



Research Paper

Women’s Position in the Accounting-Auditing Profession (1970–2020): A Chronological and Thematic Perspective

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the position of women in the accounting/auditing profession during the period 1970–2020, emphasising both the historical evolution of women's participation in the field and the themes highlighted by the relevant scientific literature by decade. The main purpose of the study is to capture the social, professional, and institutional parameters that influence the trajectory of women in the profession, as well as to analyse the issues addressed by researchers in each historical period. The study demonstrates that, despite the steady increase in female presence in the field, inequalities related to professional advancement, wage policies, social expectations, and work organisation continue to be observed. The contribution of the study lies in the historical and thematic mapping of the phenomenon, as well as in the formulation of proposals to enhance equality in the accounting sector.

KEYWORDS: Women, Accounting, Auditing, Profession, Gender, Career

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I. INTRODUCTION

In this study, our focus is on the position of women in the accounting/auditing profession over the past 50 years. It is deemed appropriate to refer to some statistical data in order to numerically understand the position of women in the profession, and this should serve as a catalyst for further interpretation, comparison, and in-depth exploration of the subject under investigation.

Based on the published data from Catalyst (2020) [1], 61.7% of accountants and auditors in the USA are women. Two-thirds of the employees in the legal and accounting profession in the European Union are women. In 2018, only 15% of auditors in senior hierarchical positions were women. The wage gap in the USA remains between genders in the profession, and it is estimated that there is a difference of about 20% against women. According to a 2015 study by the AICPA institute, it appeared that women had much better career advancement in smaller auditing firms than in larger ones. In the following table, we see the participation of women over the years 2016–2020 in the largest institutes of certified accountants.

% Female Members Worldwide								
Year	ACCA	CIMA	CIPFA	ICAEW	CAI	ICAS	AIA	TOTAL
2016	46%	35%	32%	28%	41%	33%	32%	35%
2017	46%	35%	32%	28%	41%	34%	34%	36%
2018	47%	35%	33%	29%	42%	34%	36%	37%
2019	47%	36%	33%	29%	42%	34%	36%	37%
2020	48%	36%	33%	30%	42%	35%	37%	37%

Table 1: Female members worldwide, 2016 to 2020

Source: <https://www.frc.org.uk/getattachment/e976ff38-3597-4779-b192-1be7da79d175/FRC-Key-Facts-Trends-2021.pdf>

The present work aims to map the position of women in the accounting/auditing profession at an international level during the period 1970–2020, focusing both on the quantitative participation of women and on the themes of the relevant literature that emerge by decade. Through the systematic recording of statistical data and scientific production, it is revealed how the scientific discourse around issues of gender, equality, and professional advancement in the field of accounting has evolved. The contribution of the study lies in the simultaneous presentation of social trends and the academic approaches that accompanied them, thereby illuminating the connections between professional reality and research interest over time. The present work is based on a literature review covering the period 1970–2020. The review was based on the analysis of scientific articles, statistical reports, and studies, which were selected based on their thematic relevance, geographical representativeness, and temporal coverage. The approach is both temporal and thematic, emphasising the historical evolution of women's professional roles and the shift in research interest from general participation to more specialised issues, such as professional inequalities, motherhood, career advancement, and organisational practices.

II. THE EVOLUTION OF THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN ACCOUNTING/AUDITING PROFESSION

Over the past 50 years, the participation of women in the accounting/auditing profession globally has significantly increased [2]. At the same time, bibliographic research on the topic of gender increased, especially in the 1970s, as a consequence of the flourishing of feminist theories [3]. According to [4,5], the increasing literature on gender issues in the profession historically highlights the marginalisation and segregation of women in the field, thus mapping the exclusion of women from the highest positions in the profession. Statistics from the 1970s by the ICAEW showed that the percentage of women was between 2% and 3%. The 1970 "Equal Pay Act" and the 1975 "Sex Discrimination Act" improved the position of women in the UK labour market and increased the participation rate in the ICAEW institute [6]. However, it was observed that with the increase of women in the profession, vertical segregation in the sector also emerged, as women are preferred for tax-related matters and office work rather than for auditing issues that require travel and mobility. Research has identified inequalities in the workplace and the under-representation of women. A characteristic example is in the USA among the major auditing firms, where the number of men in partner positions was 4,900 while the number of women was only 18. These numbers clearly revealed the gender asymmetry in the profession's hierarchy [2].

In conclusion, we would say that the 1970s were characterised by an oxymoron. On the one hand, the rapid increase in women's participation in the accounting/auditing profession, and on the other hand, their slow advancement and undervalued position in the field.

During the 1980s, there was strong optimism that women with high qualifications could use them as a lever to achieve a successful career. However, this was not confirmed as female accountants did not manage to advance professionally to the same levels as their male colleagues despite having similar qualifications [7]. This decade was dominated by the rise of the Big Four accounting firms, where women's participation reached 26%. Nevertheless, the overall participation in the ICAEW institute was only 4.1%, and by 1988 it reached 9.1% [6]. In the corresponding institute of New Zealand, NZICA, in 1985, the percentage was 10% [8]. According to data from the AICPA institute, women represented approximately 50% of new certified public accountants, yet they accounted for only 9% of CFOs and 24% of partners in auditing firms [2].

Since the late 1980s, there has been even greater interest in the issue of gender in this profession, where two main research streams can be distinguished. The first focused on the presence of women on corporate boards, highlighting the lack of women in senior positions, and the second on the wage gap between men and women [3]. In the 1980s, women continued to be under-represented in high positions, and thus in 1986, the concept of the "glass ceiling" was introduced as a metaphor to describe the phenomenon of invisible barriers to women's advancement [2].

Summarising the conclusions of the research from the 1970s and 1980s, we find that women have increased their participation in the profession, but they have not managed to be treated equally to their male colleagues. The studies of that era approach the issue from the perspective of the proportional rate in general participation in the profession, in obtaining higher positions, and in wage differences. The factors that contribute to the creation of these inequalities will be the subject of research in the coming decades.

Since the early 1990s, studies have focused on the phenomenon of the "glass ceiling." Since 1992, researchers have adopted a more progressive stance, using data that depict progress towards gender balance, concerning hiring practices, the increasing percentage of women in accounting organisations, and the implications of these trends for the future of the profession [5]. The research by [9] is one of the first studies in the USA to present empirical data on the accounting profession, linking gender with biases related to family structure. Specifically, the research concludes that family responsibilities act as a hindrance to a woman's

advancement, but do not affect her work performance. In other words, the results suggest the acceptance of women as employees, but at the same time indicate the existence of the "glass ceiling".

In the mid-1990s, statistics from the six major auditing firms in the United Kingdom show that 10% to 17% are women, of whom 83% are under 40 years old. The situation is similar in the USA, where half of the newcomers in the accounting field are women. However, despite the increase in participation in the profession, the advancement of women to higher positions still lags behind. The under-representation of women in senior positions is also observed in the USA, Australia, and New Zealand [4]. The research in Scotland by [10] is interesting, as it focuses on personal and situational factors that affect women's careers. The results revealed that motherhood determines women's behaviour towards their profession. Specifically, it appears that men agree to work long hours each day, unlike women/mothers who seem reluctant to follow the exhausting schedules. As a result, women are confined to administrative and simple roles, while men take on new and significant positions. Another significant finding is that men exhibit mobility in their efforts to advance, while women remain loyal to the companies where they started as trainees, waiting to receive internal promotions. A related finding concerning motherhood is that when women return to work after giving birth, they enter a process of having to prove their abilities and dedication to the company/organization from the beginning. The combination of the aforementioned factors leads male accountants to attain higher positions and work in more well-known and larger companies, while women fall behind in their careers in order to meet family obligations [4].

Nevertheless, in the 1990s, significant steps were taken to restore the position of women in the profession. Technological advancement and the internet helped to spread women's professional issues throughout society. This led businesses to change their organisational culture by adopting policies that supported women and families and recognised the importance of balancing professional and personal life [2].

At the beginning of the 21st century, Generation X formed the backbone of the workforce. This generation, unlike previous ones, believes that people work to live and do not live to work [11]. The balance between professional and personal life has been the dominant issue since the previous decade and continues to be the ultimate demand in the new millennium. The addition of flexible work provides the boost that women in the profession needed. Despite improvements in employment, women still earn less and are largely unable to take on managerial positions. This happens because a patriarchal model is still maintained in the profession [2]. The research by [11] in Ireland confirms previous studies as it finds that the governance of organizations/businesses adversely affects the advancement of women and points out that governance structures still rely on patriarchal foundations. According to [12] research in Japan, only 10% of the accounting/auditing profession is women, thus revealing that the profession is overwhelmingly male-dominated and is directly influenced by gender roles that have traditionally been constructed within society.

Towards the end of the 2000s, the research by [7] in the United Kingdom concluded that despite their qualifications, women do not have upward mobility in the profession, and the reasons are found in the position of women within the family structure and the organisation of businesses. The research also revealed some positive aspects regarding the change in the organisational culture of organisations and their shift towards supporting women with flexible hours, part-time work, and the adoption of practices within the framework of balancing professional and private life. A similar study in Cyprus by [13] concluded that in the accounting profession, there are inequalities between the two genders. The main reason is that women are more orientated towards family and less towards career, and this is not by their own choice, but because their society is structured this way.

At the dawn of the 21st century, the overt optimism that phenomena such as inequality against women would be eliminated was not confirmed in practice. The studies with the findings they present to us show the phenomenon in its true dimensions. A clearly improved image of women in the profession, but an image that is far from the equality and parity that modern women seek and deserve.

Entering the second decade of the 21st century, researchers' interest continues to focus on issues of gender and equality in the accounting/auditing profession. In 2013, the participation of women in the ICAEW institute in the United Kingdom reached 26%, nearly tripling the percentage since the late 1980s. However, despite the increase in the number of women in the profession, there was no corresponding increase in representation at the highest levels. This is mainly due to social practices, thus perpetuating the patriarchal structure of society at all levels and consequently the structure of the accounting/auditing profession [6]. The data from the study by [14] in Brazil provides information that aligns with the results of other related research, confirming the emergence of inequality against women in the profession, with the so-called "glass ceiling" explaining why women do not reach high positions. The findings showed that there is a wage gap, and men constitute the majority in large companies, while women work more in small and medium-sized enterprises. Zhao and Lord [15], in a study they conducted in China, attempted to identify the obstacles women encounter in their professional careers. They also found that family status, motherhood, and the position of women in society do not help their professional advancement. They also emphasised that the obstacles are more pronounced due to the prevailing local ideology in the country. An important observation is that the obstacles appear throughout

the entire career path of women and not just before they attain high positions, with this phenomenon being likened to a labyrinth.

A study conducted in Sudan on female accountants working in auditing, commercial companies, and banks showed that women's advancement faces organisational and social barriers. Factors such as stereotypes, family obligations, and long working hours hinder women's advancement. The research, delving deeper into cultural issues, identifies that the lack of role models, stress, and the absence of women in mentoring positions hinder women's potential, resulting in career stagnation [16]. The statistics from the accounting bodies of New Zealand led to the same conclusions as previous studies, specifically that individual, family, and organisational barriers still exist, reaffirming the traditional career patterns of women [17]. Recent research by [18] in Iran concluded that women's career advancement has limits, and after marriage and motherhood, their careers slow down. The profession reflects what exists at the broader social level, namely, the existence of specific roles for both genders. There is a strong belief that women are forced to operate in a professional environment within businesses that is not friendly towards them, as men have created internal structures and processes that exclude women, thus hindering their upward mobility while simultaneously undermining their exit from the profession. An interesting study conducted in Sri Lanka by [19] reached different conclusions compared to other studies. The findings showed that there is no overall "glass ceiling" in the accounting profession. It is worth mentioning that while gender inequality is decreasing, the perception of the "glass ceiling" still exists. In the same spirit and with similar conclusions is the research conducted in Nigeria by [20], which does not link gender with professional advancement. From the analysis of the data, it did not emerge that family responsibilities have a negative impact on women's careers in the profession. Women have access to mentoring and networking opportunities within the workplace. The fact that women do not pursue higher positions can be attributed to factors such as stress, job satisfaction, and stereotypes. In concluding our review, we will refer to a recent study conducted in Belgium by [21], which found that in chartered accountant firms, women receive lower salaries than men, while being more productive. Furthermore, the research showed that auditors prefer to assign their major clients to male auditors rather than female ones. These findings are more pronounced in companies with a higher male quota.

According to PwC's Women in Work Index (2021) [22], there has been a setback for women in the workforce due to the Covid-19 pandemic, with rates reverting to 2017 levels. In 17 out of the 24 OECD countries where an increase in unemployment was observed, women were affected more. The removal of women from the workforce reverses progress towards gender equality and simultaneously delays economic development.

III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present review highlighted a clear temporal progress regarding the participation of women in the accounting/auditing profession, but this has not been accompanied by a corresponding progress in equal professional advancement [23]. Although the percentage of women has significantly increased in recent decades, women remain underrepresented in leadership and strategic positions. At the same time, literature consistently records issues like the "glass ceiling," gender biases, the effects of motherhood, and the absence of mentoring frameworks and leadership exemplars. The link between professional stagnation and social roles, organisational structures, and stereotypes is clear in different cultural settings. Based on the findings of the literature review, it becomes clear that achieving substantial equality in the accounting/auditing profession cannot result solely from the numerical increase in women's participation. The adoption of multi-level interventions is required both by professional organisations and by individual businesses and institutions. First and foremost, it is important to have clear and fair rules for promotions and leadership roles so that the criteria for evaluation do not repeat gender or organisational biases. Also, making workplace flexibility policies stronger, like allowing people to work from home, having flexible hours, and taking parental leave, can help all employees, regardless of gender, balance work and family life. This can also help women, who are often the main carers, by taking some of the stress off of them.

The establishment of internal mentoring frameworks and the enhancement of professional networks for female accountants can foster confidence and cultivate leadership abilities, serving as a countermeasure to the lack of female role models. Companies also need to spend money on teaching their employees about gender stereotypes and how to create a culture of respect and inclusion.

Finally, the systematic collection, processing, and publication of gender-disaggregated statistical data, both at the organisational level and by professional bodies, constitutes a fundamental tool for monitoring progress and accountability in promoting equality.

The above proposals are not merely an ethical or social requirement but emerge as critical strategies for the modernisation and sustainability of the accounting profession itself in an ever-evolving social and economic environment.

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