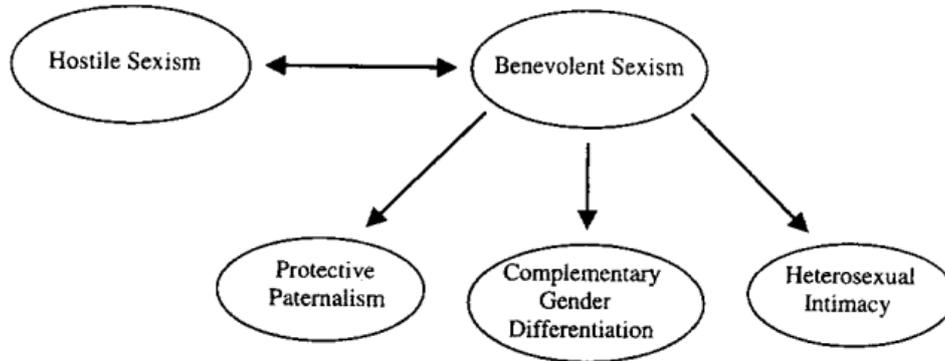
Figure 6 Factor Structure of Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. Source: Glick and Fiske (1996)

An interesting discussion arising in the context of BS and HS is how women behave in an environment which basically is hostile to them. A relevant study from Jost and Banaji's (2004), proposes a system-justification perspective highlighting how subordinate groups often internalize and accept ideologies of their own inferiority, particularly in terms of status-related dimensions perpetuated by dominant groups (Jost et al., 2004).

The study revealed that women, relative to men, were not much likely to reject benevolent sexism, since they may find the seemingly positive aspects of BS difficult to resist, as it offers rewards such as protection and provision from chivalrous men. In fact, in highly sexist environments, women may be more inclined to embrace benevolent sexism, sometimes even surpassing men in their endorsement (Jost et al., 2004).

Women's relatively higher acceptance of benevolent sexism suggests a reluctance to relinquish the above-mentioned benefits it offers without enduring the corresponding costs associated with hostile sexism. This acceptance may stem from women seeking self-protection in response to pervasive male sexism, using conformity to gender stereotypes and social roles as a coping mechanism to deal with hostile sexism. In this way, women embracing BS as a means of self-preservation, akin protection from the very group that poses a threat to their well-being (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Virginia Woolf was farsighted in 1929 arguing that true gender equality could happen only when "womanhood has ceased to be a protected occupation"; little did she knew that some women could accept benevolent sexism posing an obstacle to change.

Existing literature links benevolent sexism to workplace discrimination, the main object of interest for this research. To overcome this issue, organizations are assisted by equal employment (EE) policies, which play a crucial role in rectifying past discrimination, promoting social justice, and expanding the pool of job candidates. However, studies have shown that despite these benefits, employees often demonstrate low levels of support for EE policies. Sexism, in particular, exhibits a strong negative correlation with favorable attitudes towards EE policies being the most influential factor among various individual difference variables in predicting policy support (Hideg & Ferris, 2016).

Benevolent sexist individuals often express compassion towards women and are likely to endorse EE policies that aim to protect them, but this support is conditional upon maintaining traditional gender norms. Women are idealized and protected but simultaneously considered weak and inadequate in leadership positions, holding the belief that women are suited for certain roles based on traditional gender expectations. Seemingly, benevolent sexists may be more inclined to view women as lacking competence. In fact, studies have shown that EE policies can influence perceptions of competence, potentially leading to negative assessments of women's capabilities among both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries (Hideg & Ferris, 2016).

Based on the stereotype content model (Cuddy et al., 2008), perceiving women as warm but incompetent may evoke feelings of pity among benevolent sexists when considering EE policies aimed at enhancing women's employability. Pity is an ambivalent emotion encompassing sadness and compassion, which can either lead to active facilitation or passive harm towards the pitied group. Feelings of sadness and disrespect may result in distancing from the group, while compassion tends to prompt helping behaviors. Given that women are not easily avoided and are generally highly valued, benevolent sexists are likely to feel compassion towards women affected by EE policies.

1.2.5. Stereotype Threat and Gender Schema Theory: how biases shape behavior from childhood

Stereotype threat is a term first introduced by Standford professor Claude Steele in 1995 when he conducted research on African Americans intellectual test results. He demonstrated that in situation

of pressure or vulnerability, there's the risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, the negative stereotype of one's group (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

A professor Steele student, Dr. Steven Spencer, studied the same phenomenon among women, measuring women's math performance. The assumption was the same "when a stereotype about one's group indicts an important ability, one's performance in situations where that ability can be judged comes under an extra pressure—that of possibly being judged by or self-fulfilling the stereotype—and this extra pressure may interfere with performance" (Spencer et al., 1999). In this case, women face the stereotype that they have weaker math abilities, potentially disrupting their performance in mathematical tasks.

The research was articulated into three studies. The first one wanted to replicate the pattern observed in the literature that women tend to underperform on difficult math tests but perform equally with men on easier tests, with obtained results aligning with existing beliefs. The second experiment manipulated the information given about gender differences: a sample of men and women with a strong math background was given a difficult test (similar to the previous), and the results were different. In fact, when the test was characterized as not producing gender differences, women performed at the same level as equally qualified men. In contrast, when the test was described as producing gender differences, women underperformed significantly in relation to men. Lastly, the third experiment aimed at exploring the role of anxiety as a mediator of the stereotype threat effect, but did not find strong evidence of mediation effect.

Spencer's study suggests that stereotype threat experienced in testing situations, rather than inherent biological differences, could explain performance disparities observed in talented boys and girls taking advanced math tests. Moreover, stereotype threat may contribute to women's high attrition from quantitative fields, emphasizing the importance of addressing stereotype threat in educational as well as professional settings.

The relevance of the stereotype threat lies in the fact that the fear of confirming negative stereotypes about one's subgroup, derives basically from an internalization of gender stereotypes from the young age. This mechanism takes the name of Gender Schema Theory (GST), first theorized by Sandra Bem in 1981. At the basis of the theory there is the so-called sex-typing, by which society translates male and female into masculine and feminine (Bem, 1981). The importance of sex-typing has been highlighted by psychoanalytic, social-learning and cognitive-developmental theories; but is interesting to analyze what is learnt specifically. Not only children are taught male and female differences in terms of anatomy, reproductive function, division of labor, and personality attributes,

but also features more remotely or metaphorically related to sex, such as the angularity or roundedness of an abstract shape (Bem, 1981). This is why it is called gender schema, because they learn to invoke this heterogeneous network of sex-related associations to evaluate and assimilate new information (Bem, 1981). The gender schema guides the individual perceptions, serves as an anticipatory structure to analyze and store information in a schema-relevant manner. Thus, what this theory claims is that as children learn the contents of the society's gender schema, they learn also which attributes are to be linked with their own sex and, hence, with themselves. In this way, not only children learn to associate certain attributes to the "appropriate" sex but also evaluate his or her adequacy as a person in terms of the gender schema, to match his or her preferences, attitudes, behaviors, and personal attributes against the prototypes stored within it (Bem, 1981). In fact, adults rarely notice or remark upon how strong a little girl is becoming or how nurturant a little boy is becoming, despite their readiness to note precisely these attributes in the "appropriate" sex. Consequently, the child learns to apply this same schematic selectivity to the self, to choose from among the many possible dimensions of human personality only that subset defined as applicable to his or her own sex and thereby eligible for organizing the diverse contents of the self-concept (Bem, 1981).

Star and Zurbriggen (Star2017) reviewed the development and trajectory of gender schema theory, defining it a foundational framework in psychological literature (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2017). Though an in-depth literature review of papers citing GST, the authors discovered that its primary role has been to provide a theoretical framework rather than serve as a specific topic of investigation in subsequent studies. In fact, researchers have utilized GST more as a motivational basis for studies or as a lens for interpreting findings in various contexts. Their analysis began with tracking citations of GST throughout 34 years since its original publication, allowing researchers to observe trends and shifts in how GST has been integrated also into disciplines other than psychology. Findings indicated that GST was indeed widely referenced beyond traditional psychology journals, suggesting its relevance in fields such as education, sociology, and even medical research.(Starr & Zurbriggen, 2017). One of the notable findings was the substantial number of studies utilizing Gender Schema Theory that involved children, which reinforces the theory's significance in shaping beliefs and attitudes from a young age. The ongoing integration of GST into child psychology research emphasizes the importance of early intervention in combating stereotypes and fostering a more equitable understanding of gender.

Interesting evidence of stereotypes shaping children's beliefs and career choices comes from Bian (2017). Researchers suggested that the stereotype that associates high levels of intellectual ability,

such as brilliance and genius, more with men than with women is not only endorsed by adults but is also internalized by children as young as 6 years old (Bian et al., 2017).This is one of the reasons behind the underrepresentation of women in prestigious fields that value brilliance, such as physics and philosophy. Studies have shown that at the age of 6, girls are less likely than boys to believe that members of their own gender are "really, really smart," a child-friendly way of referring to brilliance. Additionally, girls at this age begin to avoid activities that are associated with being "really, really smart" (Bian et al., 2017).

Furthermore, research has indicated that girls' perceptions of their own school achievement do not align with their views on brilliance. Even though girls tend to perceive other girls as achieving top grades in school, this perception is not correlated with their beliefs about intellectual ability. This suggests that girls' ideas of brilliance are not solely deducted from academic results, but may be influenced by societal stereotypes and biases (Bian et al., 2017). Despite not exploring whether these findings extend beyond specific cultural contexts or how children become to internalize stereotypes, this study highlights the concerning reality that many children internalize the belief that brilliance is a male quality from a young age, aligning with the concepts of Gender Schema Theory. These stereotypes can limit children's career aspirations and opportunities by narrowing the scope of professions they consider due to gendered notions of intellectual ability.

1.2.6. Glass cliff, Glass Labyrinth and Sticky floor: structural barriers to leadership appointments

 "Glass ceiling" appeared first in the Wall Street journal, in an article by Bruckmüller and Ryan (1984) to describe gender inequality in upper management. The metaphor describes a phenomenon whereby women aspiring a top management position find themselves blocked from these positions by seemingly invisible (hence the glass), yet very real barriers (hence the ceiling) that serve to keep the upper echelons of leadership a predominantly male domain (Bruckmüller et al., 2014). On the other hand, men (particularly those in female-dominated professions) are more likely to be conveyed into management positions by means of a "glass escalator" (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). However, it becomes essential to understand what occurs once women breach these barriers and attain leadership representation.

In this context, leadership positions conquered by women are often referred to as "glass cliff" positions; to capture both the high level of these positions and the riskiness and precariousness inherent in them (Bruckmüller et al., 2014). This theory is examined through a study analyzing the

board appointments within the FTSE 100 companies (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). The methodology employed involved assessing appointment records from 2003 and evaluating company performance (change in stock price) both before and after the initiation of board members' tenures. The study revealed that women are often appointed to leadership roles under unfavorable conditions, in this way such appointments tend to correlate with a company's prior poor performance and adverse market conditions, positioning women at heightened risk for negative evaluations and outcomes that may not necessarily reflect their abilities or contributions (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

Moreover, sometimes there is also a biased public narrative around women's efficacy in executive roles. A lead article in *The Times Judge (2003)* "*Women on the Board: Help or Hindrance?*" Suggested women in leadership were harming company performance. Although this report utilized data from the Cranfield Index, which ranks companies based on their gender diversity in leadership, its methodological rigor was critiqued for lacking statistical validation and for presenting an incomplete picture of performance by omitting specific underperforming male-led companies (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

The leadership position roles achieved during adverse circumstances, reinforce the metaphor of the glass cliff, which indicates that while women are gaining access to leadership, the circumstances of their appointments are frequently less than favorable. The related implications suggest that often women's leadership appointments might come with negative evaluations or resultant responsibility for the deluding outcomes. Seemingly, negative company performance could overshadow their achievements, as it has been verified that companies with female leaders recovered faster from moments of financial depression, and lead to an intersection of scrutiny and blame those men, who may have been appointed under more favorable circumstances, do not face at the same level. (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

Bruckmüller (2014) reveals multiple causes behind the glass cliff phenomenon. These include stereotypical perceptions that women are better crisis managers and better people managers (think crisis–think female) as well as a stereotypical association between leadership and men (think manager–think male) that lies at the heart of many forms of gender discrimination in the workplace. Additional, and not entirely unrelated, factors include the perception of women as representing change from the default (male) standard, and the subtle workings of sexist dynamic (Bruckmüller et al., 2014).

The glass cliff concept expands upon the glass ceiling metaphor, recognizing that today many women achieve leadership positions, but stressing how their path towards the success is in either case

different and much less smooth compared to men. In fact, women are not only facing extant barriers along their paths to leadership, but they are also likely to encounter further challenges once they attain these positions, which may predispose them to failure due to systemic biases and organizational behaviors that disproportionately critique their performance. For this reason, while the increasing presence of women in leadership roles signals progress towards gender equity, the phenomenon of the glass cliff highlights enduring structural challenges that need to be addressed. (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

Since these topics gained increasing popularity, researchers expanded upon them, creating complementing theories explaining other aspects of the difficulties behind women's success. In fact, glass ceiling and glass cliff capture only one facet of the broader gendered dynamics that shape career trajectories. Complementing this concept is the sticky floor metaphor, which emphasizes the structural and institutional forces that constrain women's advancement from the very start of their professional lives.

The concept of the sticky floor was first theorized by sociologist Catherine White Berheide in the early 1990s, as she analyzed the stagnation of women in low-wage, low-status roles within state and local government sectors. Her colleague, Sharon Harlan, extended this reasoning, observing that the metaphor was equally applicable across a range of occupational contexts where women routinely fail to progress beyond initial or entry-level positions (Carli & Eagly, 2016).

Importantly, the sticky floor does not negate the relevance of the glass ceiling; rather, the two metaphors delineate different yet interconnected obstacles within the same system of gender inequality. Whereas the glass ceiling evokes an impenetrable barrier encountered by women who have already climbed significantly within an organization, the sticky floor calls attention to the fact that a large segment of women never attains sufficient elevation to confront that ceiling at all. It reflects a more insidious and pervasive set of limitations that prevent most women from accessing leadership pipelines in the first place (Carli & Eagly, 2016).

Empirical research supports the validity of the sticky floor as a phenomenon distinct from but parallel to the glass ceiling. Econometric studies have demonstrated that gender disparities in mobility are especially acute at the lower end of wage and status distributions. For instance, Booth et al., (2003) and (Arulampalam et al., 2007) provide evidence that women are disproportionately clustered in roles that offer minimal upward wage mobility. Similar findings by Christofides et al., (2013) show that gender-based stagnation at the bottom of occupational hierarchies is often exacerbated by labor

market structures that undervalue feminized labor, restrict access to skill development, and limit managerial opportunities.

In addition to external and systemic barriers, some scholars and commentators have also identified internalized constraints or behavioral tendencies as contributing to the sticky floor effect, such as perfectionism, reluctance to seek visibility, ineffective negotiation, and underinvestment in strategic networking—may inhibit women's progression (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Nonetheless, within academic literature, the sticky floor is most consistently framed as an external phenomenon—a manifestation of structural inequalities embedded in occupational sorting, compensation practices, and organizational cultures. Unlike the metaphor of the glass ceiling, which connotes a hardened, perhaps immovable, barrier encountered at higher ranks, the sticky floor suggests a form of constraint that is subtler yet more widespread. It also implies a differential possibility of escape: while some women may manage to "unstick" themselves and ascend the professional ladder, many remain bound to positions with limited prospects for growth. However, used in isolation, the sticky floor metaphor risks understating the cumulative nature of gendered barriers—by suggesting that, once escaped, mobility is unrestricted—whereas evidence shows that challenges persist throughout the career trajectory, often intensifying at each subsequent level.

Taken together, the sticky floor and glass ceiling metaphors offer a more comprehensive framework for understanding the multilayered obstacles that women face in their pursuit of leadership roles. By recognizing how gendered disadvantages manifest both at entry points and at executive thresholds, scholars and practitioners can better identify where interventions are needed to foster genuine career advancement for women across all organizational levels.

Building upon the conceptual framework provided by the metaphors of the glass ceiling and the sticky floor, Eagly and Carli (2007) introduced the notion of the labyrinth as a more dynamic and truthful representation of women's paths to leadership. Drawing on the colloquial meaning of the term, they describe the labyrinth as a structure characterized by a multitude of intersecting paths—some that may lead to the center, representing positions of authority and leadership, and others that are circuitous, misleading, or ultimately lead to dead ends (Figure 5). Unlike the glass ceiling, which suggests a singular, transparent but impermeable barrier encountered at higher echelons, or the sticky floor, which captures the inertia and institutional confinement at the base of the career ladder, the labyrinth metaphor captures the *continuous*, often unpredictable, and multi-phased nature of the obstacles women face (L. Carli & Eagly, 2007).

What distinguishes the labyrinth is its capacity to represent the professional journey on a whole— from entry into the workforce to ascension into executive leadership. In this view, the barriers to advancement are not confined to a specific stage but are dispersed across the career trajectory; acknowledging that women may encounter repeated, context-specific challenges that require constant navigation, resilience, and strategic recalibration(Carli & Eagly, 2007).

The labyrinth also implicitly recognizes that the conditions shaping women's advancement are shaped by intersecting variables, including but not limited to gender. Race, class, age, parenthood status, and organizational context interact in complex ways to shape the unique configurations of each woman labyrinth. Unlike the success-failure framing implied by the glass ceiling, the labyrinth metaphor accommodates heterogeneity in experience and outcome. Some women may reach leadership positions after navigating extended detours, while others may find relatively more direct routes— often contingent on access to mentorship, sponsorship, inclusive organizational cultures, and social capital.
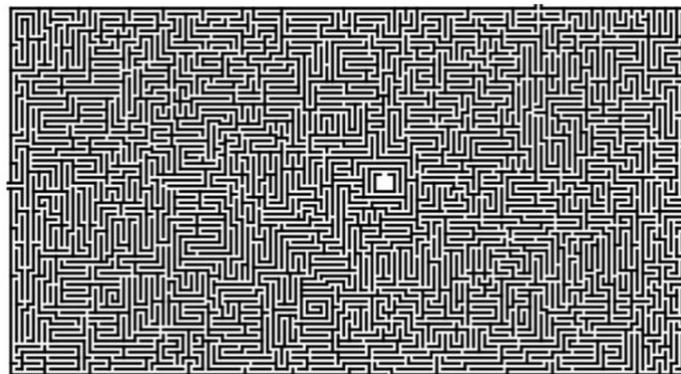
Figure 7 A labyrinth. Carli et al. (2007)

The labyrinth metaphor marks a shift away from the view of leadership exclusion as a static and universal condition. Instead, it promotes an understanding of women's leadership advancement as a dynamic, nonlinear process, influenced by cumulative advantage and disadvantage across time. In doing so, it aligns with emerging perspectives in organizational theory and feminist scholarship, which emphasize processual and intersectional approaches to inequality. Ultimately, the labyrinth offers a more realistic, comprehensive, and human-centered account of the barriers women face—not as immovable walls or adhesive floors, but as a complex and evolving terrain (L. Carli & Eagly, 2007).

1.3. Understanding decision-making biases in organizations

In organizational environments, decisions are rarely the product of purely rational deliberation. A growing body of research in cognitive and organizational psychology shows that decision-making is often driven by cognitive biases and heuristics, described as mental shortcuts that simplify judgments under uncertainty or time pressure (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). While heuristics can be functional and efficient, they frequently lead to systematic errors in evaluation, contributing to distortions in hiring, leadership selection, and opportunity allocation. For this reasons it is worthy to analyze which are the main types of heuristic, when they occur and their relationship with gender imbalance in the luxury industry, which is the main topic of the present research.

A central theoretical framework for understanding these mechanisms are the dual-process theories, which distinguish between two cognitive systems: System 1, which is fast, intuitive, and emotionally driven, and System 2, which is slower, more analytical, and deliberate (Stanovich & West, 2000) (Goldstein & Gigerenzer, 2002). In contrast to what could be thought, it is not uncommon the reliance on System 1 in organizations; especially in high-pressure or ambiguous situations it can lead to mistakes due to implicit biases.

There are several types of heuristics (affect heuristics, hot-state heuristics, hedonic treadmill), but the most studied, the recognition heuristic (Goldstein & Gigerenzer, 2002), suggests that individuals prefer options they recognize or find familiar, even in the absence of objective information. This mechanism can help explain preferences for familiar or visible candidates in professional settings— possibly at the expense of more qualified, lesser-known individuals.

Another relevant mechanism is the representativeness heuristic, where judgments about a person's suitability for a role are based on how closely they match an internal prototype (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). In hiring, this often results in systematic bias toward individuals who resemble the stereotypical leader—typically male, assertive, and agentic—while disadvantaging those who diverge from these normative images (Heilman, 2001).

Finally, the availability heuristic describes how people assess likelihood or relevance based on how easily similar instances come to mind (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). In the workplace, this often translates into overestimating the value of highly visible individuals, corresponding to those who

occupy central roles or receive more exposure, underestimating those who are less present in dominant narratives (i.e. women or minorities).

The following paragraphs will analyze the above-mentioned phenomena, highlighting how cognitive biases intersect with structural inequalities in organizational decision-making; each of these heuristics will be explored in detail, with particular attention to their role in leadership evaluation and gender bias.

1.3.1. Dual-process theories: from intuition-rationality tension to a hybrid decision-making system

The dual-process theory is a framework developed in cognitive psychology (Kahneman Daniel, 2011) to analyze the judgment and decision processes. The theory proposes the coexistence of two distinct cognitive systems: System 1, which is intuitive, fast, automatic, and emotionally driven, and System 2, which is deliberative, slow, effortful, and logical (Kahneman Daniel, 2011). System 1 allows for efficiency in familiar or time-pressured scenarios, System 2 is critical for accurate reasoning, especially when decisions involve uncertainty, complexity, or high stakes.

Beyond experimental and laboratory settings, scholars have explored how these cognitive systems operate within organizational contexts. Notably, Evans (2008) emphasized that even if dual-process models originated from research in basic reasoning, they are increasingly applied to areas like social cognition, leadership evaluation, and strategic decision-making. In organizational environments, often characterized by time constraints, ambiguity, and overload, there is a tendency to rely on System 1, particularly in high-speed or high-pressure roles such as executive hiring or crisis management (Evans, 2008).

A prominent strand of literature examines how managers and decision-makers rely on intuitive judgments in strategic contexts, often as a substitute for, or complement to, analytical reasoning. For instance, in their empirical work, (Dane & Pratt, 2007) argue that managerial intuition is a learned, domain-specific skill that can be highly effective when based on expertise. However, this intuition may also lead to systematic biases when shaped by stereotypical mental models—such as the tendency to associate leadership with masculine traits or to perceive assertiveness differently in men versus women.

Despite research detailing the properties of either rationality or intuition as core decision-making systems, there is widespread acceptance that strategic decision-making may require both i.e. (Elbanna & Child, 2007;Hodgkinson et al., 2009). Certainly, with intuition and rationality being opposed cognitive approaches, their coexistence creates a paradox, characterized by "contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously" (Smith & Lewis, 2011). This tension arises when the strengths of each decision-making practice are undermined by their juxtaposition; individually, both are logical, yet their integration may appear inconsistent or absurd (Calabretta et al., 2017). To explain, this rationality-intuition tension occurs when decision-makers, frequently oriented towards rationality and analytical thought, overlook the advantages of intuition. Consequently, such decision-makers might focus exclusively on the limitations and biases of intuitive thinking, imposing a rejection of intuition in favor of rational analysis. This leads to either/or framework, that leads to a negative dynamic, suppressing tension and resulting in suboptimal outcomes (Calabretta et al., 2017).

In this context, a solution proposed by Calabretta et al (2017) is embracing a paradox perspective. The scholars aim at managing the intuition-rationality tension preserving the advantages of the two cognitive systems, which are both considered fundamental in strategic decision-making, through acceptance and resolution strategies. Indeed, acceptance strategies allow decision-makers to embrace paradoxes as ongoing challenges, reframing tensions from an either/or approach to a both/and perspective. This shift enables actors to understand that intuition and rationality can coexist, encouraging exploration of their dynamic relationship rather than seeking to eliminate one in favor of the other. Acceptance involves engaging with the paradox without attempting to resolve it, fostering a mindset that welcomes the tensions instead of viewing them solely as obstacles. On the other hand, resolution strategies aim to address underlying tensions by fulfilling competing demands through paradoxical thinking. Two primary approaches—differentiating and integrating—have emerged in this context. Differentiating emphasizes the recognition and appreciation of the unique advantages offered by each pole, allowing for their separate utilization over time. In contrast, integrating seeks to identify synergies and connections that harmonize both opposing elements.

The result of their work is a theoretical framework, illustrated in Figure 8 below, where, through a multiple case study research design, a three-step model to use paradoxical thinking is leveraged to manage the tension between intuition and rationality. The case studies selected involved innovation projects with the cooperation of an innovating company and design professionals from design consultancies hired to assist in the process. This is because of the peculiar cognitive style of organizational design professionals from external consulting companies. Hence, if they tend to be predisposed toward intuitive decision making because of their educational background and tool kit,

they have also to follow structured procedures and methodologies for reducing the transactional ambiguity of their practices, thus they may also use rational methods (Hodgkinson et al., 2009).
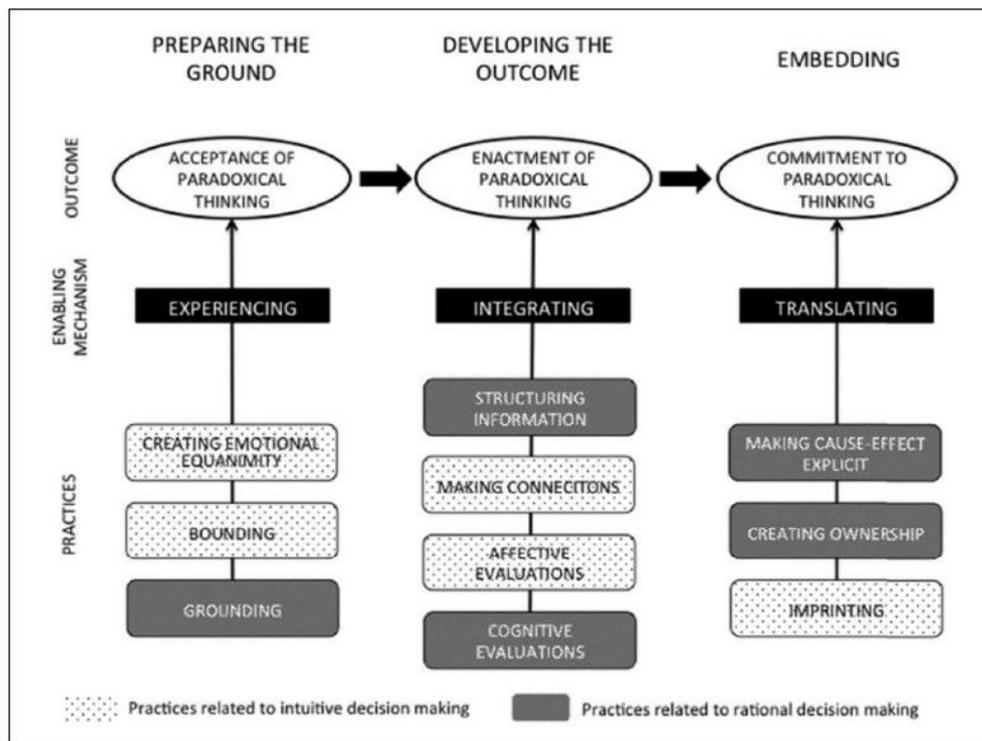
Figure 8 Three-step process to manage the intuition-rationality tension. Calabretta et al. (2017)

Yet, despite the confirmed benefits of a hybrid decision-making model and its solid theoretical background, organizational structures often incentivize intuitive over rational decisions, due to practical constraints. Hodgkinson et al. (2008) show that fast-paced corporate environments frequently reward decisiveness and confidence (traits associated with intuitive processing) over cautious deliberation. This has profound implications for diversity and inclusion: for example, Heilman (2001) and Ridgeway (2001) demonstrate that gender stereotypes, such as the association of leadership with assertiveness, a characteristic associated to masculinity, are quickly activated through System 1, influencing hiring and promotion outcomes without conscious intent.

Some scholars have proposed alternative critiques of dual-process theory in organizational settings. Gherardi and Nicolini (2002) suggest that organizational decision-making is not simply a matter of internal cognitive processing, but also deeply shaped by social practices, discourse, and collective routines. The authors propose that learning and knowledge are situated within a "constellation of interconnected practices," giving greater emphasis to the sociocultural dimensions of organizational behavior rather than cognitive processes. Similarly, Lerner et al. (2015)emphasize that emotions are

integral to decision-making processes, often exerting a more significant influence than previously acknowledged by dual-process models. The authors propose the "emotion-imbued choice" model, emphasizing that specific emotions can systematically shape judgments and choices across various domains.

Ultimately, recent developments in research highlight that addressing the intuition-rationality duality of decision-making, requires not prioritizing one over the other, but instead fostering their systematic integration. As Calabretta et al. (2016) argue, the most effective strategic decision-making processes actively manage the tension between intuitive and analytical approaches through paradoxical thinking, allowing organizations to benefit from the rapid responsiveness of intuition while maintaining the accuracy and critical scrutiny of rational analysis (Calabretta et al., 2017)Embedding structured decision protocols that encourage the conscious engagement of both systems—such as formal evaluation criteria, guided reflection sessions, and team-based cognitive diversity—can enhance decision quality without sacrificing speed. Importantly, hybrid models offer significant benefits for advancing diversity and reducing gender bias: by requiring structured, analytic reassessment of intuitive judgments, they reduce the risk that stereotype-driven intuitions unconsciously shape hiring, promotion, and leadership evaluations. Thus, integrating intuitive and rational processes not only improves organizational performance under uncertainty, but also supports more equitable and inclusive decision-making outcomes.

1.3.2. The recognition heuristic: familiarity and human-in-the-loop systems

In the context of System 1 processes, the recognition heuristic is part of a group of quick and simple decision-making strategies called fast and frugal heuristics. It was first conceptualized by Goldstein and Gigerenzer (1999, 2002) as part of the broader program of research into bounded rationality and ecological decision-making. These decision-making strategies have been historically viewed as flawed but now are seen as adaptive strategies shaped by evolutionary processes linked to psychological mechanisms.

The recognition heuristic is a key example of an adaptive strategy, since it allows individuals to make inferences based on familiarity, particularly in situations of incomplete knowledge. Considering the task of inferring which of two objects has a higher value on some criterion (i.e. which is faster, higher, stronger). The recognition heuristic for these tasks functions as such: *If one of two objects is recognized and the other is not, then infer that the recognized object has the higher value* (Goldstein & Gigerenzer, 2002b). The recognition heuristic can only be applied when one of the two objects is

not recognized, in other words, under partial ignorance. Hence, to be effective, it relies on the presence of a systematic relationship between recognized items and the criteria of a situation. Recognition heuristic capitalizes on the innate ability to recognize familiar entities, highlighting a crucial link between ecological validity and effective human reasoning. Moreover, this heuristic can lead to accurate conclusions while minimizing information overload, exemplified by the *less-is-more* effect where less information can enhance judgment accuracy (Goldstein & Gigerenzer, 2002b).

Although recognition heuristics can be a useful tool in environments where familiarity genuinely correlates with quality, such as predicting winners in sports (Marewski et al., 2010), its application in organizational contexts raises significant concerns. In hiring, promotion, and leadership evaluation, reliance on recognition may result in systematic favoritism towards individuals or ideas that are more salient, visible, or institutionally entrenched, rather than those objectively most qualified (Highhouse, 2008). This dynamic affects companies' diversity and inclusion (D&I), as underrepresented groups—particularly women and minorities—often receive less organizational exposure and visibility, leading to lower chances of selection when recognition-based heuristics are implicitly employed (Highhouse, 2008). Without deliberate intervention, the recognition heuristic can thus reinforce existing patterns of inequity and inhibit the advancement of diverse talent. Yet, what could be thought as a solution to this issue, namely the use of AI and machine learning tools to implement hiring and promotion decisions, can harm D&I as well. As reported by Peng et al. (2019), because these systems are trained on real world data, they often produce biased decisions resulting in discriminatory outcomes against underrepresented groups. Machine learning recommendation systems are systems are also known as *human-in-the-loop* or *algorithm-in-the-loop* systems and their functioning is illustrated in Figure 9.
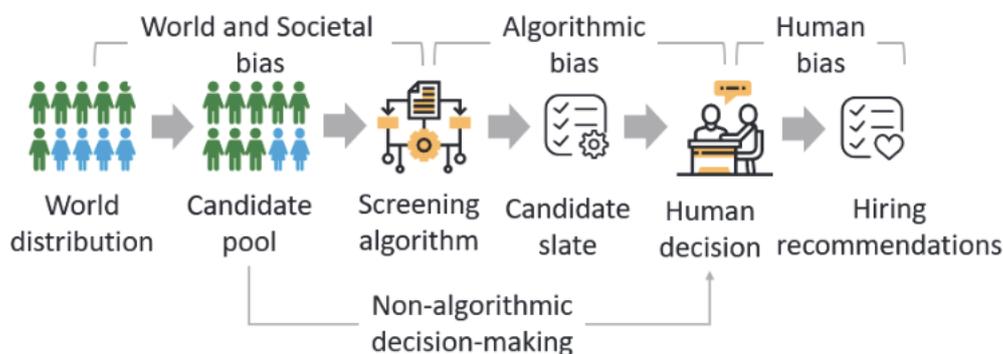

Figure 9 hybrid system for hiring. A biased decision can be impacted by world, algorithmic, and human bias. Peng (2019)

The name comes from the human-algorithm interaction along the hiring pipeline; data is gathered from existing candidate pools in volumes exceeding human processing capacity, and algorithms are employed to filter and prioritize candidates, generating shortlists that human decision-makers then evaluate to make final hiring recommendations. Henceforth, gender bias can be introduced at multiple points along this decision-making pipeline: (1) through the initial composition of candidate pools, which reflect existing gender imbalances across professions; (2) through algorithmic biases that affect which candidates are surfaced for review; and (3) through human biases that influence final hiring decisions. Addressing bias in hiring therefore requires interventions across the entire pipeline, from diversifying talent pools to auditing algorithmic outputs and training human evaluators.

Consequently, there is the increased need to understand this process in its entirety through decomposition of component biases, as the increased usage of automated systems has already been shown to have alarmingly detrimental and widespread effects (The Guardian, 2018). Furthermore, algorithmic screening now impacts individuals on a greater scale compared to manual CV screening; platforms such as LinkedIn Recruiter or Google Hire provide a singular large-scale, centralized screening database for many professions and companies, further motivating the need for a comprehensive study of the breakdown of decision biases across a wide array of professions and decision-makers Peng et al. (2019) through a series of experiments studied the impact of different sources of bias on hiring, specifically what properties of the candidate slate impact human decision-making decision.

In this study, bias in decision-making is defined as any systematic deviation in outcomes where one gender is favored over another, beyond what would be expected given the gender distribution of the candidate slate. For example, if two systems are presented with identical candidate pools composed of 50% men and 50% women, but one consistently favors one gender in its recommendations, that outcome is classified as biased. This operationalization enables a consistent evaluation of both human and algorithmic decision-making processes relative to their input distributions.

To investigate how gender bias influences hiring decisions, researchers conducted controlled experiments asking participants to recommend candidates for various professional roles, with candidate profiles manipulated along key dimensions such as education, work experience, and gender. By randomly assigning gender attributes and varying the ordering of profiles, the researchers applied a representation criterion to maintain balanced gender distributions within the candidate slates.

The findings from these investigations provide three central insights into the interplay between world distribution bias and human decision-making. Firstly, in scenarios where candidate slates reflect a

balanced gender distribution, it is observed that biases in hiring can often be mitigated, particularly across many professions where the world distribution is historically skewed (see Figure 10). Nonetheless, there are specific professions where merely adjusting representation through balanced criteria does not adequately rectify biases, suggesting that entrenched preferences for certain genders persist in roles such as nannies and obstetricians-gynecologists.

Secondly, for specific occupations, even extreme over-representation of one gender on candidate slates does not resolve biased outcomes, which implies inherent biases and preferences regarding gender suitability for specific job functions. Finally, the personal attributes of decision-makers, such as their gender, are found to influence not only the direction but also the intensity of biases present in decision-making processes.
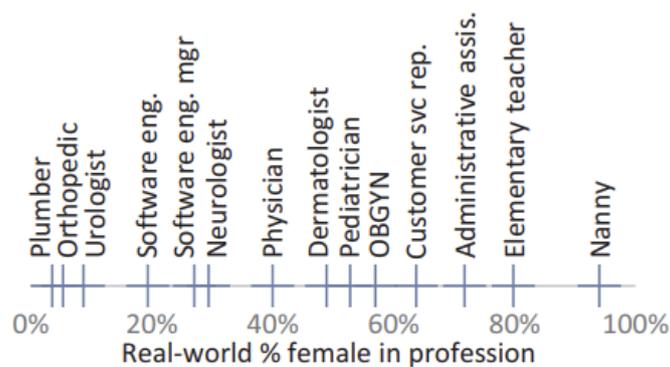
Figure 10 Real-world distributions across professions. Peng et al. (2019)

Since algorithmic hiring tools are becoming increasingly widespread, it is crucial to comprehend how component biases integrate and interact with real-world gender distributions. Factors such as how input distributions present in screening algorithms ultimately affect hiring decisions warrant detailed examination.in this context, the study's contributions are essential for advancing the discourse on fairness in algorithmic decision-making, emphasizing a comprehensive view that acknowledges the interconnectedness of algorithmic design, human behavior, and societal biases.

1.3.3. The representativeness heuristic: leadership prototypes and gender stereotypes

The representativeness heuristic, first introduced by Kahneman and Tversky (1972), describes a cognitive process in which individuals assess the likelihood of an event, or the fit of a person for a role, based on how closely they match an internalized prototype rather than on objective probability or evidence (Koenig et al., 2011a). When using this heuristic, people intuitively judge based on surface similarity (how much an individual "looks like" the type they associate with a given category) while neglecting base rates, statistical reasoning, and sometimes critical information (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997). In later refinements, Kahneman and Tversky (1982) demonstrated that representativeness often leads to severe prediction errors because decision-makers overlook fundamental indicators like prior probability and true candidate distribution, relying instead on easily activated stereotypes.

In organizational contexts, the reliance on representativeness if frequent and has significant and problematic implications for women's career development. Particularly in hiring and promotion decisions, managers may unconsciously favor candidates who resemble traditional leadership prototypes, typically agentic, assertive, and aligned with masculine-coded traits, over those who deviate from these mental images (Koenig et al., 2011a). In their meta-analysis, Koenig et al. (2011a) confirmed that across multiple paradigms, leadership stereotypes remain culturally masculine, despite progress in women's representation (Koenig et al., 2011a). This means that women, and others who do not fit the representative prototype of leadership, face systematic disadvantage regardless of their actual competence.

Confirmation of widespread reliance on representativeness heuristics in organizational context are the already discussed work by Heilman (2001) and Eagly and Wood (2012) which explored how gender stereotypes shape perceptions of women's fit for leadership roles, showing that women are often penalized for behaviors that deviate from prescriptive communal expectations, thus preventing their ascent within organizations.

The detrimental effects of representativeness heuristics are reflected into diversity and inclusion (D&I) practices. As Biernat and Kobrynowicz (1997) argue through the shifting standards model, individuals from devalued groups—such as women and racial minorities—are often judged against different performance standards. Specifically, they may face lower minimum competence thresholds but higher proof requirements to be recognized as truly capable. For instance, a woman or minority candidate might be initially judged as "good enough" to meet entry standards but must significantly overperform to be seen as leadership material (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997). In this way,

representativeness biases not only skew initial evaluations but also raise barriers to sustained advancement for marginalized individuals.

Together, these studies demonstrate that gender bias in organizations is deeply rooted in cognitive processes linked to representativeness, where perceived "fit" is influenced more by stereotypical matching than by objective evaluation of competence. To address these effects requires it is necessary to move beyond traditional meritocratic assumptions. Organizations must expand leadership prototypes to incorporate communal qualities such as collaboration, empathy, and adaptability. Only in this way, internal schemas can be reshaped, and the automatic penalization of women and minorities could be reduced.

1.3.4. Availability and affect heuristics: the role of visibility and emotional response

The availability heuristic, first introduced by Tversky and Kahneman (1973) refers to the tendency of individuals to assess the probability or frequency of an event based on the number of similar relevant examples that can be recalled. When there are numerous instances of an event or trait coming to mind, people are more likely to judge that event as common or likely, often neglecting objective statistical information. Schwarz et al. (1991) expanded on this by demonstrating that it is not the number of examples retrieved, but rather the ease of retrieval, that drives these judgments: if examples are easy to think of, individuals infer higher likelihood, even if the examples are few or atypical. A related mechanism is the affect heuristic, developed later by Slovic et al. (2004). In this distinct theory, judgments are guided less by cognitive retrieval and more by emotional reactions: if an event or individual triggers strong positive or negative emotions, it disproportionately influences decisions, often bypassing rational analysis. Both heuristics interact closely and generate similar implications: salient and emotionally charged examples are more easily retrievable, reinforcing biases in intuitive judgment.

In organizations, the availability and affect heuristics have profound implications for decision-making, particularly regarding leadership selection, risk management, and diversity initiatives. Keller, Siegrist, and Gutscher (2006), showed that emotionally vivid cases—such as publicized leadership failures or successes—can have great impact on assessments of candidate potential or organizational risk profiles. These dynamics are especially exacerbated for women, who have historically been less visible in leadership roles. Therefore, fewer salient examples of successful female leaders may come to mind for decision-makers and, due to the availability heuristic, women may be perceived as less typical leaders simply because examples are rarer, not because of actual

performance gaps. Accordingly, when women in leadership positions are subject to greater emotional scrutiny—either idealized when succeeding or harshly criticized when failing (Brescoll, 2016), the affect heuristic can amplify biases, making their performance seem more exceptional (positively or negatively) than it objectively is.

2. Gender Inequality in the luxury industry

2.1. Brief history and modern evolution of the luxury industry

An examination of the luxury industry must necessarily begin with a reference to the work of Thorstein Veblen, who was the first to systematically conceptualize luxury as both a social and economic phenomenon within the framework of modern capitalism. In his seminal work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Veblen introduced the notion of "conspicuous consumption," defined as the ostentatious display of wealth and social status through the acquisition of goods that exceed functional necessity. This pattern of consumption, deeply rooted in the behaviors of a privileged leisure class, laid the theoretical foundations for what would later become the modern luxury industry.

Over the decades, the luxury industry has undergone significant transformation, shaped by broader economic, social, and technological changes. Despite this evolution, the sector has retained its core associations with exclusivity, prestige, and symbolic value. A pivotal moment in this trajectory was the Industrial Revolution, which enabled luxury *maisons* to scale production through mechanization. Later, during the post-war economic expansion of the 1950s and 1960s, designers such as Christian Dior, Coco Chanel, and Cristóbal Balenciaga played a central role in the emergence of prêt-à-porter fashion, making high-end style more accessible while preserving the aspirational essence of luxury.

According to the most recent Bain & Company and Altagamma report (2024), the global luxury market is currently valued at approximately €150 billion and is organized into nine principal segments:

- Personal Luxury Goods (fashion, accessories, watches, jewelry, beauty, fragrances)

- Luxury Automobiles

- Luxury Hospitality (hotels and resorts)

- Luxury Travel & Experiences

- Fine Wines & Spirits

- Fine Dining & Gastronomy

- Luxury Interior Design & Homeware

- Luxury Yachts & Private Aviation

- Luxury Technology & High-End Consumer Electronics

While the industry has expanded in both complexity and market scope, it remains fundamentally anchored in the creation and transmission of cultural capital. Contemporary luxury brands increasingly seek to emphasize heritage, artisanal craftsmanship, and narrative authenticity. Rather than relying solely on exclusivity and high price points, many focus on the intrinsic value of their offerings by engaging in storytelling that highlights brand legacy, aesthetic sophistication, and meticulous attention to detail. In doing so, luxury goods continue to function as powerful symbols of identity, refined taste, and social distinction in the modern world.

2.1.1. Market structure and major players (Hermès, LVMH, Richemont and Kering)

The luxury industry is characterized by the predominance of four main conglomerates: Hermès, LVMH, Richemont, and Kering, each adopting contrasting strategic trajectories defined along the dimensions of heritage, financial structure, sector specialization, and acquisition logic.

Hermès has the largest sector market capitalization of 248.1 billion euros in April 2025 (Financial Times, 2025) thanks to its unique brand strength, heritage of craftsmanship, and cautious growth plan. Unlike most of its peers, Hermès has shunned diversification through merger and acquisition, and it has remained under the control of its founder's family with the focus on rarity, craftsmanship, and product quality. Its extremely strong profitability (over 40% operating margin) and resilience in the face of numerous crises have established it as the counter-cyclical sector leader.

Figure 11 Grace Kelly hid her pregnancy behind a Hermès bag which was named "Kelly" after her. Hermès, 2025

LVMH is still the largest and most diversified luxury conglomerate globally, with 2023 revenues of €86.2 billion. Headed by Bernard Arnault, the firm built its empire through aggressive M&A activity and diversification of its brand portfolios across five segments, from fashion and leather goods to wines and select retailing. Its decentralized creative process with strategic central control allows it to combine heritage branding with innovation and operational scale, which is demonstrated with its historical acquisitions, like Tiffany & Co. in 2021, marking the largest transaction in luxury history with $16.2 billion.

Figure 12 Actress Zendaya for the LV x Murakami 20-year anniversary campaign

Richemont stands out with sector concentration in watches and jewels, with heritage Maisons such as Cartier and Van Cleef & Arpels leading the way. Generating 2023 sales of €20.6 billion, the group

emphasizes vertical integration and craftsmanship in *haute horlogerie* and fine jewels, with the avoidance of fashion's occasional volatility. Financial management is cautious, and manufacturing and retail are managed, which anchors its positioning in the hard luxury category's upper end.

Figure 13 Lady Arpels Heures Florales watch ($392k). Van Cleef & Arpels, 2025

Kering, which used to be the world's fastest-growing conglomerate with the rebound of Gucci in the 2010s, has faced declining shares over the last year due to creative leadership transitions and market movements. Even owing a renowned brand portfolio thanks to Saint Laurent, Bottega Veneta, and Balenciaga, revenue fell to €17.2 billion in 2024. The group is rebooting anew with creative revitalization, streamlining, and growth in the beauty division (Kering Beauté), along with targeted investments (e.g., in Valentino) to refresh the market about its competitiveness.

Figure 14 First Bottega Veneta fragrances launched in 2025

To summarize the comprehensive positioning in the industry of its four biggest players, it is possible to affirm that each of them has its strength in a different strategic lever. While brand desirability and financial health see Hermès first, LVMH dominates through diversification and acquisition muscle, Richemont leads jewelry specialization at the higher level, and Kering is experiencing a transformative phase based on brand revitalization and portfolio evolution.

2.2. Governance, legacy and brand ownership structures: focus on diversity policies of the main groups

The strength of luxury conglomerates lies not only in their financial resources or the breadth of their brand portfolios, but also in the underlying structures that govern them—their models of governance, ownership legacies, and historical continuity. These foundational elements play a critical role in shaping strategic decisions, ensuring resilience in times of crisis, and preserving brand equity over the long term. This section, starting from Hermès and proceeding in a decreasing market capitalization order, will focus on a comparative analysis of the governance models of Hermès, LVMH, Kering and Richemont, to discover how different approaches to control, decentralization, and succession planning have contributed to both the stability and volatility observed across these groups, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and, more recently, the luxury market correction of 2024.

2.2.1. Hermès

Hermès represents a paradigm of family-centric governance, its CEO are Axel Dumas direct descendant of Émile-Maurice Hermès and Henri-Louis Bauer who represents Émile Hermès SAS, whose partners are the direct descendants of Émile-Maurice Hermès and his wife. The roles of executive chairmen are distinct between the two as Axel Dumas oversees strategy and operational management, while Émile Hermès SAS, through its Executive Management Board, is responsible for vision and strategic priority areas (Hermès International, 2024). The governing bodies are the Executive committee and the Operations Committee, established by the executive management to assist it in exercising its general duties.

The executive committee is composed by executive Vice Presidents, each of whom with well-defined areas of responsibility. It meets every two weeks and has the duty of overseeing the Group's strategic and operational management. As at 31/12/2024 it has 10 members, of which 3 women, with an average of 21 years of experience in the group and 10 as a member of the committee. The average

age is 57 years old. This ownership model has shielded Hermès from the hostile takeover attempt from LVMH, which accounted for unsolicited stake accumulation between 2010 and 2014. The firm's centralized structure and with vertical integration of production and retail, ensures control over quality and branding, reinforcing exclusivity and pricing power.

Figure 1 5 Members of the Executive Committee, from left to right: Olivier Fournier, Florian Craen, Agnès de Villers, Axel Dumas, Éric du Halgouët, Charlotte David, Pierre-Alexis Dumas, Wilfried Guerrand, Sharon MacBeath, Guillaume de Seynes. Hermès International, 2024

On the other hand, the Operations Committee reports to the Executive Management directly and is made up of 23 members, 15 of which are women (as at 31/12/2024). Some of these members are from the Executive Committee and others are Senior Executives of the main *métiers* and geographical areas, as well as sales and support functions of the Group (Hermès Company, 2024). The operations committee meets two or three times a year and has several duties including: involving Senior Executives in the Group's major issues and strategic orientations, promoting communication and sharing amongst its members in their area of responsibility and enable the Executive Committee to take certain decisions (Hermès Company, 2024).

As per the aim of this research, is interesting to analyze the non-discriminations and diversity policy disclosed by the company. The Company adheres to the French Commercial Code by promoting gender balance within its governing bodies. As mandated since 2018, the Supervisory Board oversees the implementation of a non-discrimination and diversity policy within the Executive Management.

In line with the Afep-Medef Code[1], gender balance objectives are recommended for boards, which has influenced the Company's practices. Since 2020, the Executive Management has targeted a minimum of 40% representation for each gender within these bodies, encompassing committees that support the Management's functions. This gender balance target was achieved by 2019, leading to the commitment to maintain this equilibrium in the long term. An action plan has been in place that promotes female representation among Senior Executives to facilitate the realization of these objectives. Overall, the initiatives reflect the Company's dedication to fostering a diverse leadership team and ensuring that both men and women are equally represented in decision-making roles, thereby supporting the broader aims of equality and inclusion within its corporate governance framework (Hermès International, 2024).

As of early 2024, various initiatives illustrate the dedication towards achieving gender equality, such as harmonized maternity leave of 16 weeks at full pay, initiated in 2019, and the introduction of paternity or adoption leave for employees in France starting in 2022, which has since been extended globally. Moreover, an agreement on "Work-life balance" signed in July 2023 aims to support employees in personal and familial responsibilities, effective January 2024 (Hermès International, 2024).

In terms of assuring non-discrimination and gender equality in its recruitment and employee appointment processes, the group implements the "Hermès, a Responsible Employer" policy (Hermès International, 2024). Yet, the company does not disclose any action undertaken during the recruiting process, apart from the aimed commitment to non-discrimination.

Additionally, the Group actively promotes the professional integration and retention of individuals with disabilities, earning recognition by the *Grand Prix Emploi* for people with disabilities. for its efforts in this area. Furthermore, it supports caregiver employees thanks to an information platform, flexibility, financial assistance, and support for parenting during pregnancy and after childbirth. In 2021, 13 women initiated the *Hécate* network, to empower women within the organization by focusing on networking, inspiration, and personal development, and has since grown to over 100 members who address various themes related to careers and personal challenges. Furthermore, Hermès has implemented the "Alterego" training program for Management Committee members and local managers, focusing on diversity management and prevention of discrimination in all forms. This one-day training combines theoretical and practical approaches, reinforcing the company's zero-

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[1] The Afep-MEDEF Code is the corporate governance code of reference for publicly traded companies. It defines principles of corporate governance by outlining rules on remuneration for corporate officers, controls and transparency. First published in September 2002, the Code is updated on a regular basis (Société Générale, n.d.).

tolerance stance toward discrimination. The succession plan for senior executives is designed to maintain leadership continuity, featuring two Executive Chairmen to mitigate the risk of sudden vacancies in Executive Management.

For all these activities and initiatives, the gender equality index published in March 2025 showed a weighted average index of 92/100 for financial year 2024. The publication of this index is yearly and mandatory as per the French Labor Code and it measures the gender pay gap within a single company considering all components of a compensation package, thereby serving to identify any points of progress. (Hermès International, 2024).

Furthermore, since 2020 the group implements an annual Talent Review to enhance succession planning for members on the Executive Committee and the Operations Committee. Each year, the findings and plans regarding succession for the Executive Management and the Chairman of the Supervisory Board are reported to the CAG-CSR Committee[2], ensuring accountability and strategic oversight (Hermès International, 2024).

The review encompasses various aspects of succession, including temporary interim succession scenarios, (i.e. absence due to illness) and unplanned, sudden and irreversible changes in leadership (i.e. death or resignation). The Talent Review process aims at maintaining a pool of leadership talent within Hermès and at mitigating risks associated with sudden leadership changes. By establishing a dynamic framework for nurturing leadership capabilities, the process strives to ensure a robust succession pipeline, eventually contributing to the organization's long-term stability and growth (Hermès International, 2024).

Hermès has been analyzed by the World benchmarking alliance (WBA), a non-profit organization launched in 2018 with the goal of promoting corporate accountability in the pursuit of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The WBA produces public benchmarks evaluating how the world's most influential companies perform on critical global challenges—including gender equality, climate resilience, digital inclusion, and respect for human rights (World Benchmarking Alliance, 2023).

The WBA rates Hermes International in its Gender Benchmark, as 27th in the apparel sector with a score of 27.2 out of 100. Its highest score is in the health and well-being measurement area, where it performs strongly with 7.7 over 17.5. It has an opportunity to improve in the marketplace and community measurement area, ranking at the bottom, with a 0/10. This last area involves the

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[2] Compensation, Appointments, Governance and Corporate Social Responsibility Committee

remaining value chain components beyond the workplace and supply chain and evaluates the non-discriminatory marketing practices that a company has in place to ensure gender-responsive communications and engagement with its various stakeholders, including customers, to support gender equality and women's empowerment (World Benchmarking Alliance, 2023)

Another strength is that Hermes International is one of the 10 companies that discloses that its primary carer leave policy is aligned to the ILO standard of at least 14 weeks. It is one of the 9 companies that disclose its remediation process for addressing violence and harassment grievances in the workplace.

In terms of area of improvement, Hermes International has an opportunity to make a public commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment, to disclose its global secondary carer leave policy, and to align it to ILO standards of at least 2 weeks (World Benchmarking Alliance, 2023).

2.2.2. LVMH

The other major group LVMH operates as a diversified yet family-controlled conglomerate. While publicly listed, the group is majority-owned by Bernard Arnault via Groupe Arnault, granting the family strategic authority over the conglomerate's direction. The main bodies of corporate governance are the Board of Directors and the executive committee. As stated on the official LVMH website, the Board of Directors defines the Group's strategy, with a focus on enhancing company value and safeguarding its interests. Its core responsibilities include setting the Group's key strategic directions and overseeing their execution, ensuring transparent and accurate disclosure of Group information, and protecting the company's assets. The members include of course Bernard Arnault and three of his sons (Alexandre, Antoine, Federic) and his daughter Delphine, other members include Dominique Aumont and Marie-Véronique Belloeil-Melkin; in this context there are only two women. On the other hand, many women figure as independent directors, hence six women and three men cover this role (Sophie Chassat, Wei Sun Christianson, Clara Gaymard, Marie-Josée Kravis, Marie-Laure Sauty de Chalon and Natacha Valla; Henri de Castries, Laurent Mignon and Hubert Védrine). Being an independent director means not being affiliated with the company itself and not having worked, for at least for the year prior the appointment, in the company.

It is evident that the LVMH board features a strong familial presence and that the representation of women within the broader board structure reflects an effort to comply with gender diversity mandates under French law. Only two women, including Delphine Arnault, are part of the core executive or

family-linked governance cluster. However, among the independent directors, women are not only well-represented but outnumber men, with six women and three men serving in these roles. This composition aligns with both the Copé-Zimmermann Law (AMF, 2024), and the AFEP-MEDEF Code's recommendations on board diversity and independence (Société Générale, n.d.). The presence of experienced and internationally recognized figures such as Wei Sun Christianson, former CEO of Morgan Stanley China Operations, and Marie-Josée Kravis, economist specializing in public policy analysis and strategic planning, suggests a strategic choice to enhance the board's legitimacy in the eyes of investors. Nonetheless, the concentration of executive power within the Arnault family could raise questions about the real influence of independent directors, in such centralized governance model. Hence, if LVMH meets formal diversity criteria, the dynamics between ownership control and independent oversight could be analyzed in assessing the board's true balance of power.

Moving to the other governing body, the Executive committee (Figure 16 below) comprises executives who head the Group's operational and functional entities. It has the duty of defining strategic objectives aligned with the directions set by the Board of Directors and coordinates their implementation. The Executive Committee also monitors the business environment ensuring that the organization adapts to changes and innovations, establishing responsibilities among executives and monitors the execution of these responsibilities. The members are Arnault and his daughter Delphine, Stéphane Bianchi (Group Managing Director), Maud Alvarez-Pereyre (Human Resources), Nicolas Bazire (Development and Acquisitions), Pietro Beccari (Louis Vuitton CEO), Michael Burke (Fashion Group CEO, a division including Celine, Givenchy, Kenzo, Loewe, Marc Jacobs, Patou, Pucci and Rossimoda), Cécile Cabanis (CFO of LVMH group), Jean-Jacques Guiony (CEO of Moët Hennessy, the Wines and Spirits division of LVMH), Guillaume Motte (CEO of Sephora), Stéphane Rinderknech (CEO of LVMH Hospitality Excellence & Beauty), Jérôme Sibille (Group Executive VP General Administration & Legal Affairs) and Jean-Baptiste Voisin (Chief Strategy Officer).

This composition highlights an unambiguous gender imbalance in terms of member appointments. Out of fourteen members, only three are women: Delphine Arnault, Maud Alvarez-Pereyre, and Cécile Cabanis. Though revealing some level of female participation at the top, still falls significantly short of gender parity, especially considering the Rixain Law, which sets targets for increasing female representation in senior leadership roles by 2027 (*Bpifrance.Com*, 2023).

STÉPHANE BIANCHI
Group Managing Director

MAUD ALVAREZ-PEREYRE
Human Resources

DELPHINE ARNAULT
Christian Dior Couture

NICOLAS BAZIRE
Development and Acquisitions

PIETRO BECCARI
Louis Vuitton

MICHAEL BURKE
Fashion Group

CÉCILE CABANIS
Finance

JEAN-JACQUES GUIONY
Wines & Spirits

GUILLAUME MOTTE
Sephora

STÉPHANE RINDERKNECH
LVMH Hospitality Excellence & Beauty

JÉRÔME SIBILLE
General Administration & Legal Affairs

JEAN-BAPTISTE VOISIN
Strategy

Figure 16 Members of LVMH Executive Committee

Moreover, the inclusion of Delphine Arnault, daughter of Bernard Arnault illustrates also the tight familial influence, which may harm the transformative power of gender diversity, when not comprised into a merit-based inclusion logic. To elaborate, the increasing prominence of Delphine Arnault within the group, who has been nominated also Dior CEO on the 1st of February 2023(LVMH, n.d.), can signal the closing of the gender gap in an industry criticized for its male-dominated structure. On the other hand, it raises questions about the drivers of female advancement in top executive positions. In fact, she is inseparable from her position as the daughter of Bernard Arnault, the Group's Chairman and CEO. This interrelating of gender and familial legacy exemplifies a broader phenomenon observable in family-controlled conglomerates: leadership diversity may be nominally enhanced through dynastic succession, rather than through structurally inclusive, merit-based pathways (Bettinelli et al., 2018). In such contexts, symbolic representation risks supplanting substantive reform, diluting the emancipatory potential of gender diversity initiatives (Lombardo Emanuela & Meier petra, 2014). Indeed, as scholars of corporate governance argue (e.g. (Bennedsen et al., 2007; Bertrand & Schoar, 2006), family firms maintain a sort of conservatism and internal loyalty, which can simultaneously preserve legacy and inhibit organizational pluralism (Lombardo Emanuela & Meier Petra, 2014). Instances such the appointment of the CEO's daughter as member of the BoD, risk being perceived as indicators of gender progress, while they may merely reflect entrenched patterns of dynastic succession. This distinction is vital in governance models characterized by concentrated family ownership and control, where symbolic inclusion can easily substitute for meaningful institutional change (Lombardo Emanuela & Meier Petra, 2014). In this context, Delphine Arnault's rise to leadership, illustrates the complexity of interpreting such appointments as genuine strides toward gender parity.

To better contextualize LVMH's efforts towards gender equality, it is worth analyzing the Universal Registration Document in its final 2024 version. This document represents the Group's comprehensive annual disclosure to shareholders, regulators, and stakeholders, combining financial reporting with non-financial information, such as sustainability, social responsibility, governance, and ethical commitments. The main initiative supporting the empowerment of women is *EllesVMH*; created in 2007, is a program designed to accelerate women's career development at all levels (LVMH, 2024).

The initiative is concretized by a digital platform where trainings on personal branding, entrepreneurial mindset, negotiation and career advancement are available to all employees. The platform also includes: *Elles Racontent*, a series of inspiring testimonials from women leaders; *Elles Conseillent*, where women executives and managers give practical advic and *Elles Échangent*, an

eclectic mix of content highlighting in-house initiatives that support gender equity. Moreover, EllesVMH gives access to a digital mentoring program aiming to connect all employees across all the Group's Maisons, functions, and regions to promote women's career development. Leveraging artificial intelligence, the program pairs individuals based on their expertise and interests, fostering meaningful connections to overcome organizational silos (LVMH, 2024).

The Document then states that group's Executive Committee has set itself the target of having women hold 50% of the Group's key positions by 2025; in 2024, 52% of key positions (543) at the Group were held by men and 48% by women (501), showing that the target is almost achieved (LVMH, 2024).Women also make up 55% of talent identified in succession plans for key positions.

Now it is worth mentioning how this targets are technically achieved and how the succession plan is undertaken in such big entity. In this context, LVMH relies on two integrated processes: the HR reporting system (§1.1.2 of Universal Registration Document) and the Organization and Management Review (OMR) process (§1.5.1 of Universal Registration Document). The HR reporting process provides a standardized and structured way for all *Maisons* within the group to collect and report gender-related data. This includes not only quantitative indicators, such as the number of women in leadership roles, but also qualitative information about diversity policies and the degree to which targets have been met. Each business entity is responsible for entering data into a centralized HR system, where multiple levels of verification and cross-referencing to the group's legal and financial structures ensure reliability. Complementing this system, the OMR process evaluates organizational structures and plans talent development. Conducted annually in partnership between HR and senior executives, it identifies key positions within the Group and tracks the gender distribution of current roles. These roles are then flagged in the Group's HR data systems, enabling an automatic and precise calculation of the proportion of women in leadership. In addition, the OMR also includes succession planning, ensuring that gender balance is not only a reflection of the current state but is actively built into future leadership pipelines (LVMH, 2024).

Regarding gender pay gap, the documents assure that rigorous tracking of pay levels worldwide is undertaken, so that men and women are paid fairly. This approach is backed by an annual audit, and has proven successful, resulting in a score of 94.5 in France's Gender Equality Index, up 3.5 points since 2020 (LVMH, 2024).

However, the World Benchmarking Alliance (WBA) Report from 2023 shows different results. On 112 companies analyzed on the gender benchmark, LVMH ranks 21st in the apparel sector with a

score of 29.3 out of 100 (*2023 Gender Benchmark - World Benchmarking Alliance*, 2023). What catches the eye is that, on a scale from 0 to 17.5 in the measurement area of compensation and benefit, LVMH score is of 3.3, ranking #33 among the 112 companies analyzed, falling far below Kering with 10.9, which is the top performer in such category (World Benchmarking Alliance, 2023). The compensation and benefit area considers gender pay gap in a company's workplace, while in a company's supply chain the focus is on whether women are extended formal contracts and a living wage. This measurement area also considers family-friendly benefits that companies and their suppliers should extend to their workers to support their unpaid care burden, which women disproportionately carry. For the year 2023, WBA does not provide details about the scoring, but such information is available for 2021 so it's worth analyzing it, considering that data could be obsolete.

The assessment details highlight how, despite having set up a Gender equality index to calculate gender wage gaps, it was used by only some of the operations in France and was not calculated for the global operations. Moreover, there is no evidence that the company collects sex-disaggregated pay data by different pay bands and occupational functions for its global operations. Continuing, there is no evidence that the company provides other financial benefits (i.e., insurance benefits, bonuses, retirement contributions) as part of a gender pay gap analysis. Lastly, whilst the company has entity-specific tools in place to identify and reduce any pay gaps between women and men within the same job category, it does not have a clear strategy to holistically close any gender pay gaps identified across the company globally.

The group should also improve in the violence and harassment measurement area, where its performance falls below average, scoring a 2.2/17 and ranking 84 over 112. While the company states in its Code of Conduct (LVMH, 2025) the rejection of all forms of physical, sexual, verbal or psychological violence and harassment, there is no evidence of a standalone policy. Moreover, in 2020 the company responded to a call for action launched by the French Minister for Gender Equality, Diversity and Equal Opportunities to support a public communication campaign designed to reach victims of domestic violence, part of which was a commitment to share information on domestic violence and available support among employees and more broadly to external audiences via their social networks, however this is not aimed at addressing violence and harassment in the workplace (World Benckmarking Alliance, 2021).

In addition, the company states that it will take appropriate and necessary measures to terminate any misconduct with its code of conduct, including appropriate disciplinary sanctions in case of violence and harassment. However, the process does not mention support for the aggrieved during/after

remediation (e.g. leave from work, counselling/mental health support) or prohibit the inclusion of a confidentiality provision (nondisclosure/silencing agreement) in violence and harassment settlement agreements, unless requested by the victim (World Benckmarking Alliance, 2021).

On the other hand, the areas in which LVMH scored the more points were employee engagement, occupational segregation and childcare/family support. In terms of employee engagement, the company dialogues with employee representatives through "Works Councils", leading to several agreements on a broad range of gender equality issues in the workplace, which is evidence that the company engages with employees on this topic. Regarding occupational segregation, the company is one of the 6 collecting sex-disaggregated data on the gender balance of its workforce assuring a gendered balance composition of its departments (even if only across four functions). Lastly, LVMH offers access to childcare in day care centers or at home, and provides additional support to working parents, such as providing authorized absence for employees with sick children and providing remote assistance with homework (World Benckmarking Alliance, 2021).

2.2.3. Kering

Moving to Kering, as of June 2025, its governance structure is very similar to the one of its direct competitors, LVMH. Kring thus presents two principal governing bodies: the Executive Committee and the Board of Directors. The role of the Executive Committee (figure 17 below) is to oversee Kering's operational and strategic management and consists of 13 members: François-Henri Pinault (Chairman and Chief Executive Officer), Francesca Bellettini (Deputy CEO, in charge of Brand Development), Jean-Marc Duplaix (Deputy CEO and Chief Operating Officer), Stefano Cantino (CEO of Gucci), Cédric Charbit (CEO of Saint Laurent), Laurent Claquin (Chief Brand Officer), Raffaella Cornaggia (CEO of Kering Beauté), Marie-Claire Daveu (Chief Sustainability and Institutional Affairs Officer), Mélanie Flouquet (General Secretary), Béatrice Lazat (Chief People Officer), Armelle Poulou (Chief Financial Officer), Bartolomeo Rongone (CEO of Bottega Veneta), Roberto Vedovotto (President and CEO of Kering Eyewear) (Kering, 2025). Compared to LVMH, Kering has a more gender balanced executive committee with 6 out of 13 members being women.

Moving to the Board of Directors, its task is to define the Group's strategies, ensuring their implementation. As of 4th March 2025, the Board comprises 13 members, with women accounting for 55% of the composition. The members include: François-Henri Pinault (Chairman and Chief Executive Officer), Concetta Battaglia (Director representing employees), Maureen Chiquet (Independent Director), Jean-Pierre Denis (Director and Climate Change Lead), Yonca Dervisoglu

(Independent Director), Dominique D'Hinnin (Independent Director), Rachel Duan (Independent Director), Giovanna Melandri (Independent Director), Baudouin Prot (Director), Vincent Schaal (Director representing employees), Héloïse Temple-Boyer (Permanent representative of Financière Pinault), Véronique Weill (Lead Independent Director), Serge Weinberg (Independent Director).

Kering's governance structure demonstrates a clear commitment to gender diversity, with significant female representation in both its Executive Committee and Board of Directors. This is due to a clear statement in its Code of Ethics of commitment to "greater diversity and gender parity in all roles and positions, and at all levels in the Group hierarchy, in particular by putting an end to the waste of female talent through the whole chain of command" (Code of Ethics, 2025).
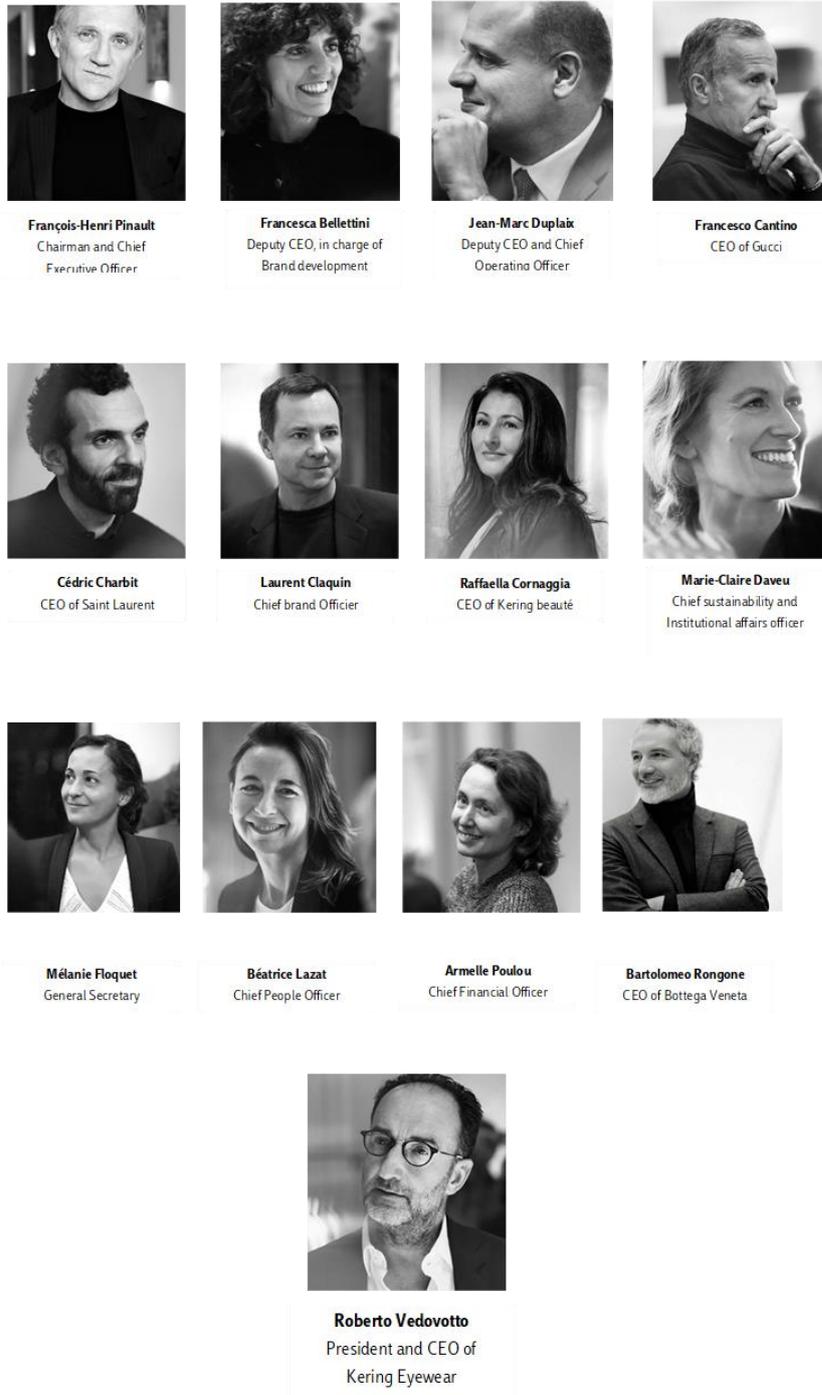
Figure 17 Members of Kering Executive Committee

The board has remained stable until Monday 16th June 2025. On this day The Kering Board of Directors, chaired by François-Henri Pinault, approved the appointment of Luca de Meo as Chief Executive Officer of the Group with changes being effective upon shareholder's meeting planned for 9th September 2025 (Kering press release, 2025). Dr. De Meo has over 30 years of experience within the automotive industry and Pinault declared " *His experience at the helm of an international listed*

group, his sharp understanding of brands, and his sense of a strong and respectful corporate culture convinced me that he is the leader I was looking for to bring a new vision and steer this chapter in our Group's history"(Kering press release, 2025).

Figure 18 Luca De Meo, next Kering group Ceo

The intended commitment to gender equality is tangible via a dedicated web page on the company website (Kering for women) where all internal policies and activities supporting women are disclosed. According to Kering, gender equality, developing women's talents, and combatting violence against women are embedded priorities in the Group's culture. They state how empowering women is a longstanding commitment, since 2010, when Kering was one of the first to adopt the Women's Empowerment Principles, an initiative of UN Women and the UN Global Compact thanks to which businesses make concrete efforts to promote the advancement of women in the workplace and in the community. That same year, Kering launched its Leadership and Gender Diversity program to enable women to take on management roles at the highest levels and, more generally, to embed a culture of equality throughout the Group (Kering, 2025).

Furthermore, Kering achieved international recognition for its initiatives on behalf of women. In 2024, Kering placed 10th globally and 2nd in France, on the FTSE Russell Diversity and Inclusion Index. The same year, Gucci achieved Gender Parity Certification for the second consecutive year, as outlined in the Italian government's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP – Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza), following an evaluation process audited by Bureau Veritas. The House was also recognized with the prestigious Observatory Women and Fashion Award in the category of Empowerment: Cultural Policies for Female Career Development (Kering, 2025).

Additionally, Kering is committed to inspiring women to develop their talents with specific programs on leadership training and mentoring. Over the last eight years, Kering has joined forces with the women's international leadership program, EVE. The Group has also expanded its internal program named Women in Luxury. Kick-started in France, in 2022, the program's scope extends to 11 locations across various regions including Hong Kong, mainland China, Japan, Korea, France, Italy, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, the United States and Mexico. Last year Boucheron, a group high-jewelry brand, unveiled its Boucheron Women in Luxury Mentoring Program, with a focus on career guidance, self-confidence, networking and upskilling as well as advice on maintaining a work-life balance. These actions are yielding tangible results: in 2025 women at Kering account for 63% of our total headcount; 58% of managers; 46% of our Executive Committee and 55% of our Board of Directors (excluding Directors representing employees) (Kering, 2025).

In addition to these, Kering is giving support to women through the Kering foundation and the Women in Motion program. Founded in 2008, the Kering Foundation combats violence against women and in 2023 extended its scope towards addressing children sexual abuse. Over the past 15 years, the Foundation has worked closely with partner NGOs to help women and children survivors live a life free from violence.

The Foundation's strategy focuses on three pillars:

- Resourcing partner organizations by providing increased and flexible funding, including in periods of crisis, to guarantee quality services to women and children, accompanying prevention initiatives and facilitating knowledge sharing among partners. As one example, in 2023 Kering Foundation supported to the opening of *La Maison des femmes de Rennes* as part of the endowment fund's ongoing commitment to creating 15 similar structures across France.
- Engaging Kering's ecosystem to create safe workplaces and offer support to colleagues impacted by domestic violence, offering dedicated training sessions to its staff.
- Influencing new actors and motivating new audiences to act and raise additional funds to put an end to violence that is passed down from generation to generation.

Furthermore, to amplify its commitment and facilitate collaboration with its Houses, other companies or other foundations, as well as to raise funds, Kering is changing the status of its Corporate Foundation to that of an endowment fund. Faithful to the model established since its creation, this fund will continue to prioritize the partnership and the co-development of long-term programs with a limited number of local organizations (*World Benchmarking Alliance*, 2023).

Moving to the Women in Motion initiative, it started in 2015 in partnership with the Festival de Cannes with the aim of shedding light on women's contribution to cinema. Since then, the program has expanded to US and Japan, extending into other forms of art including photography, literature and the plastic arts. The program consists in a series of talks from prominent figures who share their views on the representation of women. After more than 40 talks that have attracted over 70 leading lights of the cinema world, the program has become a platform of choice for helping to change mindsets, to celebrate women of influence, and to think about both the role of women and the recognition they receive in arts and culture. The initiative culminates at the Festival de Cannes when two Prizes are awarded to iconic figures from the world of cinema, whose career is a source of inspiration, as well as to a promising female in the sector.

These actions have awarded Kering the 2nd place in the Gender Benchmark by WBA in 2023, with a score of 54.4 out of 100, showing improvement since the last iteration of 44 out of 100 in 2021; it is also the highest-ranking company headquartered in Europe & Central Asia. Kering demonstrates leadership in almost all measurement areas across the whole benchmark, securing the top place in compensation and benefits and marketplace and community, the fifth place in governance and strategy and violence and harassment, and seventh place in representation. Nevertheless, it has an opportunity to improve in the health and well-being area (World Benchmarking Alliance, 2023.

What contributed to the high ranking, was the disclosure of several measures undertaken to provide for women employees. Firstly, it is one of the 15 companies disclosing that its primary carer leave policy is aligned to the ILO standard of at least 14 weeks, and the one for the secondary carer is of at least 2 weeks. Secondly, Kering is also one of the few companies to disclose its remediation process for addressing violence and harassment grievances in the workplace. However, the areas of improvement include gender-responsive due diligence, disclosing gender-disaggregated turnover and promotion data as well as strengthening its commitment to preventing violence and harassment in its supply chain; for example, Kering could require its suppliers to conduct dedicated trainings or to have specific policies in one or more local languages.

2.2.4. Richemont

The last group that will be included in this analysis is Richemont, the Swiss hard-luxury conglomerate. As of March 31, 2025, Richemont, as all the other groups, maintains a dual-tier governance structure comprising the Board of Directors (BoD) and the Senior Executive Committee (SEC). The Board of Directors responsible for the overall strategic direction of the Group and the appointment of senior management. In addition, it is responsible for establishing financial controls

and appropriate procedures for risk management as well as the overall supervision of the business. The members are principally of Non-executive Directors with diverse professional and industry backgrounds and who are independent in character and judgement (*Corporate Governance | Richemont*, n.d.)

The board consists of 17 members, with 2 executive and 15 non-executive directors. The Board is chaired by Johann Rupert, with Bram Schot serving as Deputy Chairman. Other members are Nicolas Bos (Executive Director, Group CEO), Keyu Jin, Wendy Luhabe, Fiona Druckenmiller, Jasmine Whitbread, Vesna Nevistic, Jean-Blaise Eckert, Jeff Moss, Thomas Buberl, Patrick Thomas, Norbert Platt, Anton Rupert, Yves-André Istel, Maria Ramos, Jean Daniel Pasche.

Of these 17 directors, resulting in 41% female representation on the Board, a quite balanced gender distribution for a multinational luxury group. Women also hold strategic committee roles: for example, Jasmine Whitbread chairs the Governance and Sustainability Committee, and Fiona Druckenmiller is part of the Audit Committee, ensuring meaningful influence over key decision-making domains (*Richemont Corporate Governance FY25*, 2025).

On the other hand, the Senior Executive Committee (SEC) comprises 10 members: Nicolas Bos (Group CEO), Johann Rupert (Chairman), Catherine Rénier (CEO of Van Cleef & Arpels), Louis Ferla (CEO of Cartier), Marie-Aude Stocker (Chief People Officer), Bérangère Ruchat (Chief Sustainability Officer), Patricia Gandji (Chief People Officer and CEO of Regions), Burkhart Grund (CFO), Karlheinz Baumann (Director of Operations), Swen Grundmann (Group Company Secretary). Of the 10 members 4 are women, reflecting a solid representation in executive leadership roles. Several female executives lead crucial functions such as sustainability, human resources, and regional leadership, key strategic domains within a global luxury conglomerate.

Richemont's approach to gender equality manifests through its Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) strategy, which is overseen by the Group People & Culture function and closely aligned with the company's sustainability agenda (Richemont Non-Financial Report, 2025). As outlined in the 2025 non-financial report, the group adopts a holistic perspective on inclusion, with gender equity not as a standalone initiative but as an integrated dimension of leadership development, workplace policy, and corporate governance. One of the key pillars of Richemont's D&I policy is the promotion of inclusive leadership. Thus, the Group has implemented unconscious bias training across its *maisons* and corporate functions, aiming to raise awareness of implicit prejudices and mitigate their influence in recruitment, performance evaluation, and promotion decisions (Richemont Non-Financial Report, 2025).

In addition, Richemont monitors and discloses gender representation across governance levels. As of 2025, women represent 41% of the Board of Directors and 40% of the Senior Executive Committee, a strong performance relative to industry benchmarks. The company also tracks gender ratios across all functions and grades, integrating this data into its sustainability key performance indicators (KPIs). Beyond leadership representation, Richemont has implemented policies aimed at improving the structural conditions for gender inclusion, comprising flexible work arrangements, enhanced parental leave schemes, and the promotion of work-life balance. The Group also fosters a culture of inclusion through internal communities and employee-led networks, which support underrepresented groups and serve as platforms for dialogue and support (Richemont Non-Financial Report, 2025).

Unfortunately, Richemont has not been analyzed by the World Benchmarking Alliance, so it's not possible to counterbalance the company disclosed information with a third-party organization.

2.3. Gender gap in the luxury industry: evidence of glass labyrinth

As analyzed up until now, the luxury industry is one of the most attractive for women employee, since it is often celebrated for its aesthetic sensitivity, cultural sophistication, and emotional storytelling—qualities traditionally associated with femininity. However, is uncommon to find women at its highest levels of decision-making, as it is evident from the previous chapter analysis.

An interesting document about these gender imbalances is the "Unpacking Pay Equity in Fashion – Italy" report, developed by Global Fashion Agenda with the support of global advisory firm PwC (2024). The report has a specific focus on the Italian luxury market, reasonably, since with the French one, represents the backbone of the world's luxury industry. The report reveals that only 25% of leadership roles in fashion companies are held by women, despite their strong numerical majority at the operational level. While Italy's overall gender pay gap stands at 4.3%, well below the EU average of 12.7%, the study notes that much of the gap remains "unexplained," and likely linked to structural discrimination and unequal access to advancement pathways.

Another relevant element to be considered is that in the luxury segment, is that many artisanal manufacturing procedures, with exceptionally delicate and high-value products such as hand embroidery, lace and feathers are externalized to specialized ateliers, where women represent the main gender both in the operational workforce and management positions. An example of this small Italian companies is Fondazione Le Costantine (Vogue, 2023).

Figure 14 Workers at Le Costantine, Vogue 2023

Le Costantine is a textile cooperative based in Casamassella, Puglia, where only women are employed; this foundation as both a social enterprise and cultural preservation initiative, offering economic independence and skill-building to women, many of whom are from socially vulnerable backgrounds or have faced barriers to employment (Vogue, 2023). The artisans of Le Costantine are specialized in hand-made textiles that have garnered international recognition thanks to in Dior's 2021 Cruise Collection, where Maria Grazia Chiuri, Dior creative director for women RTW at the time, decided to showcase their handcrafted fabrics for her creations during the dedicated fashion show in Lecce (Figure 17 below).

Yet, despite their expertise and centrality to product creation, women often remain invisible in leadership pipelines. As such, the industry exhibits what has been presented in the first chapter as "glass labyrinth" (L. L. Carli & Eagly, 2016): a system of opaque and cumulative barriers that prevent women from reaching top-tier positions, even when they dominate in numbers and competence at the base. The result is a persistent disjunction between female-driven creative labor and male-driven executive power, a paradox that remains one of the most entrenched in the global luxury industry.

Figure 15 Dior Cruise collection, Dior 2021
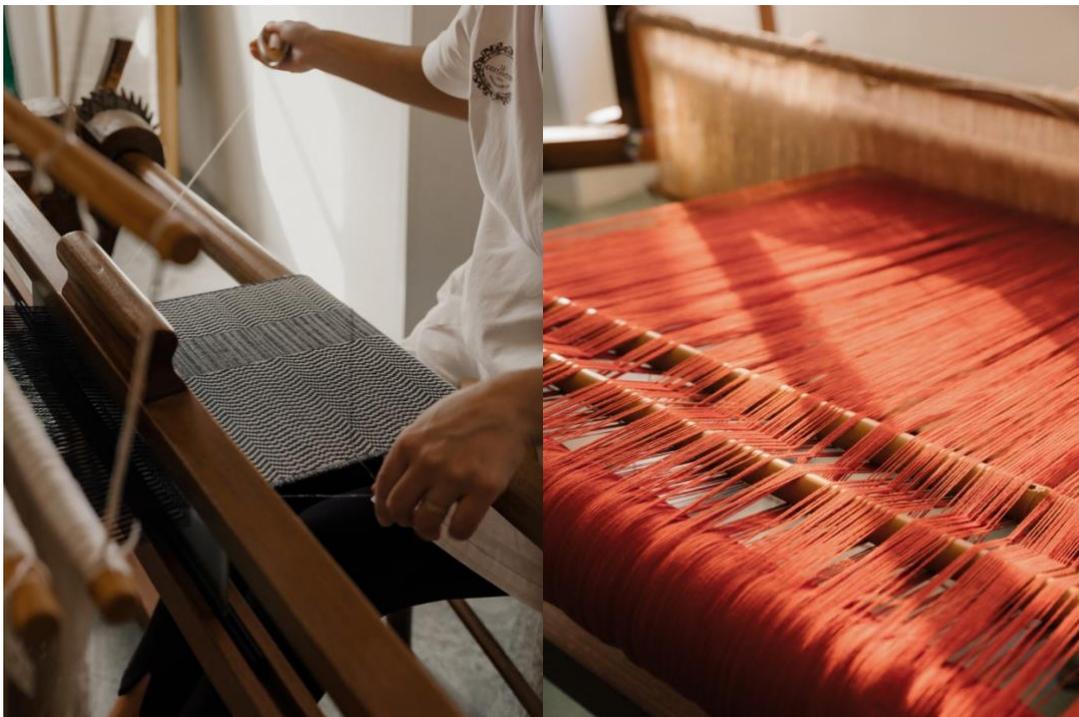
Figure 18 Workers at Le Costantine, Vogue 2023

To confirm this gap, it is worth looking at the succession of creative directors at the most prestigious and popular fashion houses. Indeed, although creative sensitivity and sense of beauty are qualities

often attributed to femininity, an analytical survey of creative leadership succession reveals the continuing trend of masculine dominance. Accordingly, although it is often believed that women have an intrinsic affinity with fashion and aesthetics, the symbolic identification has yet to become equal decision-taking access. By contrast, creative directorships at the large luxury maisons are overwhelmingly occupied by men, entrenching long-held gendered assumption about whom is truly innovative or visionary.

To give tangible examples herby the last 10 creative directors for women's RTW and Haute Couture in Dior:

1. Christian Dior (1946–1957)

2. Yves Saint Laurent (1957–1960)

3. Marc Bohan (1960–1989)

4. Gianfranco Ferré (1989–1997)

5. John Galliano (1997–2011)

6. Bill Gaytten (2011–2012)

7. Raf Simons (2012–2015)

8. Serge Ruffieux & Lucie Meier (2015–2016)

9. Maria Grazia Chiuri (2016–2025)

10. Jonathan Anderson (2025–present)

Similary, the last creative directors in Gucci:

1. Tom Ford (1994–2004)
2. Alessandra Facchinetti (2004–2005)
3. Frida Giannini (2006–2014)
4. Alessandro Michele (2015–2022)
5. Sabato De Sarno (2023–Feb 2025)
6. Demna Gvasalia (Jul 2025–present)

Moreover, the most recent round of publicized appointments follows the pattern. Matthieu Blazy was appointed creative director at Bottega Veneta in early 2025, following Daniel Lee, continuing a masculine succession track within the house's leadership ranks. At Gucci, following the departure of

Alessandro Michele and the brief, disappointing, tenure of Sabato De Sarno, the house hired the former Valentino designer Pierpaolo Piccioli, yet another succession of creative leadership along masculine lines. Meanwhile, Michele himself settled in as Valentino's leader, in succession of Piccioli. These hires represent the usual pattern of rotation along masculine lines among the industry's most elite ranks. Women are represented in the rotation with little regularity, and their hires are often shorter, more scrutinized, or framed as breaks with the norm, if hired at all.

Cases of female leadership are present but are exceptional cases (Maria Grazia Chiuri at Dior and Nadège Vanhee-Cybulski at Hermès) within the consistent pattern that sees creative direction as a men's prerogative. Even within houses that design exclusively or, indeed, overwhelmingly female garments, males fill leadership roles. This anomaly discredits the mythology of the female advantage in creative fields and confounds the assumption that women are inherently the preferred candidate in qualitative or artistic fields. Rather, it is an extension of the broader bias that sees creativity, innovation, and vision disproportionately represented as masculine. What is even more notable, is the continuous movements of leadership appointments. In other words, luxury is not a static industry, it moves with the trends and with the market; at this point seems obvious that women are the only ones not moving, being "sticked" to floor, slipping on the glass labyrinth.

3. Research project design and obtained results

3.1. Setting: research rationale

The experimental focus of this work is the world of fashion, an industry that constitutes a particularly fraught setting in which to explore gender bias in work assessment. Even if fashion is typically considered a traditionally feminized-coded sector, with an identification that is tied to creativity, aesthetics, and emotive work, properties traditionally associated with women, preponderance in fashion companies, both in terms of creative ownership and managerial control, still lies with men.

Many of the most influential houses of the past were founded by women, such as Coco Chanel, Elsa Schiaparelli, Madeleine Vionnet, and Jeanne Lanvin, whose innovations determined the very essence of 20th-century fashion. But some of their inheritances have steadily been taken over, however, by their male-led maisons counterparts, such as Christian Dior, Giorgio Armani, Gianni Versace, and Gucci, which dominate the market and mainstream accounts of the contemporary luxury business. Women are nearly absent, meanwhile, from the top creative positions in the most significant brands, according to the previously mentioned male dominance of creative direction at flagship houses such

as Gucci, and Dior, whose most recent succession has excluded women chiefly (Istituto Marangoni, 2025 ; Fashion Minority Alliance, 2023). As the Fashion Minority Alliance 2023 Report calculates, only 14% of the creative directors of the world's most significant fashion brands are women, and they, in turn, remain under shortened terms and intensified scrutiny (Fashion Minority Alliance, 2023). This structural exclusion persists despite the dominance of women throughout the remainder of the industry, notably as consumers, laborers, and mid-level managers.

The fashion industry thus presents the ideal paradox to illuminate gender bias: it's culturally feminine yet systematically depriving women at the top of power and rewards. By looking at how the gender of the candidate orients impressions of warmth, competence, and commitment, three assessment dimensions that are heavily determined by gendered expectations, this work seeks to explore the unconscious processes that perpetuate inequality despite the establishment of inclusivity. The setting, which is based on the selection of employment judgments in the fashion industry, allows a richly contextualized exploration of asymmetries based on stereotypes, and responds to the challenge to go beyond mere discrimination, and examines how neutral processes perpetuate settled hierarchies of power. Here, the work is not only examining gender differences in assessment, but relies on qualitative comments of fashion works, gaining valuable insights on the logics that still associate authority, creativity, and leadership capability with masculinity.

3.2. Research Hypotheses: mediation and moderation models

To introduce the hypotheses and the methodological framework guiding the empirical analysis, it is worth building upon the theoretical background discussed in the literature review of Chapter 1. Previous sections have highlighted how gender stereotypes, particularly those linked to perceptions of *warmth*, *competence*, and *commitment*, are well rooted in modern society and have repercussions on organizational schemas, influencing both individual evaluations and institutional decision-making. In particular, the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002), Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012), and Ambivalent Sexism Theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) collectively demonstrate how gender-based expectations bias judgments of women's suitability for leadership roles, often framing them as warm but less competent and committed.

These theoretical assumptions provide the rationale for the formulation of two different sets of hypotheses to be empirically tested through an experimental design.

The first one, tests the direct effect of candidate gender on the warmth, competence, and commitment dimensions, directly drawn from the Stereotype Content Model (Cuddy et al., 2008) and widely appreciated in gender and organizational literature. The first hypotheses are formulated as follows:

H1: *Gender is associated with hiring decision, with female being evaluated as less employable than males.*

H2*: The relationship between gender and hiring is mediated by perception of (a) warmth, (b) competence, and (c) commitment.*

According to this framework, gender functions as an antecedent variable shaping how individuals are perceived in terms of personal attributes that are socially and professionally valued. Specifically, female candidates are often stereotyped as higher in warmth but lower in competence and commitment, whereas male candidates are generally associated with higher perceived agency and professional reliability.

In the first set of hypotheses, warmth, competence and commitment are theorized as mediators in the relationship between gender and hiring decisions. In this mediation model, the effect of gender is channeled through the evaluative traits ascribed to the candidate. In this framework, it is not the gender per se that determines candidates' employability, but rather how gender shapes perceptions of their warmth, competence, and commitment. This pathway is visually cleared in the mediation model diagram (Figure 19), and it aligns with literature emphasizing the *indirect mechanisms* through which gender bias operates in professional evaluation contexts (Heilman, 2001).
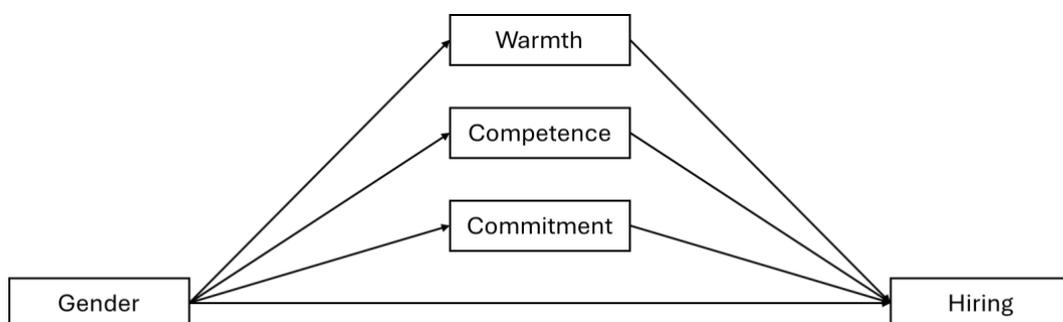
Figure 19 Mediation model, own elaboration

However, thanks to increasing organizational literature, companies have implemented regulations, codes of ethics, trainings and other diversity and inclusion practices to overcome gender biases and gaps. For this reason, many companies today publicly commit to gender parity, often gaining praise and visibility for doing so. Nevertheless, such efforts do not necessarily reflect the internalized beliefs of all individual employees, could be plausible that the widespread institutionalization of D&I policies has, in some cases, led to a form of symbolic compliance, where gender equality is embraced at the corporate level but not integrated into the attitudes and decision-making processes of every organizational actor. Some individuals could remain skeptical of, resistant to, or simply ambivalent toward gender parity, while others may hold implicit biases that persist despite formal policies.

As a result, decision-makers may feel compelled to suppress or regulate their biases, not because they have personally internalized inclusive norms, but because organizational culture requires it. This ambiguity between institutional mandates and individual cognition suggests that gender may no longer operate as a determinant factor, but could rather influence hiring indirectly, shaping perceptions of candidate traits (such as warmth, competence, and commitment) which are themselves subject to gendered interpretations.

Hence, in such contexts, the indirect effects of gender bias may become more salient than direct discriminatory behaviors. Even when hiring decisions appear merit-based, they may be driven by trait evaluations already skewed by gendered expectations, reinforcing subtle yet consequential forms of inequality. In fact, contemporary literature highlights consistent findings on the non-uniformity of these traits across genders, and that the same level of competence or warmth can yield different evaluative consequences depending on whether the candidate is male or female. For example, in Rudman and Glick's (2001) work on backlash effects, if agentic women violating prescriptive gender norms face negative outcomes, agentic men are rewarded in the workplace. Similarly, Phelan and Rudman (2010) study the double bind women face in leadership contexts: exhibiting competence may increase perceived hireability, but only insofar as it does not undermine perceptions of warmth. In this sense, gender acts as a moderator, altering the strength or direction of the relationship between perceived traits and hiring decisions.

Hence, the following hypotheses are hereby formulated:

H3: *Hiring is negatively influenced by (a) warmth, and positively influenced by (b) competence, and (c) commitment.*

H4*: The relationship between (a) warmth, (b) competence and (c) commitment with candidates'
employability (i.e. hiring) is moderated by gender, such that females are perceived as high in warmth
and low in competence and commitment, leading to decreased perceived employability.*

Therefore, the second set of hypotheses, visually presented in Figure 20 below, allows to test the moderation effect of gender on the factor influencing the candidates' hireability. In other words, the aim of the hypotheses is to study whether trait–hireability associations are themselves gendered, analyzing the moderation effect of gender on warmth, competence and commitment, reflecting the increasing complexity of gender bias, especially in organizations that publicly endorse D&I values.
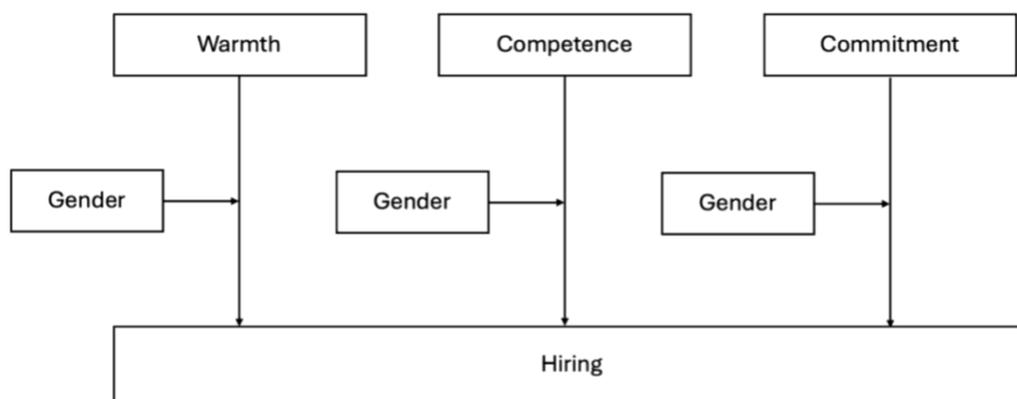
Figure 20. Moderation Model, own elaboration

3.3. Methods

3.3.1. Participants

Participants were recruited upon the requirement of being luxury industry employees or experienced recruiters. The total amount of subjects recruited was 180; however, 104 participants were excluded as they did not complete the entire survey which was treated as a revoke of consent. The final sample includes 76 participants (age: m = 44,1 ± 14.75 s.d.). This size is considered sufficient for statistical analyses, as supported by the Central Limit Theorem, which ensures that the sampling distribution of the mean approximates normality with samples exceeding 50 observations.

 In line with the Declaration of Helsinki and the APA ethical standards, all participants responded to the test after giving consent to the utilization their personal data for academic purposes, with the guarantee of anonymity for their identity and organization of belonging. Moreover, participants were informed of their right to interrupt the test at any time, in case they feel uncomfortable. They were

recruited through various channels, including social media (i.e., LinkedIn and Facebook) and direct and indirect contact.

The employees have been asked to provide demographic information such as age, education, nationality, social status, number of children under care (if any) and gender, and professional information such as the size of their organization, seniority in years and wage range. This is not only to ensure an unbiased analysis but also to uncover intersectional and contextual dynamics of discrimination. For example, Isaac, Lee & Carnes (2009) conducted a systematic review of 27 randomized controlled trials in hiring contexts and reinforced the critical need to measure additional variables like parental status, identifying these factors as significant in shaping bias. This recommendation was applied in the present study by collecting broad categories of demographic and professional information, enabling a robust yet adaptable statistical analysis.

Therefore, in terms of gender most respondents identified as female (72.4%), followed by male participants (22.4%), while an additional 5.3% identified as non-binary or preferred not to disclose their gender.

Concerning the education level, the distribution of the sample is the following: 3% had a lower secondary education, 35.5% had completed upper secondary education or vocational training, 12% had earned a bachelor's degree, while the majority (38%) held a master's degree, and another 12% had pursued additional postgraduate education, such as a PhD or other advanced degrees.

Regarding age, 32% of participants were between 23 and 35 years old, 27.5% were between 36 and 45, 13% between 46 and 55, and another 27.5% between 56 and 65 years old. As for family status, 25% of the sample reported being single, 22% were in a relationship, 50% were cohabiting or married, and 3% were divorced or separated. Finally, with respect to parental status, 54% of participants reported having no children, while 46% stated that they have children.

From a current title perspective on jobs, most respondents were employees (56%), with 15% having other positions outside of listed specifications. Additionally, 12% of respondents were interns or trainees, 5% were junior managers, and 5% were senior managers. Smaller portions of the sample were general managers (4%) and partners (3%). Consequently, the most common income bracket was €15,000–25,000, reported by 33% of participants, followed closely by €25,000–35,000 (30%). Additionally, 14.5% reported earning less than €15,000, while 10.5% each fell into the €35,000–50,000 and €50,000–100,000 ranges. Only 1% of respondents reported incomes exceeding €100,000.

3.3.2. Experimental Design

The study adopted a randomized experimental research design to examine how gender influences professional candidate assessment. Respondents were randomly assigned to assessing one of two synthetic curriculum vitae without personal photo, one of a male professional (Figure 20) and the other of a female professional (Figure 21), that were identical in academic qualifications, work experience, linguistic proficiency, skills and personal information provided.

The CV provided to participants were fictional but created thanks to a previous analysis of LinkedIn profiles of professionals working in fashion as corporate employees, who held a business education and thus eligible for a managerial role. The single experimental manipulation between the two CVs was the candidate's name (Luca or Diana), which was selected to indirectly convey the gender (male or female) of the candidate, avoiding making a saliently explicit gender remark.

Both CVs were designed to reflect a highly qualified candidate for a leadership position, and respondents were exposed to the CV for a minimum of 30 seconds before proceeding to the evaluation stage. Respondents subsequently filled out a series of questions aimed at evaluating their perceptions of candidates' Warmth, Competence, and Commitment according to the dimensions described in the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002). All the items used to measure the dimensions were scored on a 5-point Likert scale; to measure Warmth, and Competence six items were used, whereas four items were used to measure Commitment. Finally, hiring likeliness was surveyed asking participants to indicate how much they would favor appointing the candidate to their firm's board of directors. The question on hiring intention was deliberately concerning the BoD, thus a high-level position, due to both empirical and academic reference presented in Chapter 1. In fact, it is evident that in present times there are fewer obstacles to women's employment when a lower-level role is involved; for this reason, the survey was designed to assess if gender bias was emerging in participants facing a hiring decision for a high-responsibility job position.

In addition to the quantitative measures, the questionnaire also included an open-ended question in which participants were asked to give reasons for their assessment of the candidate's suitability for a board position. This qualitative section was included to capture interpretive nuances and subjective reasoning that might not emerge from numerical data alone.

With such premises it was possible to isolate the gender's effect, allowing for causal inference regarding gender's role in trait ascription and hiring decisions, while holding other variables constant by keeping all other CV attributes invariant. Consequently, it has been this possible to test both the

mediation (Does gender have a mediating effect on hire through perceptions of traits?) and the moderation (Does gender moderate perceived traits' effects on hire). Moreover, the qualitative answers have been interpreted together with the quantitative data, to have a comprehensive understanding of the root causes behind potentially stereotypical judgments.

Luca Zan

Collection Merchandising Manager presso Giorgio Armani

Milano, Lombardia, Italia

Summary

Experienced Collection Merchandising Manager with a demonstrated history of working in the luxury, fashion and cosmetic industry. Skilled in Retail, People Management, Luxury Goods, and Sales. Strong business development professional with a Master focused in Fashion Management from LUISS Guido Carli. Last, but absolutely not least: husband of Claudia, and father of Allegra and Iacopo.

Experience

Giorgio Armani
3 anni 11 mesi
Collection Merchandising Manager AX Womenswear
maggio 2024 - Present (10 mesi) Milano, Lombardia, Italia

Collection Merchandiser AX Womenswear
aprile 2021 - maggio 2024 (3 anni 2 mesi)

DSQUARED2
Collection Merchandiser
gennaio 2020 - aprile 2021 (1 anno 4 mesi)
Milano, Italia

Patrizia Pepe
2 anni 10 mesi
Buyer & Merchandiser
ottobre 2017 - gennaio 2020 (2 anni 4 mesi)
Firenze, Italia

Buying & Merchandising Intern
aprile 2017 - ottobre 2017 (7 mesi)
Firenze, Italia

Invitalia - Agenzia Nazionale per l'attrazione degli investimenti e lo sviluppo d'impresa S.p.A
Junior Financial Analyst - Incentives & Innovation
dicembre 2016 - marzo 2017 (4 mesi)

Key Skills
English
Teamwork
Management

Lingue
Italiano (Native or Bilingual)
Inglese (Full Professional)
Francese (Professional Working)

Certificazioni
Delf B2

Figure 20 CV, Male Candidate. Own elaboration

Diana De Angelis

Collection Merchandising Manager presso Giorgio Armani
Milano, Lombardia, Italia

Key skills
English
Teamwork
Management

Lingue
Italiano (Native or Bilingual)
Inglese (Full Professional)
Francese (Professional Working)

Certificazioni
Delf B2

Summary

Experienced collection merchandising manager with a proven track record of working in the luxury, fashion and cosmetics industries. Skilled in retail, people management, luxury goods and sales. Strong business development professional with a Master's degree in Fashion Management from LUISS Guido Carli. Last but not least: wife of Claudio and mother of Allegra and Iacopo.

Experience

Giorgio Armani
3 anni 11 mesi
Collection Merchandising Manager AX Womenswear
maggio 2024 - Present (10 mesi) Milano, Lombardia, Italia

Collection Merchandiser AX Womenswear
aprile 2021 - maggio 2024 (3 anni 2 mesi)

DSQUARED2
Collection Merchandiser
gennaio 2020 - aprile 2021 (1 anno 4 mesi)
Milano, Italia

Patrizia Pepe
2 anni 10 mesi
Buyer & Merchandiser
ottobre 2017 - gennaio 2020 (2 anni 4 mesi)
Firenze, Italia

Buying & Merchandising Intern
aprile 2017 - ottobre 2017 (7 mesi)
Firenze, Italia

Invitalia - Agenzia Nazionale per l'attrazione degli investimenti e lo sviluppo d'impresa S.p.A
Junior Financial Analyst - Incentives & Innovation
dicembre 2016 - marzo 2017 (4 mesi)

Figure 21. CV, Female candidate. Own elaboration

Another relevant aspect is the cover story preceding the experiment, provided to potential participants to ensure unbiased results. In fact, the text appearing on social media to attract participants was of a general tone, inviting professionals to test their ability in recruiting talent, not mentioning "gender" or correlated words in any means.

Hereby the full cover story text:

"**An opportunity to explore the selection process in the fashion and luxury industry!**

This project is part of an **experimental thesis** exploring the dynamics of selection in the luxury sector, a highly competitive and ever-changing industry.

The goal of the experiment: To examine the CVs of candidates for a prestigious position in the luxury world, testing professional assessment skills in a highly competitive environment. The approximate length of the experiment is estimated to 3 minutes, with 1 minute to read carefully the provided CV.

Why participate?

- **Contribute to innovative research:** your contribution will help to better understand the dynamics of selection in the fashion and luxury world.

- **Expand your understanding of the industry:** gain new insights into the recruiting process in one of the most competitive and coveted industries.

- **Assess skills:** test your ability to analyze professional experiences and skills objectively.

Who is invited to participate? The project is aimed at anyone with an interest in the fashion industry, human resource management and the professional selection process. Every evaluation will be valuable in enriching the research.

How to participate? Just click on the link to start the CV analysis. The exercise length is about 3 minutes, but it's meaningful. Everyone's participation will contribute to the realization of this academic research project and better understand the choices that determine success in an industry like luxury."

3.3.3. Statistical testing

In preparation for the quantitative analyses, the raw data associated with the Hireability, Warmth, Competence, and Commitment variables were transformed into z-scores. This standardization was needed due to inconsistent items' number in the variables' measurement. By converting each variable into z-scores, namely rescaling them to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1, all variables were uniformed and placed on the same metric, allowing for direct comparison and proper interpretation.

Another pre-processing requirement is the assessment of the internal consistency of each multi-item scale with the Cronbach's alpha. The coefficient offers a measure of the intercorrelation among the items on each scale and, thus, an index of those items' ability to tap the same underlying construct consistently. Values above 0.70 are deemed as acceptable, suggesting good internal reliability. For this study, all scales resulted reliable (α_{Warmth}= 0,933; $\alpha_{Competence}$ = 0,904; $\alpha_{Commitment}$ = 0,952), which adds confidence to the composite measures used on the following analyses. To test the hypotheses, quantitative analysis of data was conducted through statistical software SPSS. Specifically, to test the mediation and moderation hypothesis the PROCESS macro for SPSS was used (Hayes, 2017).

To test the first set of hypotheses– H1 and H2- one single mediation model was computed using hiring as a dependent variable, gender as independent variable, and warmth, competence and commitment as mediators. Further in all the three models a series of control variables were included as covariates, namely age, gender, education, marital status, parental status, income, job position, and company's sector and size. To test the second set of hypotheses – H3 and H4 – three separate moderation models were computed using either warmth, competence, and commitment as independent variable, hiring as dependent variables and gender as moderator. All models also include all the control variables described above as covariates.

3.4. Results

H1-H2. The results of the model indicate that the model was overall significant (R^2 = 0.70, F [13, 62] = 11.16, $p < 0.001$). Nonetheless, the effect of gender on hiring was found non-significant (β = -0.12, p=0.41). Conversely the direct effect of competence on hiring was statistically significant (β = 0.72, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the more a candidate was perceived as competent the more he/she was likely to be evaluated positively for BoD. Along the same lines, the effect of commitment was also significant (β = 0.36, p <0.05), indicating that a perception of commitment is positively related to

hiring. Conversely, the effect of warmth was found non-significant (β = 0.14, p = 0.24). Regarding the covariates, participants' gender showed significant effect (β = 0.27, p <0.05), indicating that female participants expressed more favorable hiring judgments compared to males. Also, age was found significant (β = 0.1, p <0.05), indicating that older participants expressed more positive hiring evaluations. Marital status also produced a significant effect (β = 0.42, p <0.001) indicating that participants in a relationship or married were more positive in their hiring evaluations compared to singles. Finally, a marginally significant negative effect of income was found (β = -0.12, p =0.07), indicating more negative evaluations from people earning higher salaries.

More importantly, the results of the indirect effects revealed that competence (β = 0.01, LLCI = -0.36, ULCI = 0.30), warmth (β = 0.00, LLCI = -0.13, ULCI = 0.11), and commitment (β = 0.01, LLCI = -0.24, ULCI = 0.14) did not mediate the relationship between gender and hiring (Total effect: β = 0.00, LLCI = -0.30, ULCI = 0.22). Hence, the results did not provide support for neither H1 nor for H2.

Table 1 Mediation model

	β	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Gender	-0.12	0.14	-0.83	0.41	-0.41	0.17
Competence	0.72	0.13	5.71	0.00	0.47	0.97
Warmth	0.14	0.12	1.18	0.24	-0.10	0.37
Commitment	-0.36	0.15	-2.48	0.02	-0.66	-0.07
Gender (participant)	0.27	0.13	2.02	0.05	0.00	0.53
Age	0.01	0.01	2.00	0.05	0.00	0.03
Marital status	0.42	0.13	3.09	0.00	0.15	0.68
Parental status	0.18	0.28	0.64	0.53	-0.38	0.73
Education	-0.08	0.07	-1.18	0.24	-0.23	0.06
Income	-0.12	0.06	-1.83	0.07	-0.24	0.01

Job Position	-0.05	0.04	-1.26	0.21	-0.13	0.03
Sector	0.08	0.07	1.14	0.26	-0.06	0.21
Size	-0.09	0.05	-1.67	0.10	-0.19	0.02
Indirect effects						
	β	**SE**	**t**	**p**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
Total effect	0.00	0.13	-	-	-0.30	0.22
Competence	0.01	0.16	-	-	-0.36	0.30
Warmth	0.00	0.05	-	-	-0.13	0.11
Commitment	-0.01	0.09	-	-	-0.24	0.14

The model also provides the analysis of the effects on the moderators: warmth, competence and commitment. As per the Warmth, as a mediator. In this case, the model is globally statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.32$, F [10,65] = 2.81, p = 0.004). The effect of gender resulted not statistically significant (β =0.023, t = 0.11, p = 0.91), while significant effects were associated to age (β =0.02 t = 1.98, p = 0.05), and marginally significant effects to marital status (β =-0.33, t = -1.6977, p = 0.10, parental status (β =-0.74, t = -1.91, p = 0.06) and income (β =-0.12, t = -1.70 p = 0.09). All other covariates did not result statistically significant (See Table 2 below for details).

Table 2 Mediation model, Warmth as mediator, own elaboration of SPSS results

	β	**SE**	**t**	**p**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
Gender	0.02	0.21	0.11	0.91	-0.40	0.45
Gender (participant)	0.30	0.19	1.61	0.11	-0.07	0.68

Age	0.02	0.01	1.99	0.05	-0.00	0.04
Marital status	-0.33	0.19	-1.70	0.01	-0.71	0.06
Parental status	-0.74	0.39	-1.91	0.06	-1.52	0.03
Education	-0.07	0.10	-0.67	0.50	-0.28	0.14
Income	-0.15	0.09	-1.70	0.09	-0.33	0.03
Job Position	-0.08	0.06	-1.47	0.15	-0.20	0.03
Sector	0.00	0.10	0.04	0.97	-0.19	0.20
Size	-0.00	0.08	-0.08	0.93	-0.16	0.14

Regarding competence, the model is globally statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.30$. F [10.65] = 2.99. p =0.006). The effect of gender resulted not statistically significant (β =0.008. t = 0.03. p = 0.97), while significant effects were associated to children (β =-0.91. t = -2.30, p = 0.02) and income variables (β =-0.20, t = -2.23, p = 0.03), both having a negative effect on the competence. In other words, as the number of children and income increase, participants tend to evaluate the candidate of lower competence. In addition, marginally significant effects were found for the marital status variable (β =-0.34, t = -1.77, p = 0.08), meaning that single participants reported more favorable judgements, while married or divorced people less favorable ones. All other covariates did not result statistically significant (See Table 3 below for details).

Table 3 Mediation model, Competence as mediator, own elaboration of SPSS results

	β	**SE**	**t**	**p**	**LLCI**	**ULCI**
Gender	0.01	0.22	0.03	0.97	-0.42	0.44
Gender (participant)	-0.06	0.19	-0.31	0.76	-0.44	0.32
Age	0.02	0.01	1.49	0.14	-0.01	0.04

Marital status	-0.34	0.19	-1.77	0.08	-0.73	0.04
Parental status	-0.91	0.39	-2.30	0.02	-1.69	-0.12
Education	-0.06	0.10	-0.62	0.54	-0.27	0.14
Income	-0.20	0.09	-2.23	0.03	-0.38	-0.02
Job Position	-0.07	0.06	-1.18	0.24	-0.19	0.05
Sector	0.04	0.10	0.39	0.69	-0.16	0.24
Size	0.04	0.08	0.47	0.64	-0.12	0.19

Finally, regarding the analysis of commitment, the results highlight a globally significant model (R^2 = 0.36, F [10,65] = 3.63, p =0.007). The effect of gender resulted not statistically significant (β =0.02, t = 0.11, p = 0.91), while significant effects were associated to the children (β =-0.83, t = -2.21, p = 0.03) variable, having a negative effect on the evaluation of candidates' commitment. Age had a marginally significant positive effect (β =0.02, t = 1.69, p = 0.10), meaning that older participants reported more favorable judgements (See Table 4 below for details).

Overall, the results of these analysis indicate that male and females are evaluated as equally competent, warm and committed, in contrast with extant literature.

Table 4 Mediation model, Commitment as mediator, own elaboration of SPSS results

	β	*se*	*t*	*p*	*LLCI*	*ULCI*
Gender	0.02	0.21	0.11	0.91	-0.39	0.43
Gender (participant)	0.12	0.18	0.67	0.50	-0.24	0.49
Age	0.02	0.01	1.69	0.10	0.00	0.04

Marital status	-0.23	0.19	-1.25	0.22	-0.60	0.14
Parental status	-0.83	0.38	-2.21	0.03	-1.58	-0.08
Education	-0.16	0.10	-1.62	0.11	-0.36	0.04
Income	-0.14	0.09	-1.61	0.11	-0.31	0.03
Job Position	-0.07	0.06	-1.24	0.22	-0.18	0.04
Sector	0.00	0.10	0.04	0.97	-0.19	0.20
Size	-0.05	0.07	-0.70	0.49	-0.20	0.09

On the other hand, to test the second set of hypotheses **(H3, H4)**, three separate moderation models were computed in order to test for the interactions between the gender of the CV and Warmth, competence and commitment on hiring decisions.

First, the model for the moderation of gender on the perception of competence is globally statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.67$, F [12,63] = 11, p = 0.00). The interaction between gender and competence resulted not statistically significant, while marital status (β =0.40, t = 2.90, p = 0.01) was found as significant and gender of the participant (β =0.27, t = -0.84, p = 0.05)and age (β =0.01, t = 1.94, p = 0.06) generated marginal effects (See Table 5 below for more detailed data).

Table 5 Moderation model, Competence x Gender Interaction, own elaboration of SPSS results

	β	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Competence	0.35	0.27	1.33	0.19	-0.18	0.88
Gender	-0.13	0.15	-0.84	0.40	-0.42	0.17
Competence x Gender	0.12	0.16	0.74	0.46	-0.20	0.43
Gender (participant)	0.27	0.13	2.01	0.05	0.00	0.54

Age	0.01	0.01	1.94	0.06	0.00	0.03
Marital status	0.40	0.14	2.90	0.01	0.13	0.68
Parental status	0.23	0.28	0.80	0.43	-0.34	0.80
Education	-0.04	0.07	-0.58	0.57	-0.19	0.10
Income	-0.13	0.07	-1.93	0.06	-0.26	0.00
Job Position	-0.05	0.04	-1.31	0.20	-0.14	0.03
Sector	0.07	0.07	1.03	0.31	-0.07	0.22
Size	-0.06	0.05	-1.19	0.24	-0.17	0.04

However, it is possible to appreciate conditional effects on the dependent variable (Male: 0,47; p=0.00; Female:0,58; p=0.00). Despite the difference between male and female is not significant, the effect of perceived competence compared to males, is more pronounced, and the visual inspection of the effects is still interesting to appreciate. Figure 22 below reports the impact on hiring of competence, the effect of gender is represented by blue and pink lines (blue=male; pink= female). It can be noted that the line for female candidates is steeper compared to the one for males; hence, for high levels of perceived competence (upper-right quadrant), the moderation effects is null, meaning no difference is observed for hiring a male or a female candidate. On the contrary, for lower level of competence (lower-left quadrant) there is less probability that the women will be hired, showing a preference for the male candidate.
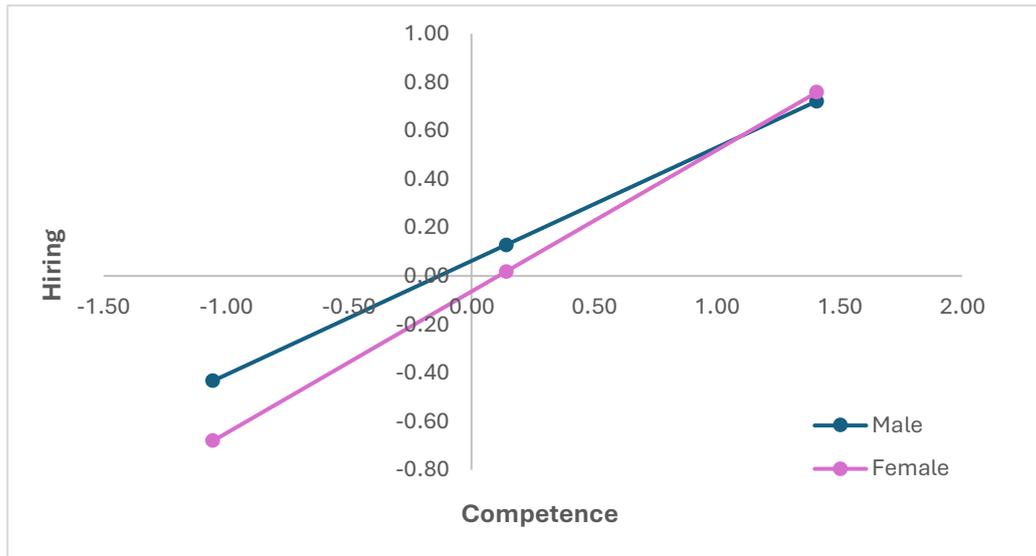
Figure 22 Y: Hire; X: Competence; W: Gender

The second moderation model computed to evaluate the warmth-gender interaction was found globally significant ($R^2 = 0.54$, F [12,63] = 6.17, p =0.00). Income (β =-0.18, t = -2.38, p = 0.02) resulted as a significant covariate while age (β =0.02, t = 1.87, p = 0.07) and marital status (β =0.32, t = 1.96, p = 0.05) reported marginal effects (detailed results are presented in Table 6 below).

Table 6 Moderation model, Warmth x Gender Interaction, own elaboration of SPSS results

	β	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Warmth	0.13	0.32	0.39	0.69	-0.52	0.77
Gender	-0.13	0.18	-0.75	0.46	-0.49	0.22
Warmth x Gender	0.12	0.19	0.63	0.53	-0.26	0.50
Gender (participant)	0.15	0.17	0.92	0.36	-0.18	0.49
Age	0.02	0.01	1.87	0.07	0.00	0.03
Marital status	0.32	0.16	1.96	0.05	-0.01	0.65
Parental status	-0.01	0.34	-0.04	0.97	-0.68	0.66

Education	-0.06	0.09	-0.67	0.51	-0.23	0.11
Income	-0.18	0.08	-2.38	0.02	-0.34	-0.03
Job Position	-0.07	0.05	-1.33	0.19	-0.17	0.03
Sector	0.10	0.08	1.20	0.23	-0.07	0.27
Size	-0.05	0.06	-0.73	0.47	-0.17	0.08

In this case as well, even if the interaction between gender and warmth resulted not statistically significant, the conditional effects are significant in terms of the female gender (Male:0.25; p=0.12; Female:0.36; p=0.01). Similar to Figure 22, Figure 23 below illustrates the effect on hiring of warmth. For higher level of warmth, there's no different impact on hiring depending on the candidate's gender, while regarding lower level of warmth the effect on hiring will involve more the male candidate.
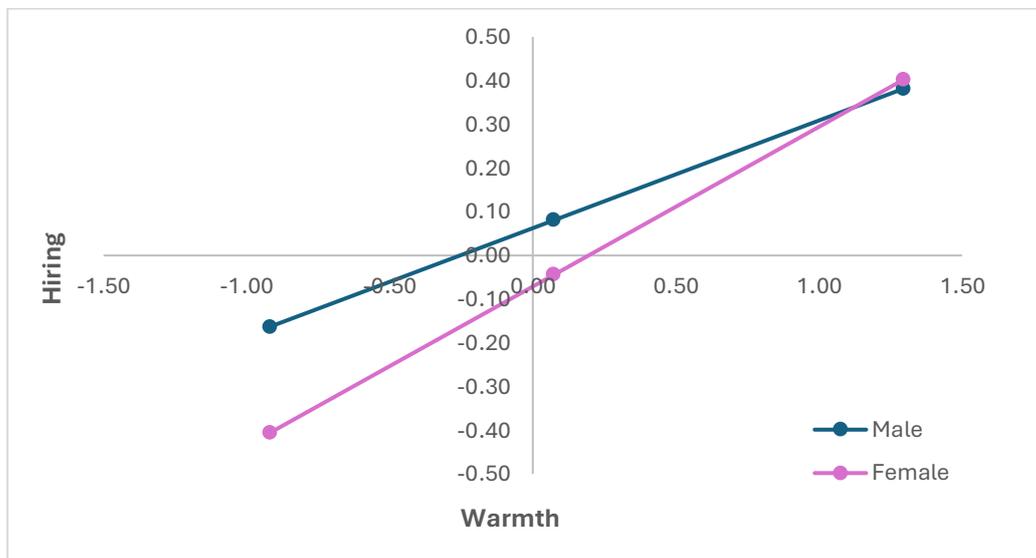

Figure 23 Y: Hire; X: Warmth; W: Gender

Lastly, even the third model concerning commitment, results globally statically significant ($R^2 = 0.55$, F [12,63] = 6.44, p =0.00). In this case, the interaction between commitment and hiring is statistically significant (β=0.38, t = 1.99, p = 0.05). The covariates age (β=0.02, t = 2.37, p = 0.02), marital status (β=0.33, t = 2.06, p = 0.04) and income (β=-0.022, t = -2.82, p = 0.01) were found also significant

and job position (β=-0.08, t = -1.71, p = 0.09) being marginally significant; extensive results are displayed in Table 7 below.

Table 7 Moderation model, Commitment x Gender Interaction, own elaboration of SPSS results

	β	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Commitment	-0.33	0.33	-1.01	0.32	-1.00	0.33
Gender	-0.13	0.18	-0.75	0.46	-0.48	0.22
Commitment x Gender	0.38	0.19	1.99	0.05	0.00	0.76
Gender (participant)	0.27	0.16	1.65	0.10	-0.06	0.59
Age	0.02	0.01	2.37	0.02	0.00	0.04
Marital status	0.33	0.16	2.06	0.04	0.01	0.66
Parental status	0.08	0.34	0.23	0.82	-0.59	0.75
Education	-0.02	0.09	-0.28	0.78	-0.20	0.15
Income	-0.22	0.08	-2.82	0.01	-0.37	-0.06
Job Position	-0.08	0.05	-1.71	0.09	-0.18	0.01
Sector	0.08	0.08	1.02	0.31	-0.08	0.25
Size	-0.04	0.06	-0.71	0.48	-0.17	0.08

The significant interaction emerging from the results is only on the female candidates, whereas it is not on the male ones (Female:0.43 the; p=0.00; Male:0.05; p=0.78). These effects are illustrated in Figure 24 below, reporting the moderation of commitment on hiring for the two different genders. The results show how, if lower levels of commitment are involved, there's a preference for the male candidate, while this changes when turning to higher-commitment contexts. In other words, for male candidates the perception of commitment does not exert a significant effect on hiring decisions; even when the candidate is perceived as low in commitment this doesn't change the hiring decision.

Conversely, for females, perceived commitment has a significant effect on hiring decisions: females are punished for low perceived commitment and rewarded for high perceived commitment. At a first glance, this data could result encouraging if a female candidate would receive better chance of employment when showing high commitment, but, in the following sections, a detailed analysis of this result will highlight a different possible interpretation.
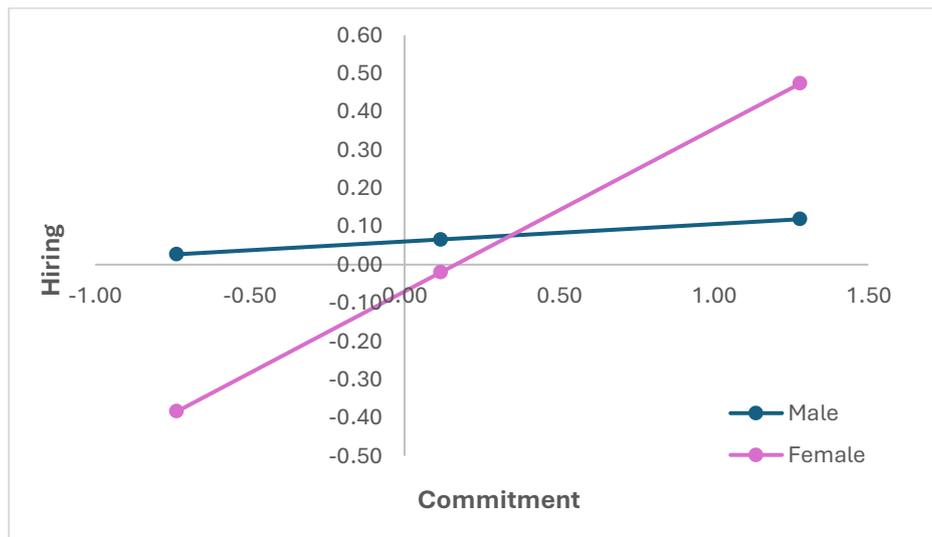

Figure 24 Y: Hire; X: Commitment; W: Gender

3.5. Qualitative comments

As mentioned in the Research Rationale paragraph, the design of the experiment involved a section where participants could leave qualitative comments about the candidate (Appendix 1). This means that they were left with the opportunity of disclosing personal considerations on their decision of whether or not to hire the candidate in the Board of Directors, going beyond numerical ratings.

Comments towards the female candidate revealed admiration blended with skeptical views. She was consistently described as a responsible individual, extremely qualified, with high organizational and managerial abilities. Her career path was praised for consisting of substantial experience in large fashion companies combined with fine knowledge in languages and an aspiration towards a career. Some respondents also recognized the contribution she would give in upgrading skills for existing workers and stressed the worth of empowering young individuals like her. At the same time, some comments revealed intensified scrutiny towards her profile: she failed to comprise detailed

information about specific activities and competence, her experience in management was considered too short for a BoD position, and her numerical skills were doubted even though holding Economics and Management degrees. Others criticized her for not having held other positions with high-level of responsibility. Lastly, she received negative evaluations due to more personal issues, such as a note in her CV about private life information.

The male candidate was commented upon in a consistently more technically and professionally proficient manner in comparison. He was referred to as qualified, trustworthy, and committed, with an exemplary academic track record in addition to recognized finance skills and relevant experiences in leading luxury companies. Respondents repeatedly highlighted his complete set of skills as an extremely qualified young executive whose CV was "undoubtedly interesting from a technical skills point of view." Most of the evaluators prized his real experience in the luxury business as a potential contribution source for a company even though others penalized him for a lack of maturity and curiosity.

Overall, apart from some common remarks upon the young age or the need to know the candidate more through other recruiting steps, the hireability of the female and male candidate was questioned for different reasons, remembering that the feature changing across the two CVs was only the applicant' name.

4.Discussion of results

4.1. Extant literature and analysis of mediation model results (H1, H2)

The mediation model reported results highly diverging from the extant literature, it does noy support the canonical chain mechanism of gender-bias models, namely, gender → trait inferences → hiring. In particular, it diverges from Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) and the "think manager–think male" paradigm (Heilman, 2001), which generally predict a female disadvantage in leadership roles. However, it aligns with more recent large-scale field experiments and meta-analyses showing that overt discrimination in hiring has declined over the past two decades (Schaerer et al., 2023). This study has conducted a meta-analysis of papers analyzing gender bias in hiring practices in female-stereotypical and gender-balanced as well as male-stereotypical jobs from 1976 to 2020. The results show how the selection bias in favor of male over female candidates decreased over time and was eliminated. Eventually, starting in 2009 it reversed sign for mixed-gender and male-stereotypical jobs,

meaning that males face discrimination when applying for female-stereotypical positions (Schaerer et al., 2023).

One of the theories supporting this phenomenon, that is compatible also with the context of the present study, is the *fading-of-bias account* (Schaerer et al., 2023b). This implies acknowledging that discrimination against women was common in past generations, contributing to inequalities that have carried over into the present. For example, gender gaps in representation in senior leadership positions today are attributable in part to upstream biases in selection decades ago that limited the present-day pool of available talent just below the executive level. Yet from this perspective, today's middle managers, the main category of employees selected as a sample for the current research, have become better at correcting for societal stereotypes when it comes to deciding who to hire (Tetlock & Mitchell, 2009) and given empirical evidence of changes in some gender norms and behaviors (Badura et al., 2018; Koenig et al., 2011) may also be less biased in the first place. In summary, from this perspective, contemporary selection processes are in the aggregate no longer substantially impacted by applicant gender.

Another theory in support of no gender differences in competence and commitment perceptions may originate from the shifting standards model (Biernat & Fuegen, 2001; Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997). According to this model, evaluators impose relative standards by target's social group so that women are rated under low minimum standards in general but are required to demonstrate higher capability to qualify for exceptional rating. For elite applicants to board level, however, evaluators appear to impose uniform high standards for both females and males so that variation of perceived competence and commitment are compressed. This explanation is consistent with findings that when females pass entry barrier into high prestige domain, competence judgment converges to that of males (Ridgeway, 2001). Then again, the observed null gender effects from the current study may come from not a lack of bias but the correcting impact of a high threshold of evaluation applied equally to everyone at the top of a hierarchy (Biernat & Fuegen, 2001; Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997; Ridgeway, 2001).

The model reported Competence as the dominant predictor, followed by Commitment with warmth being non-predictive. This aligns with the Stereotype Content Model's expectation that competence and commitment are decisive for high-status roles (Cuddy et al., 2008). Moreover, SCM posits that for leadership positions, communal traits generally carry less weight and can even create backlash in candidates showing those traits. To add on, the positive judgment on perceived high commitment fits the reliability heuristics: the prior discussed phenomenon according to which in uncertainty contexts, evaluators often rely on cues that signal trustworthiness. In professional contexts, a candidate perceived as highly competent is judged as more predictable, effective, and less risky to appoint.

On the other hand, the significant effects of participants' gender, age, marital, income status and size of the organization, resonate with recent organizational research emphasizing that evaluative bias is not only a function of target attributes but also of rater characteristics and social position (Fisher et al., 2019). For example, women were more likely to give positive feedback to all candidates, regardless of the gender, while men expressed more severe judgements. This phenomenon is consistent with other findings which found that female students tend to provide more favorable ratings in performance evaluations of professors (Fisher et al., 2019), suggesting a general tendency toward more generous judgments. Similarly, the finding that higher-income respondents were more critical in their evaluations could be linked to status-protection mechanisms linked to double standards for competence (Foschi, 2000). It has been studied how individuals occupying privileged social positions apply stricter evaluative standards, possibly to reinforce existing hierarchies (Foschi, 2000). In contrast, the more favorable judgments expressed by older and married participants might reflect greater life experience, stability, or an orientation toward communal values.

Taken together, these patterns highlight that in studying biases in hiring it is important also to consider also the evaluator's traits, not focusing only on the target, broadening the focus from bias *against* candidates to the subjective filters through which evaluators interpret candidate attributes.

These findings lay the ground for the second model involving a moderation effect of gender on the strength or direction of the relationship between perceived Competence, Warmth and Commitment and hiring decisions. Evidently, with the increasing awareness on D&I themes, companies have developed policies and training to overcome gender disparities and pure gender discrimination in terms of employment it is starting to become, fortunately, always rarer. However, as previously analyzed, biases are radicalized, originate from centuries of gendered history and education, sometimes backed up by biology and evolutionary science; a company policy is not enough to dismiss them, and evidence of perpetuated gender differences may lay under the surface and go beyond the mere women - to – men employee's rate.

4.2. Extant literature and analysis of moderation model results (H3, H4)

The more nuanced analysis of the moderation models, conducted to more interesting findings. That is because, if the mediation model tested whether evaluative dimensions (competence, warmth, commitment) act as mediators explaining the effect of gender on hiring, the moderation model explores *when and for whom* these traits really matter.

In the first model, the analysis of the conditional effects associated with the competence by gender interaction shows that this dimension is more predictive of hiring for female than male candidates, despite the nonsignificant formal interaction term. In other words, despite the dimension is predictive for both males and female candidates, the slope of the effect across gender shows a difference between males and female. This pattern is explained by two mechanisms. First, shifting standards (Biernat & Fuegen, 2001): raters employ more stringent competence criteria when evaluating women in high-status positions, shrinking average gender gaps in the upper levels but growing sensitivity to stronger competence signals to recruit women when lower level of competence is involved. Second, roles expectation: indeed, leadership is conventionally male typed, and a man is considered to be competent by default, conversely, a woman is not expected to exemplify agentic tendencies, or high competence. Therefore, when a woman is perceived as competent, the additional increment in attributed competence enhances her likelihood of being hired to a greater extent than it does for men. These phenomena can be understood through the lens of role congruity theory and gender stereotype research. When individuals deviate from prescriptive gender norms, their behavior is often evaluated against the backdrop of these expectations. For instance, a man who engages in childcare or household responsibilities may be perceived as an exceptionally good father or husband, precisely because such activities contradict traditional masculine role prescriptions. By contrast, when a woman performs the same tasks—caring for children and managing the household—she is not regarded as exceptionally good, as these behaviors align with descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes of femininity and are therefore taken for granted.

In the second model, the analysis of the conditional effects associated with the warmth by gender interaction shows the slope of warmth is significant for female candidates but not for male ones. This means that, when a female candidate is evaluated as low in warmth, her chances of being hired decrease substantially, while the same lack of warmth has little impact on a male candidate's evaluation. At higher levels of warmth, however, gender differences converge. This pattern aligns with the Stereotype Content Model (Cuddy et al., 2008) predicting that groups perceived as "low warmth" are subject to active harm (a woman showing low warmth is not chosen for an employment). However, given the professional context, evaluators expect not only warmth (to conform to prescriptive gender norms of communality) but also competence (to fulfill role-related demands). In this way women face a double bind that men typically escape (Heilman et al., 2025); warmth operates as a second burden for women: while competence is necessary to prove professional adequacy, warmth is required to be socially accepted in the role. The results also resonate with prescriptive stereotype theory (Rudman & Glick, 2001): women "should" be warm and communal, whereas men are not bound by such expectations. For example, a female candidate who appears cold is judged as

less hirable, even if her competence is high, experiencing backlash. Men, in contrast, do not experience the same penalty for lacking warmth, because their stereotype-congruent expectations imply agency and assertiveness rather than communality.

In the third model, the significant commitment by gender interaction effect underscores a similar phenomenon, with a gender-differentiated "commitment tax". Perceived commitment predicts hiring for women but not for men. Following the ideal worker norm and the motherhood penalty (Correll et al., 2007; Torres et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2013), evaluators often presume women (especially potential mothers) to be less devoted. Thus, high observed commitment is therefore rewarded only for women, while low commitment is punished more severely. For men, high commitment is often assumed by default, so additional commitment signals neither help nor hurt.

In conclusion, the value of the results of the moderation models is in the shedding light on the conditional penalties, because even when the direct gender effect is non-significant (as mediation suggested), moderation shows that women are under diverse evaluative rules. Also, it shows unobservable bias; indeed, despite the final outcomes look "equal"—as, overall, hireability does not diverge between male and female candidates— the paths leading to such outcomes are different. Men are under an "assumed competence/commitment" baseline, while women's employability depends heavily on exceeding thresholds of competence and commitment and avoiding a penalty for low warmth.

4.3. Analysis of qualitative comments

An original and insightful contribute to this research is given by the qualitative comments provided on the candidate by the participants of the experiment.

If overall, some judgments were recurrent for both genders, other comments were specific to the female or male candidate and others expressed the same concept with different choice of words. What was recurring for both genders were comments about the lack of professional experience to cover such high role, the need to know the candidate more through an interview before expressing a judgement, the impressive academic achievements and language proficiency, and the acknowledgment of the importance of the companies which the candidate previously worked at.

On the other hand, only the female candidate was noted as lacking "specific activities and competencies," or expected to have "covered higher level positions" before being considered for the BoD. Only the woman was acknowledged for having a strong curriculum "but has too little work

experience," and only she received a positive hiring evaluation linked to her "Warmth" (umanità, in Italian). Furthermore, only the woman was deemed not hirable due to "private life information on the CV," and, finally, only she received the comment of having "not enough numerical skills," despite holding degrees in Economics and Management.

In addition, only the female candidate was praised for the great willing of "pursuing a career", remarking the commitment bias women face when applying for high-level leadership position. The male candidate did not receive any comment about his career ambitions, implying how commitment and career-orientation are assumed traits in males, whereas for female candidates to being recognized such attributes an exceptional exceedance of thresholds is expected.

Regarding the comments exclusively referred to the male candidate, it is possible to highlight that he was prized for his finance skills (with the same CV as the female candidate) and that the word "competence/competent" is much more recurrent compared to the female's comments. Interestingly, some comments also revealed that the male candidate was found lacking curiosity and received a negative hireabily feedback. This is because he failed to display agentic qualities, which also include curiosity or innovative drive, and thus was penalized in the evaluations. This aligns with prescriptive stereotypes theory, which does not only constrain women but also punishes men who deviate from expected masculine norms. Since competence, curiosity, and innovation are often assumed as baseline characteristics for male leaders, their absence generates a backlash effect, leading to negative judgments on hireability. This pattern suggests that stereotypes imply rigid gender expectations from both sides: women are disadvantaged when they display excessive agency and men are penalized when they lack it.

However, the most interesting section refers to comments expressing the same concepts but with differences linked to the gender. For example, when receiving the same positive hiring evaluation, if the reason for the woman candidate was because is "important to give young people the opportunity to gain work experience", the man was found hirable because "looks like a qualified young professional". It is evident how, despite starting from the same comment about the young age, hiring the woman seems more like a charity, a good action to do only because she is young, while the man is a qualified young professional that deserves the role because of his competence.

Here, another relevant aspect concerns age, which often interacts with gender when estimating evaluative reactions. Existing literature reveals that older candidates are regularly assessed as more qualified and competent for leadership roles since age is stereotypically connected with wisdom, acquired expertise, as well as authority (Dipboye & Colella, 2004; Finkelstein et al., 1995; Ng &

Feldman, 2012). In this context, women could experience a phenomenon called intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Hence, if a young men could be penalized for his young age, this effect could be counteracted by the agentic features inherently assumed by his masculinity. In contrast, young women are directly disadvantaged since their lower age sums up with stereotype inferences about lack of competence and commitment. In this sense, the intersection of gender and age stereotypes creates multiplied sources of disadvantage.

Along the same lines, some participants commented the good contribute both candidates could give to a company; but, if for the woman this implies improving "competence and skill building within the actual employees", the man could represent a contribute for the "proven experience in the luxury industry and therefore could add value to the company". In these comments it is possible to see again the SCM and prescriptive stereotypes theory: the male and female candidate could be both great members of the BoD but the skills needed in the role are ascribed only to the man (adding value to the company, agentic features), while hiring the woman could be a great opportunity to increase skill building in existing employees (communal values).

Similarly, a difference emerges also in justifying the negative hireability judgement. In fact, while both candidates ended up graded as not yet ready for the BoD, the reason was opposite: the female was deemed ineligible because she had not yet covered high-level positions, while the male was judged not yet ready due to a need for more time to gain maturity and experience. Since the two CVs indicated the same age and seniority, the similarity between them highlights a double standard. In practical terms, the same career pattern was regarded as "too short" for both, yet for the female candidate it was portrayed as evidence of insufficient achievement, while for the male it was regarded as a natural stage of a developing career.

In consideration of these factors, the qualitative comments complement the findings of the statistics by giving voice to evaluators' thought process and hence uncovering linguistic fine details via which bias exerts its impact. They confirm much of trends yielded from models like Stereotype Content Model, Social Role Theory, and shifting standard theory, highlighting the rigid gender expectations stereotypes pose on both sides, implying that also male candidates are penalized in lack of expected agency traits. In the end, this qualitative section comes particularly useful, as it gives a clear overview on how double standards in evaluations according to gender work in practice: women are praised for their warmth thus penalized when they appear lacking it, men are assumed to be committed and competent so face backlash when they appear scarce of those agentic features. In addition, it opens a reflection on how the same CV (Graduation in the same course from the same institution with the same evaluation, the exact same work experience, same personal information included) elicits

different judgments according not only to the gender of the candidate, but also to the rater idiosyncratic constructions. That makes the paper's contribution especially important, as it indicates that elite-level recruiting decisions are not only made based on observable variables like competence, warmth and commitment, but also on personal knowledge and experience of evaluators.

4.4. Limitations and future research

Despite its contribution, there are limitations of this study. First, sample composition and size constrain external validity of the results. Participants belonged to a relatively homogeneous population, and thus there are strong constraints on how far the results can be generalized. Furthermore, the relatively small sample (76 respondents) constraints the external validity of results as well. Second, this experiment rested on standardized content CVs that, for simplification, do not represent recruiting processes' richness. Recruiting, in the real word, takes place over multiple rounds, with more heterogenous candidate data, and embedded in organizational politics, which potentially can compromise gender stereotypes beyond this experiment's control. Third, while the quantitative models captured strong recruitment evaluation trends, subtle processes such as group deliberation processes, linguistic framing, or nonverbal impressions went unaccounted for, yet these variables are likely influential in casting stereotypes as decisions. Finally, whereas the qualitative analysis of comments supplemented the statistical results, the approach itself was interpretive and exploratory. More formal linguistic or computational methods would be needed to verify whether observed patterns of word use indeed generalize across contexts and evaluation groups.

In terms of future research opportunities, the present research lays the ground for several possible studies. In the first place, it could be possible to control the heterogeneity within selection committees (whether gender balance, disciplinary background, or international exposure) to analyze the choices of differently composed committees. Equally interesting is the exploration of discourse itself. As this study has shown, evaluators' comments often rely on subtle linguistic distinctions that encode gendered framings of warmth, competence, and commitment. This aspect could be further explored through discourse analysis, or text mining, to uncover the recurrent patterns of wording through which stereotypes are perpetuated.

Apart from these two lines of questions, others are also implied due to the multiple phases of recruitment, active information manipulation on the part of candidates and the increasing role of AI-powered instruments in recruitment.

In real-world recruiting processes unfold over rounds, from shortlisting of CVs at the initial stage, via interview and final decision-making. Future research can potentially follow how bias accumulates, diffuses, or transfers as candidates progress further down the choice pipeline. Further emphasis can also be placed on the strategic agency of end-candidates themselves: do women and men self-present differently on the dimension of warmth, competence, or commitment, and do such strategies serve to buffer bias or instead have the reverse effect due to the composition of evaluators? Finally, the expanding deployment of AI-driven screening devices, video screenings, algorithmically ranked lists, raises the question of how technology reshapes stereotypes' salience, potentially suppressing or inflating them compared with face-to-face screenings.

4.5. Conclusions

This thesis aimed at exploring the luxury sector paradox: an industry socially stamped as feminine where leadership remains predominantly male. Using the context of existing gender stereotype and preference bias models, the study investigated how equally qualified females and males seeking chief board positions are perceived by recruiters.

Results confirm that bias never appears as mere exclusion but rather as conditional terms and narrative framing. Women's employability judgements relied more on competence and warmth, while men reported assumed positive commitment characteristics, leading to advantages in recruiting. Qualitative commentary confirmed this bias, showing how same-level accomplishments were described differently to reveal the ways stereotypes operate subliminally through language.

By analyzing the luxury market both with statistical models and discourse analyses, the paper shows how apparently inclusive sectors end up recreating unequal access to leadership. This underscores the necessity of looking not only at who gets assessed, but how assessment gets constructed. In other words, achieving gender equality requires interventions directed at evaluators as much as at candidates.

Ultimately, the importance of studying bias in the luxury industry lies in its symbolic reach. Luxury houses have spent centuries constructing images of prestige around heritage, craftsmanship, and exclusivity. Yet, in today's context, especially for younger generations, prestige is starting to not only being associated to the quality of products, but increasingly to the values that an organization stands for: respect for people, fairness of opportunities, and care for individuals' wellbeing. This makes luxury a mirror and amplifier of social values, where leadership appointments have influence far

beyond the corporate boundaries. However, even in an industry built on creativity and diversity, subtle stereotypes continue to define who is seen as fit to lead. Discovering and addressing these mechanisms is therefore not only a matter of organizational fairness but also a cultural imperative, since the leaders chosen in luxury help redefine what prestige and authority mean in contemporary society.

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APPENDIX 1

Comments on the female candidate:
- Missing specific focus on activities and competences in the CV.
- The candidate shows great management and organizational skills.
- Reliable.
- Relevant work experience in addition to the study path.
- The candidate seems to have an extensive experience in the fashion industry (in some of the most relevant companies) both from an economic and managerial side.
- Important to give young people the opportunity to gain work experience.
- Highly qualified.

- Great past work experience.
- Only work experience, higher level positions in merchandising or buying required.
- Good candidate with extensive experience in the field for his age, however it remains too short an experience for a CDA.
- Experience and warmth;
- Information about private life in the CV.
- Her experience could improve competence and skill building within the actual employees.
- Noticeable willing to pursue a career, even if my company is not aligned with her experience.
- Too short previous work experience, lacking numerical competence.
- Great language knowledge.
- I would hire the candidate after an interview.

Comments on the male candidate:
- For his study titles.
- Competence, reliability and commitment.
- Previous experience in the finance field.
- Experience, skills and competence.
- High competence.
- Truly qualified candidate.
- Complete skills set.
- Strong academic background and some years of work experience.
- Great work experience in leading companies in the industry.
- Luca's profile is undoubtedly interesting from a technical skills point of view in the Fashion industry, from the CV perhaps missing some elements of maturity needed to sit on a board of directors (strategic skills and more solid people management experience).
- Still not enough experience to sit in the board of directors.
- Looks like a qualified young professional.
- Language and experience needs met.
- I see him as a person with proven experience in the luxury industry and therefore could add value to the company.
- Doesn't look like someone curious.
- I would need to know him more.