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PERCEPTIONS OF PORTUGUESE TOURISM GRADUATES CONCERNING WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

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Abstract: This study aims at presenting the results of the Gentour Project concerning the perceptions of Portuguese tourism graduates regarding women's professional performance in leadership positions.

The empirical study underlying the present research was based on a survey applied to Portuguese tourism graduates and carried out from December 2010 to March 2011. The sample consisted of 1,419 graduates. Convenience sampling technique was used. Contacts were established with professors and researchers of all Portuguese institutions with tourism higher education degrees, who were asked to disseminate the survey among former graduates. IBM SPSS Statistics (v.19) was used to perform the statistical analysis. Univariate and bivariate statistical techniques were applied, through exploratory and inferential methods, and a 5% level of significance was adopted.

Female tourism graduates' self-perceptions confirm that women tend to enhance their professional performance and leadership skills. Thus, data suggest that self-perceptions and self-confidence cannot explain gender differences in leadership positions.

Since women's self-perceptions are not self-imposed barriers to their career development, as claimed by some authors, the need to unveil the reasons, inherent to the observed gender gap, is advocated.

The value of this study relies on the demystification of women's self-perceptions as negative and inferior comparatively to their counterparts.

Key words: Tourism, Gender, Perceptions, Performance, Leadership

JEL classification: L83, J16, L26

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism stands out as an important sector for national economies and a relevant employment generator. In fact, tourism contributed to 9.3% of the World GDP and to 8.7% of total employment, in 2012, and it is forecast that it will continue to grow in the future (WTTC, 2013a). According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), tourism contributed, in 2012, to 15.9% of the Portuguese GDP and it was responsible for 18.5% of total employment in Portugal (WTTC, 2013b). Even though its growth pace is slowing down, tourism is still an expanding sector.

Tourism is a female-dominated sector in most countries (Amaro, 2007; Costa, Carvalho & Breda, 2011; Parrett, n.d.). It is an industry characterised by a predominance of low salaries, as well as work during unsocial hours, such as holidays, nights and weekends, which complicates work-family balance (O'Leary & Deegan, 2005; Parrett, n.d.; Ramb, 2008).

Over the last decade, the number of graduates in Tourism Higher Education in Portugal has been increasing, regardless of the fact that the majority of workers in the Portuguese tourism sector have low education levels (Árias & Barbosa, 2007; Costa *et al.*, 2011; Santos & Varejão, 2007). In fact, in the academic year 2010/11, there were 81 Bachelor degrees in tourism, as well as 19,082 tourism graduates.

The employment situation of tourism graduates has been diagnosed in the Portuguese context by Costa, Carvalho, Caçador and Breda (2012a, 2012b), who concluded that there are not only remarkable gaps between men and women, but also that graduates, in general, have difficulties in finding a tourism job and earn low salaries.

Although most of the highly qualified individuals are women, particularly if tourism graduates are considered in Portugal (GPEARI-MCTES, 2011), strong gender inequalities prevail, hindering the development of their full potential in the labour market (Costa *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, women have lower probability of engaging in leadership positions, as they occupy low and middle-level positions in their organizations (Costa *et al.*, 2012a). Several authors claim that these gender differences are explain by women's self-perceptions, as they see themselves as less capable and inferior comparatively to their counterparts and therefore turn out as self-imposed barriers to their career development.

This study aims to unveil gender differences concerning the Portuguese tourism graduates' perceptions on women's professional performance in leadership positions. In the first section, the literature on perceptions on women's professional performance is analysed. In the following section, the methodology underlying the empirical study is presented. Data was collected through an online questionnaire applied to the Portuguese tourism graduates within the research project Gentour, which was carried out in Portugal. The software IBM SPSS Statistics (v.19) was used to perform the statistical analyses. The results are presented and discussed in the following sections, starting with the characterization of the sample regarding

gender distribution, levels of education, employment rates and leadership positions. Then perceptions on women's professional performance of male and female graduates surveyed are compared, concerning professional abilities and skills, willing to pursue a career, feelings in workplace and barriers to career development. Finally, the main conclusions and limitations of the study are presented.

PERCEPTIONS ON WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE: A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Purcell (1997) stated that despite the female penetration of career occupations that might result from the increasing presence of women in higher education, female graduates are still less likely than their male counterparts to have a career leading to mainstream management, because "initial inequalities of access are reinforced by subsequent early career moves" (p. 52).

Among the main causes underlying gender inequalities pointed out in the literature (Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004; Commission of the European Communities, 2009; Guerreiro & Pereira, 2006; Jordan, 1997; Parrett, n.d.; Purcell, 1997), one can find companies and society itself reproduction of gender stereotypes.

According to Kamas and Preston (2012), women are not less willing to compete than men, but instead, differences in self-confidence, often enhanced by gender stereotypes, could explain women's avoidance and men's embracing of several types of competitive activities. These authors pointed out that the elimination of gender stereotyping and strengthening of women's self-confidence may contribute to reducing gender gaps in high-paying competitive professions.

Literature presents mixed results concerning self-perceptions of men and women in the organizational environment. While some studies claim women to be lower in self-confidence than men (Kamas & Preston, 2012; Langowitz & Minniti, 2007; De Bruin, Brush & Welter, 2007; Nieva & Gutek, 1981 cited in Post, DiTomaso, Lowe, & Cordero, 2009), others provide evidence on similar levels of self-confidence among men and women (Chusmir, Koberg & Stecher, 1992).

Langowitz and Minniti (2007, p. 357) highlighted the importance of the individual's perception: "perception explain an important portion of the difference in entrepreneurial propensity across genders since men tend to perceive themselves in a more optimistic light and, as a result, have stronger incentives to start new businesses".

De Bruin *et al.* (2007, p. 330) found that self-perceptions influence opportunity recognition, "which play an important role in shaping entry into entrepreneurship as well as highlighting potential development paths". According to these authors, women sometimes present themselves barriers by simply doubting their skills: "self-imposed barriers in those cases where women (wrongly) perceive

that they may not have the right opportunities and know-how to start or grow their own businesses” (De Bruin *et al.*, 2007, p. 330).

Evidence from research on different, but related, constructs also indicate that women in the general population tend to be lower than men in self-esteem, aspirations, expectations, and success attribution (Nieva & Gutek, 1981), all of which may be related to self-confidence.

On the contrary, Chusmir, Koberg & Stecher (1992) found that women and men managers were strikingly similar in self-confidence in several ways. These authors’ study rejected gender differences in the level of self-confidence in either at-work or social/family situations.

Thus, in order to unveil the reasons, inherent to the observed gender gap among Portuguese tourism graduates (Costa *et al.*, 2012a, 2012b), this study aims at analysing the perceptions of Portuguese tourism graduates regarding the way women and men perceive women’s professional performance in leadership positions.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The empirical study underlying the present research was based on a survey applied to Portuguese tourism graduates. The survey analyzed the employment situation of Portuguese tourism graduates and was carried out from December 2010 to March 2011. The sample consisted of 1,419 graduates, including 990 women (69.8%) and 429 men (30.2%). Convenience sampling technique was used. Contacts were established with professors and researchers of all Portuguese institutions with tourism higher education degrees, who were asked to disseminate the survey among former graduates. Although the generalization of results to the population is not allowed, the robustness of the sample yielded consistent findings and identified important and statically significant trends among Portuguese tourism graduates

The tourism degrees taken into account for the present study were those included under the subareas of “Hospitality” and “Tourism and Leisure,” in the Portuguese National Classification of Fields of Education and Training.

The instrument used for data collection was an online questionnaire, which covered a wide range of areas. It concerned not only education and employment, but also other areas, such as perceptions of discrimination and work-family balance.

This paper focus on data concerning the perceptions of Portuguese tourism graduates regarding the professional abilities and skills, willing to pursue a career, feelings in work and barriers to career development. Respondents were asked to score several statements within each of these categories, applying a 5 point Likert scale, where 1 stands for “Totally disagree”, 2 “Disagree”, 3 “Do not agree nor disagree”, 4 “Agree” and 5 “Totally agree”. Some of the statements presented were drawn or adjusted from the Report “Gender Equality in the European Union 2009” (European Commission, 2010).

The software IBM SPSS (v. 19) was used for the quantitative data analysis. Univariate and bivariate statistical techniques were applied, through exploratory and inferential methods, and a 5% level of significance was adopted.

PERCEPTIONS ON WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

CHARACTERIZATION OF THE SAMPLE

The convenience sample used included 990 women (69.8%) and 429 men (30.2%). This predominance of women reflects the unequal gender distribution in the population of tourism graduates, since only 35.7% of graduates in the year 2008/09 were men (GPEARI-MCTES, 2011). Half of the participants are 28 years old or younger and their average age is 29.4 ($M=28.87$, $SD=6.27$, 95% IC [28.50; 29.24]).

Men are also outnumbered by women in all levels of education. However, a higher concentration of female graduates can be seen in the lower levels of education (bachelor's and *Licenciatura*), while male graduates are more likely than their female counterparts to be holders of higher degrees (postgraduate, master's, and doctorate) (Figure 1). Men account for about half of the doctorate subsample, even though they represent less than a third of all the graduates. Apart from tourism degrees, the respondents also possess non-tourism degrees: *Licenciaturas* (4.2% of women and 3.9% of men) and postgraduate (2.9% of women and 4.1% of men).

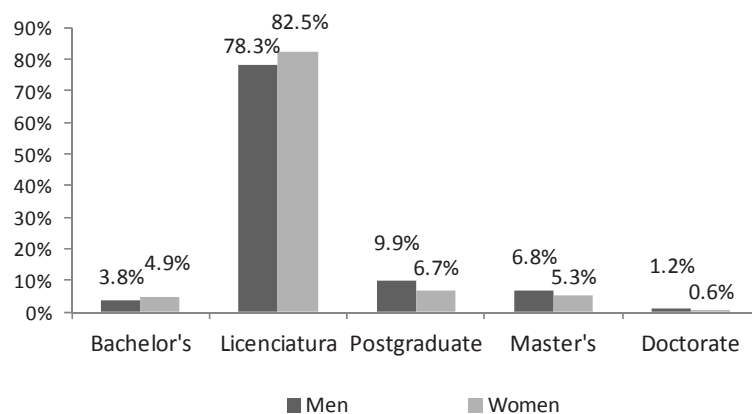


Figure 1: Level of education of surveyed tourism graduates

Employment rates were very similar among male and female graduates, namely 74.4% and 75.1%, respectively.

Analysing leadership positions, it was observed that there are more female than male tourism graduates in leadership positions. However, in relative terms, it can be concluded that the proportion of men in leadership positions almost doubles that of women: whereas 29.4% of male graduates hold leadership positions, only 14.8% of female graduates do so (Figure 2).

There are also more a major proportion of male respondents, comparatively to female respondents, among those who are not leaders but would like to hold such positions: 82.7% of men compared with 74.8% of women (Figure 2). Nonetheless, the gender gap concerning the willingness to have a leadership position is not as wide as the gender gap in the occupation of leadership positions.

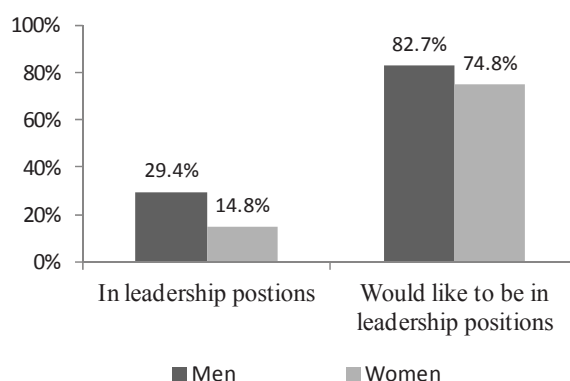


Figure 2: Tourism graduates in leadership positions and tourism graduates' willingness to be in leadership positions

PROFESSIONAL ABILITIES AND SKILLS

In order to analyse Portuguese tourism graduates concerning women's professional abilities and skills, respondents were asked to score three statements: "Women are better managers than men"; "Women are better leaders than men" and "Women do not always have the necessary qualities and skills to fill positions of responsibility".

Regarding to the first two statements (Figure 3), the most frequent answer among male and female respondents was do not agree nor disagree. However, statistically significant differences were found among men and women in both statements ($U=86333.000$, $W=149879.000$, $p<.001$; and $U=102468.500$, $W=166014.500$, $p<.001$; respectively). Concerning women's management skills being better than men's management skills, it was observed that men disagree more, totally or partially, than women (36.8% versus 11.2%, respectively) while women agree more, totally or partially, than men (42.9% versus 10.4%). A similar result was obtained when analysing the outcomes concerning women's leadership skills being better than men's leadership skills. Once again, men disagree more,

totally or partially, than women (45.2% versus 21.0%, respectively) while women agree more, totally or partially, than men (28.5% versus 8.1%).

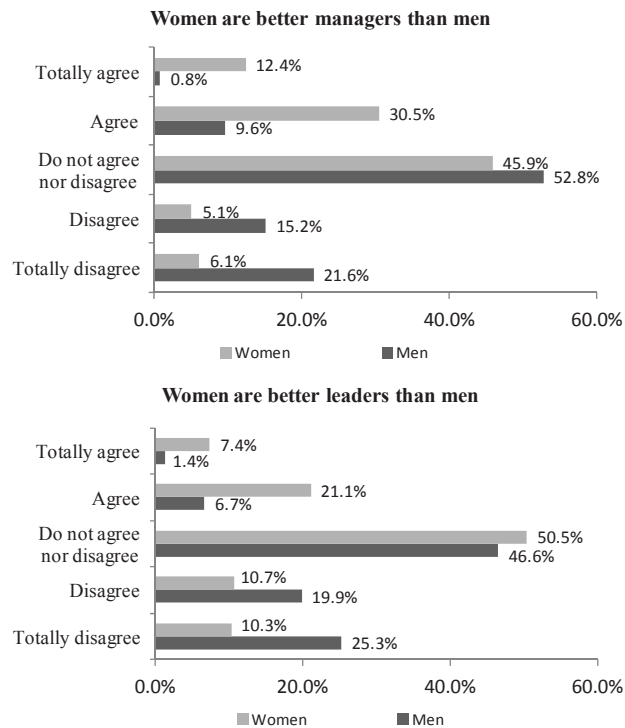


Figure 3: Tourism graduates' perceptions on women's management and leadership skills

As regards to women not always have the necessary qualities and skills to fill positions of responsibility, while the most frequent answer among male graduates was do not agree nor disagree, among women the majority showed total disagreement with this sentence (Figure 4). In fact, analysing the (total or partial) disagreement feeling one can see that this was much more pronounced among women (73.3%) than among men (50.0%). These differences were statistically significant ($U=113408.500$, $W=497534.500$, $p<.001$).

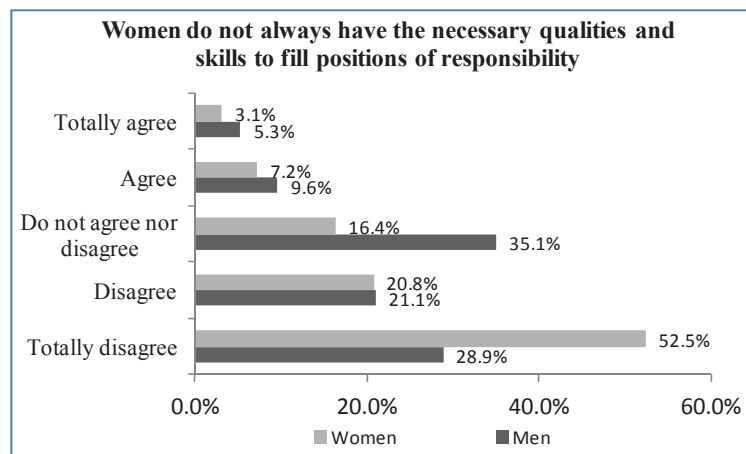


Figure 4: Tourism graduates' perceptions on women's qualities and skills to fill positions of responsibility

Therefore, these results show that women tend to enhance more women's management and leadership skills that men do.

WILLING TO PURSUE A CAREER

Concerning women's willing to pursue a career, respondents were asked to score the following two statements: "Women are less interested than men in positions of responsibility" and "Women are less willing than men to fight to make a career for themselves".

For both sentences, the most frequent answer among respondents was totally disagree, as one can see in Figure 5. The differences observed among male and female graduates were statistically significant ($U=143841.000$, $W=527967.000$, $p=.024$ and $U=143840.000$, $W=527966.000$, $p=.022$, respectively). Indeed, female graduates showed a more pronounced disagreement (total or partial) comparatively to their counterparts, regarding women's lower interest in positions of responsibility (69.8% versus 62.4%, respectively) and women's lower willing to pursue a career (74.4% versus 66.3%, respectively).

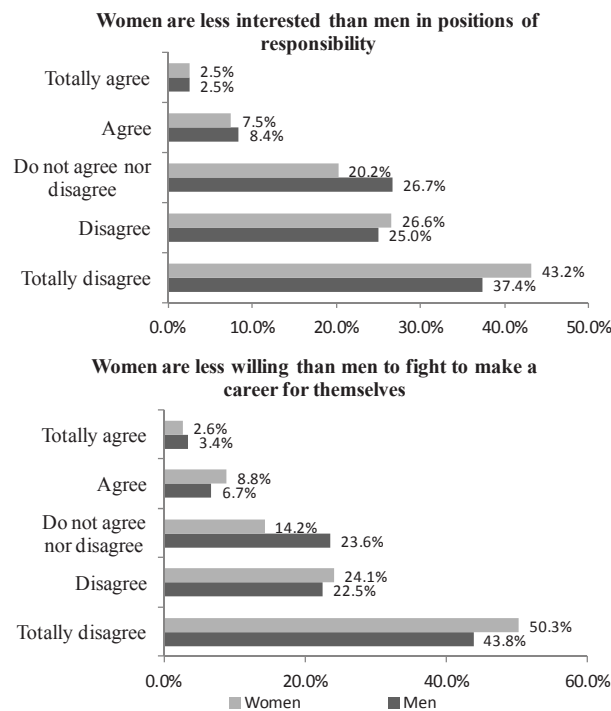


Figure 5: Tourism graduates' perceptions on women's willing to pursue a career

Once again, results suggest that women tend to enhance their interest and willing to pursue professional careers and thus women's choices and preferences could not explain their lower representation in leadership positions.

FEELINGS IN WORKPLACE

The feelings in workplace were analysed through a group of four statements: "There is more conflict in the organization when women are leadership positions", "I rather have a man as immediate superior than a woman", "I rather work with men than with women" and "I trust more in women than in men".

Concerning the first sentence, associating high level of conflict in the organizational environment to women in leadership positions, no statistical significant differences were identified between male and female graduates ($U=153163.000$, $W=216709.000$, $p=.615$). In fact, the answers observed among men were very similar to those observed among female and, in general, these were equally distributed through the 5 points of the scale (Figure 6). These results reveal the divergence of opinions among the graduates surveyed.



Figure 6: Tourism graduates' perceptions on the association of high level of conflict in the organizational environment to women in leadership positions

Men and women revealed similar opinions regarding the preference for having a men as immediate superior instead that a women. Analysing Figure 7, one can see that the answer more frequent among respondents, male or female graduates, was do not agree nor disagree followed by total disagree. Gender differences revealed no statistically significance ($U=148644.500$, $W=212190.500$, $p=.185$).

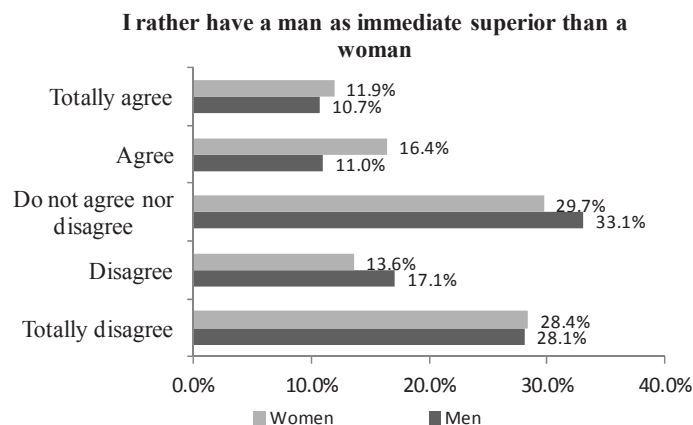


Figure 7: Tourism graduates' preferences on their immediate superior's gender

A different trend was observed in "I rather work with men than with women" (Figure 8). Whereas the proportion of men in total or partial disagreement (35.7%) almost doubles the proportion of women with this negative opinion (15.6%), the proportion of women in total or partial agreement (55.3%) surpasses the proportion of men in the same categories (32.0%). These differences were statistically significant ($U=109235.000$, $W=172781.000$, $p<.001$).

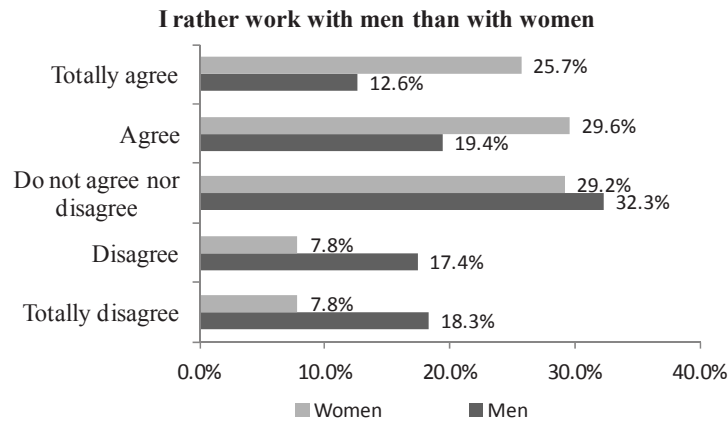


Figure 8: Tourism graduates' preferences on their colleagues' gender

Regarding “*I trust more in women than in men*”, men and women revealed once again similar views (Figure 9), as 44.9% and 42.9% respectively claim *do not agree nor disagree* and 48.9% and 49.9% respectively claim being in total or partial disagreement with this statement. These differences were statistically not significant ($U=151762.000$, $W=215308.000$, $p=.434$).

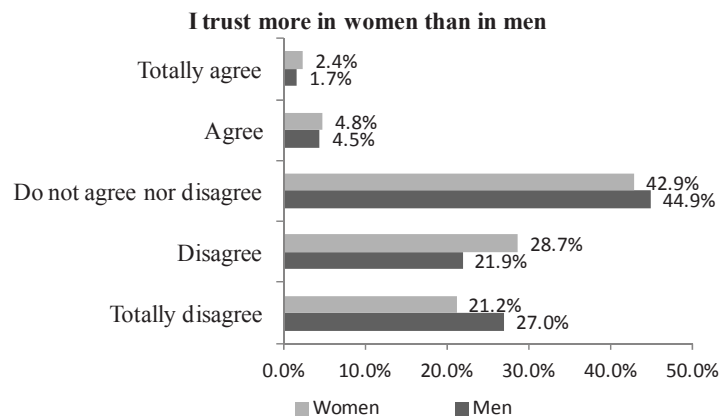


Figure 9: Tourism graduates' confidence in women and men

Results suggest that among surveyed graduates predominate a positive view of women's performance in leadership and management positions, supported by the preference for female immediate superiors. However, concerning horizontal or interpersonal relationships in the workplace, among colleagues within the same hierarchical position, data suggest that men and women have less confidence in women and both unveil a major preference for working with male colleagues.

BARRIERS TO CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Regarding the barriers that women face in their career development graduates were presented with the following four statements: “Women have lower possibilities to grow professionally than men because of their family responsibilities”, “The business community is dominated by men who do not have sufficient confidence in women”, “Men create barriers to women’s professional development” and “Women create barriers to other women’s professional development”.

As regards to the lower possibilities for women’s professional growth due to family responsibilities, both men and women generally disagreed with this statement (53.2% and 41.6%) (Figure 10). However, the proportion of women that agree total or partially (34.8%) almost doubles the proportion of men revealing the same opinion (18.6%). Gender differences observed were, once more, statistically significant ($U=127285.500$, $W=190831.500$, $p<.001$).

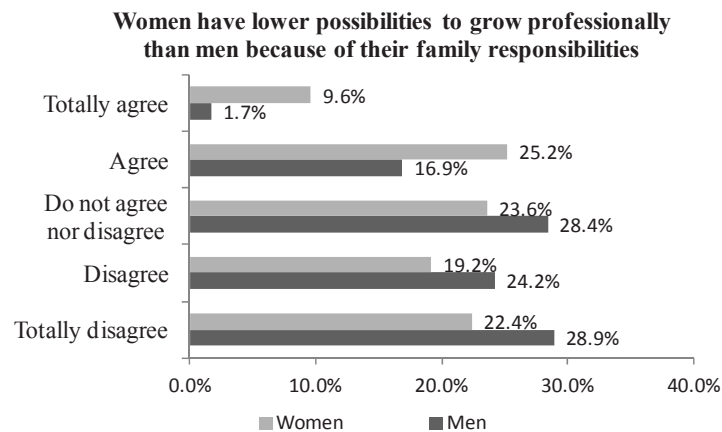


Figure 10: Tourism graduates’ perceptions on women’s lower possibilities to grow professionally due to their family responsibilities

The following two statements, addressing the responsibility of men in creating barriers to the professional development of women, namely “The business community is dominated by men who do not have sufficient confidence in women” and “Men create barriers to women’s professional development”, generally split men and women’s opinions ($U=118968.000$, $W=182514.000$, $p<.001$ and $U=111807.000$, $W=175353.000$, $p<.001$, respectively) (Figure 11). While male concentrated their answers in the disagreement categories in both statements (43.6% and 52.8%, respectively), female graduates agreed more, total or partially (39.4% and 34.2%, respectively).

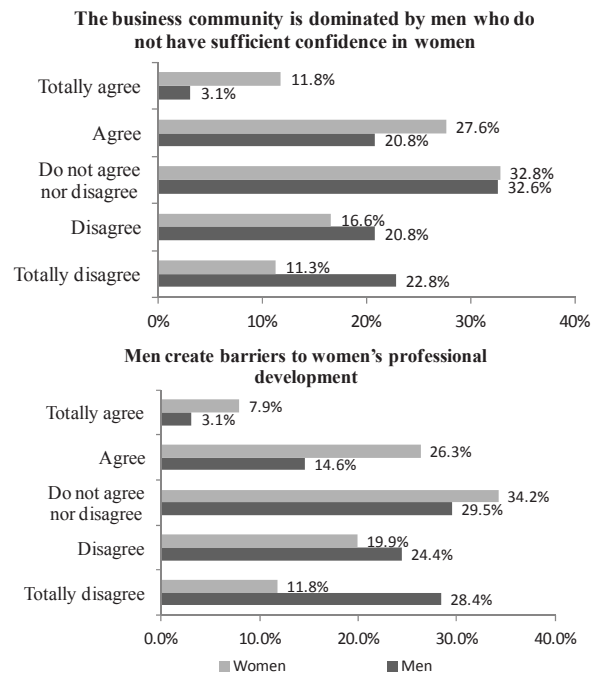


Figure 11: Tourism graduates' perceptions on the responsibility of men in creating barriers to the professional development of women

Concerning “Women create barriers to other women’s professional development”, male and female graduates revealed similar opinions and as one can see in Figure 12, both men and women mostly agreed with the statement (52.0% and 46.9%, respectively). Gender differences observed were, once more, statistically significant ($U=144846.500$, $W=528972.500$, $p=.042$).

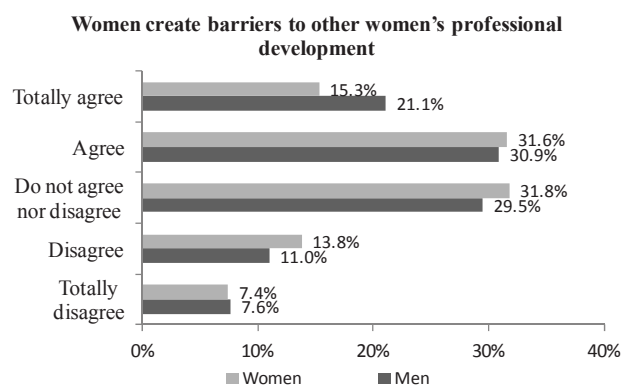


Figure 12: Tourism graduates' perceptions on the responsibility of women in creating barriers to the professional development of other women

Data suggest that the male labor market dominance is not seen by male graduates as a barrier for women's professional development. Indeed, male labor market dominance and family responsibilities take more significance among female graduates comparatively to their counterparts. In addition, women are seen as more responsible for creating barriers to women's professional development.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

There is a significant gender gap in the fulfillment of leadership roles; however, this gap does not seem to be justifiable by the gender gap in the preference for these positions. Even though more men aim to be leaders, the disparity between men and women's willingness to have such a role is not nearly as high as the disparity observed between the actual number of male and female leaders. This suggests that it is either due to the labor market or other kind of constraints that the gap in upper management is observable.

Female tourism graduates' self-perceptions confirm that women tend to enhance their professional performance and leadership skills, as well as their interest and willing to pursue professional careers. Thus, data suggest that self-perceptions and self-confidence cannot explain gender differences in leadership positions. In addition, since women's self-perceptions are not self-imposed barriers to their career development, as claimed by some authors, the need to unveil the reasons, inherent to the observed gender gap, is advocated.

Some of the barriers that could explain the gender gap observed, identified by surveyed women, were: less confidence in women, as they are seen as more responsible for creating barriers to women's professional development, which leads to a major preference for working with male colleagues; male labor market dominance; and family responsibilities.

The value of this study relies on the demystification of women's self-perceptions as negative and inferior comparatively to their counterparts.

Limitations of the study

The present study shows some limitations. The major one underlying this empirical study concerns the sampling technique applied, as it does not allow for the generalization of the findings. As a result, it is difficult to reach those graduates who finished their degrees a longer time ago. Therefore, the samples turn out to be very young and results should be cautiously interpreted. Thus, rather than extending to other contexts these conclusions, this article aims to contribute to the widening of the debate concerning the questions raised in this research.

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