

CLOSING THE SPONSORSHIP GAP: HOW PURPOSEFUL ADVOCACY ACCELERATES WOMEN'S CAREERS



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Closing the Sponsorship Gap: How Purposeful Advocacy Accelerates Women's Careers

In boardrooms, leadership discussions, and the back-channel conversations that shape careers, opportunity is about access to influence — not just merit. For years, companies have committed to advancing more women into leadership roles. Yet the numbers tell a more complex story: **career mobility is often about proximity to power, not just performance.**

Sponsorship is one of the most influential drivers of advancement — and one of the most unevenly distributed. While mentorship provides guidance, sponsorship actively opens doors. However, access remains highly selective.

New research from **Women of Influence+** reveals that sponsorship frequently stems from shared experiences, social familiarity, and cultural affinity.

In practice, this can limit availability for women, particularly those from racialized backgrounds, when they are not part of the dominant leadership networks. Because senior leadership remains predominantly male, these dynamics — often unintentionally — reflect the existing power structures they aim to change. Recognizing this is the first step toward designing more equitable paths forward.

But there's good news: sponsorship is also one of the most effective levers organizations can pull to accelerate equity. When leaders become more intentional about whom they sponsor, and when companies structure sponsorship initiatives to reach a wider range of high-potential talent, it leads to stronger talent pipelines and more inclusive leadership at the top.

Methodology and Purpose

This North American survey, conducted by **Women of Influence+** in early 2025, explores how sponsorship — particularly from men in leadership — shapes women's career growth, and what organizations stand to gain by formalizing it.

Survey scope

- Conducted: February 21 – March 10, 2025
- Participants: 402 professionals across industries
- Sample Source: Women of Influence+ subscriber list and social media communities

Given that men still hold the majority of senior leadership roles, their sponsorship decisions have an outsized influence on talent development. This research seeks to understand:

- How sponsorship operates today
- What barriers prevent women from accessing it
- How leaders, especially men, perceive their role in shaping diverse, high-performing teams

This research is part of Women of Influence+'s commitment to delivering insights that help organizations build better, more effective workplaces.

About Women of Influence+

For more than three decades, Women of Influence+ has been at the forefront of sharing the unfiltered success stories of diverse role models to illustrate the unique paths and challenges self-identifying women and gender-diverse individuals navigate to reach success.

Our goal isn't to change the narrative — we are rewriting it.

We recognize the numerous challenges that women, with their diverse intersectional identities, face when trying to navigate advancement in their careers. Instead of watching from the sidelines, we take a proactive, inclusive, and multi-faceted approach to ensure women are supported and celebrated every step of the way.

Through our work — carefully curated success stories, our awards programs, learning and development events, and our research — we are providing a reimagined definition of what it means to be influential. This definition isn't static, it's inclusive and dynamic, and deeply considers how influence is used to positively impact the world of business and work.

We equip women with connections, support, training, and tools to carve new pathways and excel within their careers on their own terms. No matter what stage you are at in your career when you discover the WOI+ platform, there is something here for you.

Key Findings

The results offer a clear picture of who receives sponsorship, who is left out, and how this shapes leadership representation.

Sponsorship Is Recognized, But Still Misunderstood and Inaccessible

***“The people who got it were not necessarily the best.
They were just the closest to decision-makers.”***

— Survey Respondent

Sponsorship is widely acknowledged as a powerful career driver, but acknowledgment does not equal access, and it certainly doesn't mean it's well understood. While many women recognize sponsorship in theory, far fewer have experienced it, and even fewer know how to activate or sustain it in practice.

This gap tends to be **more pronounced for women of colour**, who often face additional barriers to entering the informal networks where sponsorship relationships take shape. Without both access and a clear understanding of how sponsorship works in practice, opportunities for leadership visibility, career-defining projects, and advancement remain unevenly distributed.



Sponsorship Follows Power, Not Potential

“It’s much easier for men — who have better networks in the workplace if, for no other reason than the sheer number of them — to offer key roles and projects to other men without considering that a marginalized person might need or benefit from the opportunity more because they haven’t yet received it.”

— Survey Respondent



Sponsorship decisions mirror leadership demographics. **Since men still hold the majority of senior leadership roles, they are more likely to be in positions of influence,** which means they control most sponsorship relationships, whether intentionally or not.

Women in leadership tend to sponsor other women, but their underrepresentation limits their reach. Without formal mechanisms, sponsorship reinforces the status quo, benefiting those already in the room, and excluding those with potential but less access.

The Measurable Impact of Sponsorship

“The last five years of my career were specifically created because of a single sponsorship opportunity that led to several other opportunities.” — Survey Respondent

For those who receive sponsorship, **the impact is significant**: faster promotions, visibility with decision-makers, and expanded professional networks.

The data shows **sponsorship is especially powerful for younger professionals and women of colour** — groups that face greater barriers but experience outsized benefits when sponsored. Yet these same groups are the least likely to have access to sponsorship. This is more than a fairness issue: it’s a missed opportunity to retain and accelerate top talent.



Awareness Isn't Understanding, and It Doesn't Guarantee Access

Sponsorship is widely recognized as a high-impact career accelerator, but that recognition often stops at the surface. **While many are familiar with the term, few fully understand how sponsorship actually works in practice — or how to engage in it effectively.**

Sponsorship is frequently confused with mentorship, treated as a buzzword rather than a behaviour, and addressed superficially within many organizations. This distinction matters: knowing that sponsorship is important is not the same as knowing how to enable it. Without that clarity, access stays limited and the full impact of sponsorship is never realized.

85%

of respondents
were familiar with
the concept of
sponsorship.

45%

of respondents have
experienced
sponsorship.

73%

of sponsored
respondents say it
significantly advanced
their careers.

The upside of sponsorship is even greater for underrepresented groups:

- **86%** of BIPOC women say sponsorship positively impacted their careers, compared to **67%** of white women.

Sponsorship is also especially impactful for younger women.

- **80%** of women under 35 strongly agree it contributed to their advancement — and this trend holds across age groups, with **78%** of women aged 35 to 44 and **70%** of women 45 and older reporting similar benefits.

But the access gap persists.

“Women of colour are in dying need of [sponsorship]. Unconscious bias is leaving them out of the pool. An advocate is needed to speak on their skills and experience to help open doors that are consistently closed.” — Survey Respondent

Women of colour are **12 percent** less likely to have had a sponsor.

Sponsorship remains informal and relational, often out of reach for those who aren't part of inner circles.

Among women who have never received sponsorship:

- **41%** cite lack of access to potential sponsors.
- **36%** say they're unclear on how sponsorship works.
- Many believe it's reserved for those with privilege or inside connections.

This results in a dynamic where performance alone doesn't guarantee opportunity, but relationships do.



Who Gets Sponsored — and Why That Shapes Leadership

“Earlier in my career, a sponsor stepped up to make sure I had assignments where I could excel, where I was visible internally and externally. This helped me grow much faster than I would have without the sponsor.” — Survey Respondent

Today, sponsorship is still largely shaped by those in senior roles — most of whom are men. As a result, **men control the majority of sponsorship relationships** — not always by intent, but by proximity and position.

So who benefits from these relationships, and how are those decisions made? Few sponsorship decisions happen through formal programs or structured criteria. Instead, they often emerge from informal relationships — shaped by familiarity, perceived potential, and shared experience. As a result, sponsorship flows toward those already within the inner circle of power.

Because senior leadership remains largely male, **men account for the vast majority of sponsors**, a pattern reflected clearly in the data:

- **79%** of women with a sponsor say it was a man.
- **75%** of executive-level sponsorship comes from men.
- At the director level, that figure rises to **86%**.



79% of women with a sponsor say it was a man



This tendency is reinforced by how sponsors choose who to support:

- **92%** cite perceived growth potential — a subjective and often biased metric.
- **33%** choose someone with shared values or interests.
- Only **31%** intentionally sponsor someone from an underrepresented group.

Sponsors also benefit:

- **86%** say they feel proud knowing they've helped someone grow.
- **83%** say it brings them joy.
- **75%** say it enhances their own leadership skills.

These patterns point to a structural reality: sponsorship can be powerful, but without intention, it tends to replicate the status quo rather than expand opportunity.

Sponsorship is both a powerful professional lever and a source of personal fulfillment. But **without structure and intention**, it risks reinforcing the very imbalances it could help solve.

“I sponsor a strong female professional in my organization and have been intentional about advocating for her in meetings where she isn’t present. I create opportunities for her to present to executives, both with and without my presence, and encourage her to make decisions based on her own merit. When challenges arise, I provide support from the sidelines while ensuring she receives full credit for her work. As a result, she is now in line for a promotion to a director role within the next three months.”

— Survey Respondent

The Business Case for Structuring Sponsorship

“A senior executive put my name forward for a high visibility project early in my career [and] that was the key to everything.”

— Survey Respondent

Informal sponsorship leaves high-potential talent on the sidelines, and creates blind spots in succession pipelines.

Sponsorship works. But to scale its benefits, it must become a leadership expectation, not a personal choice.

Without structure:

- **41%** say their workplace has no formal sponsorship program.
- Only **35%** say their organization encourages sponsorship.
- Nearly **30%** of non-sponsors say they don't know what effective sponsorship looks like, and **21%** say their workplace offers no clear examples to guide them.

Organizations that formalize sponsorship stand to gain:

- Improved retention of high-potential talent
- Greater leadership diversity
- Stronger succession pipelines
- More engaged and accountable leaders

Formalizing sponsorship is much more than a talent initiative, it's a strategic leadership investment that drives performance, increases engagement, and strengthens leadership pipelines.

From Good Intentions to Meaningful Impact

Survey respondents were clear: sponsorship has transformative potential, but only when it's intentional, structured, and supported by leadership at every level. Their recommendations reflect a strong desire for more actionable programs, transparent processes, and cultural accountability.

Here's what they said needs to change:

1. Make Sponsorship a Core Leadership Practice

Respondents called for **formal, structured programs that match high-potential women with senior leaders** and make sponsorship a visible part of leadership expectations.

- Establish programs that actively match high-potential women with senior leaders, across gender and identity.
- Set clear success metrics and track the impact of sponsorship on advancement, visibility, and retention.
- Make sponsorship a formal expectation of leadership roles, with accountability and consistency across departments.

“Formal sponsorship programs — not just mentorship — should be required for people in leadership positions.” — Survey Respondent



2. Prepare Leaders to Sponsor Effectively

“A publicly-available playbook would help — I just don’t know where to start.” — Survey Respondent

***“Training is needed for both men and women in leadership, not everyone knows what effective sponsorship looks like.”
— Survey Respondent***



Many respondents, including those in leadership, **admitted they didn’t always know how to sponsor effectively**. Others feared missteps or misinterpretation. Respondents emphasized that leaders need training, support, and real examples of sponsorship in action.

- Offer **practical training** on how sponsorship differs from mentorship, and what meaningful sponsorship looks like.
- Provide tools, case studies, and playbooks to **guide leaders** through common barriers and best practices.
- Recognize and **reward leaders who actively sponsor** women, particularly those from underrepresented groups.

3. Strengthen Cross-Gender Sponsorship Practices

“Fear of being misinterpreted stops good leaders from stepping up.”
— *Survey Respondent*

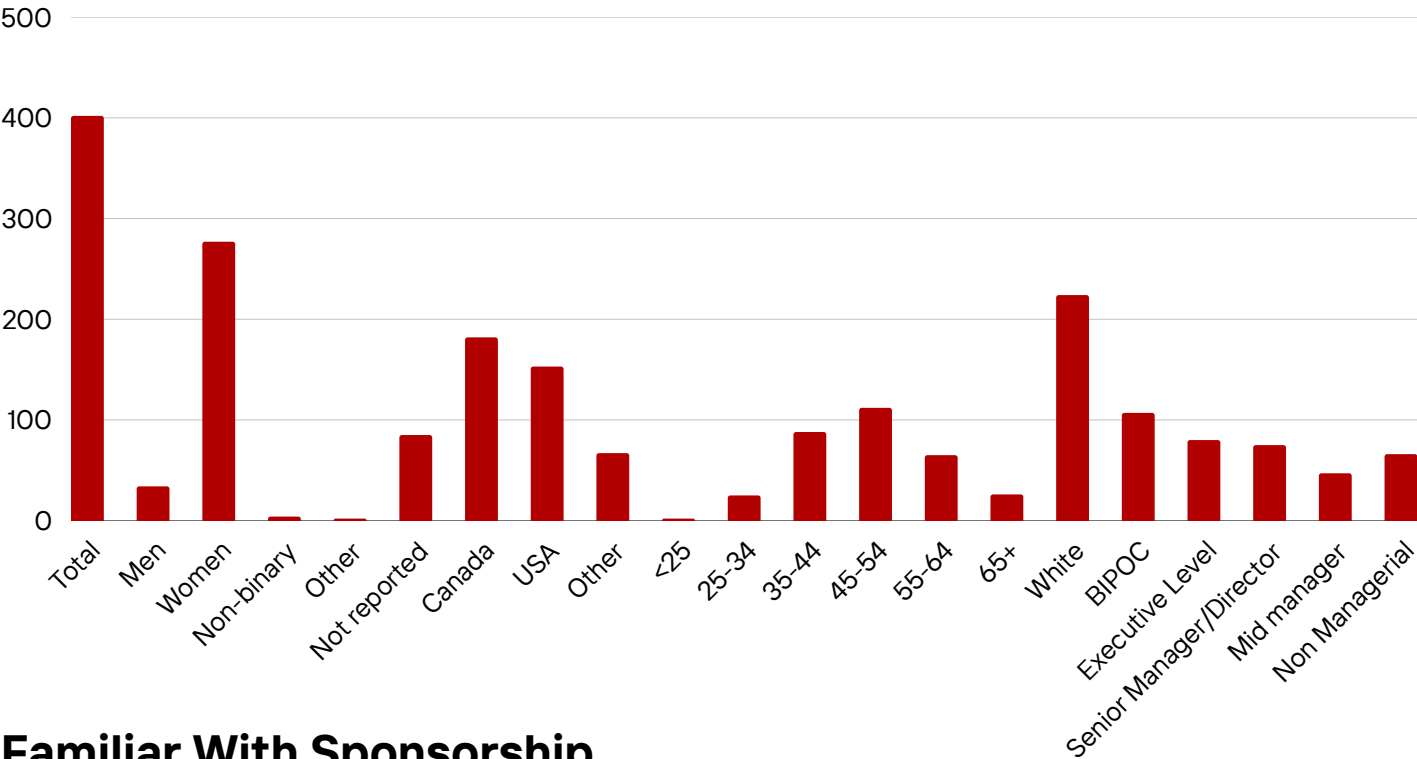
Respondents **acknowledged the gender dynamics at play in who gets sponsored** — and by whom. Many emphasized the need for organizations to **normalize cross-gender sponsorship** and create guidelines to reduce perception-related hesitation, especially among male leaders.

- Address discomfort or uncertainty by setting **clear expectations** and modeling professional, values-aligned sponsorship behaviors.
- Audit sponsorship flows to understand not just who is sponsored, but by whom — and use this to **address imbalances** in access and influence.
- Integrate sponsorship discussions into succession planning to **prevent high-potential talent from being overlooked** due to informal networks.



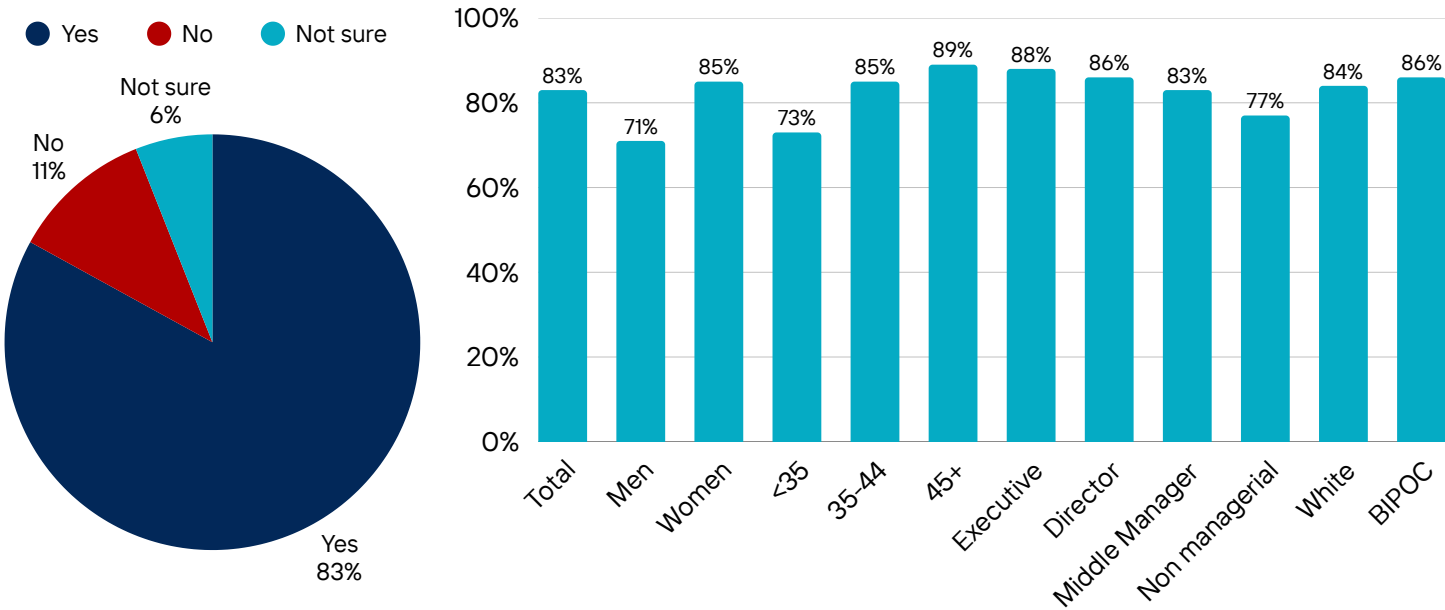
Appendix

Sample Characteristics



Familiar With Sponsorship

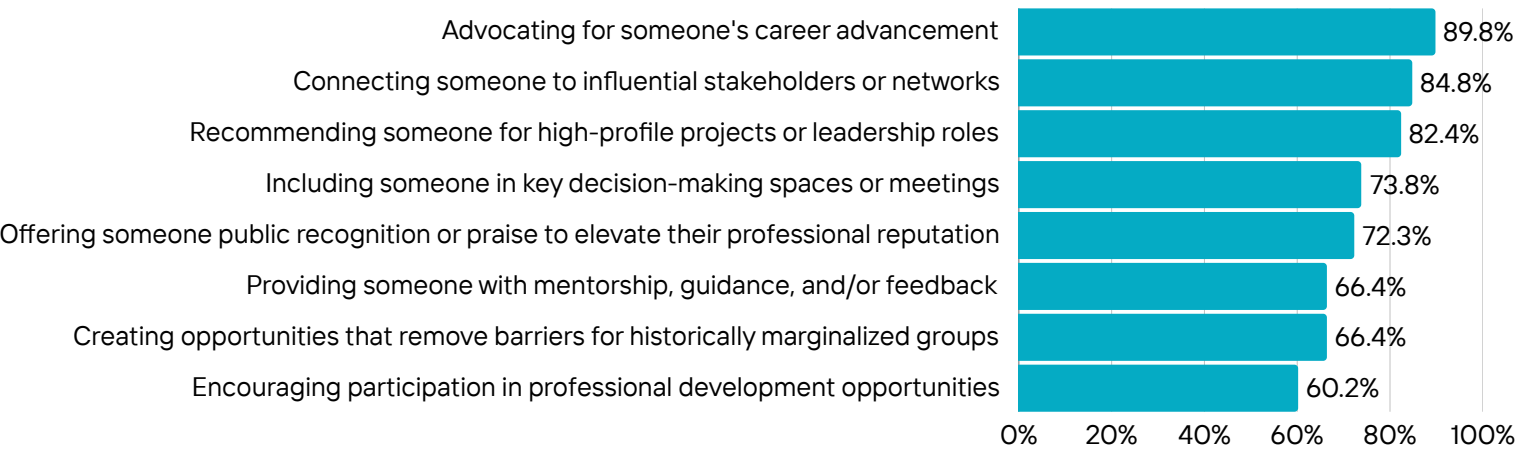
Eight in ten of those who completed the survey claimed to have some familiarity with the concept of sponsorship. This was higher among women respondents (at 85%) and higher in the C-suite (at 88%) compared to lower non-managerial workers (at 77%).



Appendix

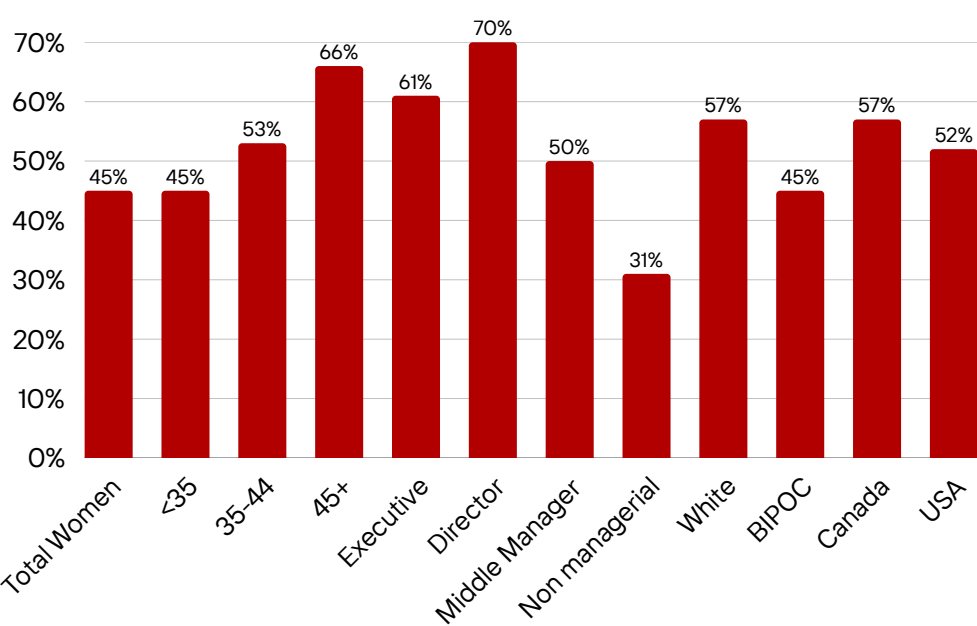
Perceived Definition of Sponsorship

From a list of seven different explanations of sponsorship, participants could check any item they felt appropriately defined the concept. The highest listed are “advocating for advancement,” “connecting others to your network,” and “recommending others to high profile projects.”

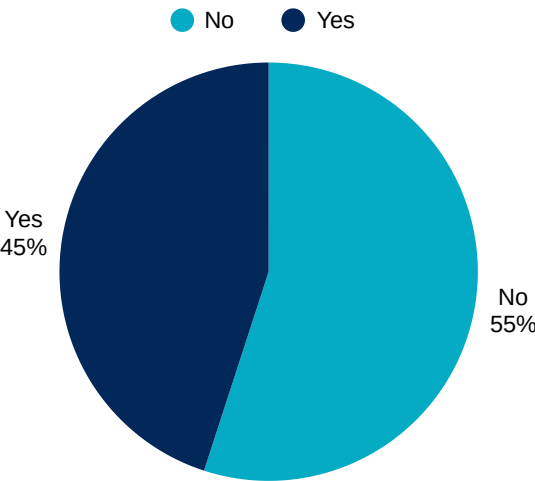


Received Sponsorship

Among the women in the study group, 45% say they have received some form of sponsorship in their career. This increases with age and appears to be higher with white women versus women from racialized backgrounds (12-point gap). Women in more senior positions appear to be far more likely to have been on the receiving end of sponsorship.



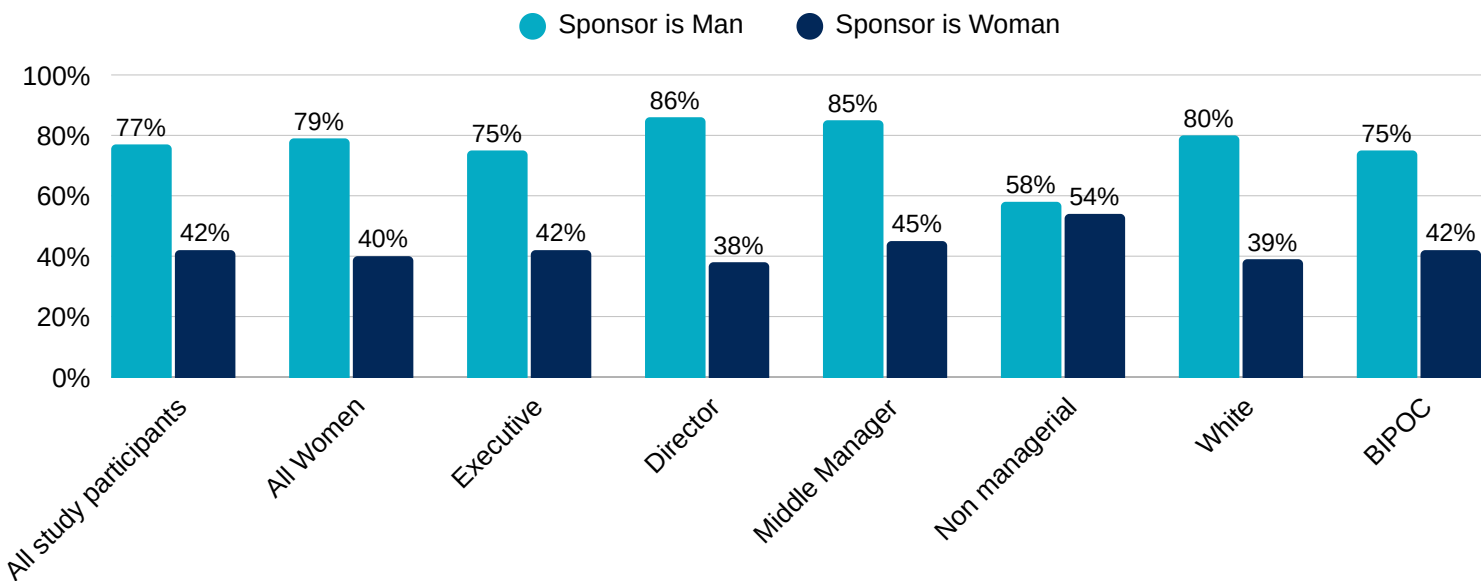
Received (among Women)



Appendix

Sponsor Identification

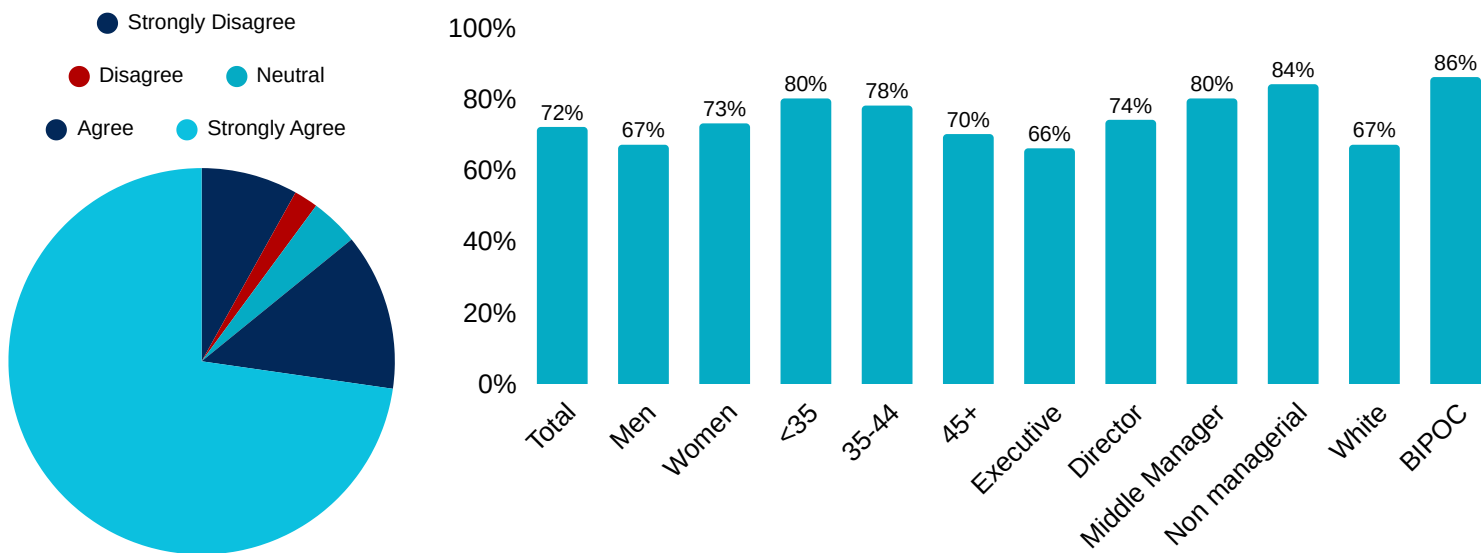
The sponsor is more likely to have been a man than a woman – across all sample groups.



Stated Impact Among Those Who Have Received Sponsorship

The vast majority agree that having a sponsor positively influenced their professional growth – with even greater impact reported by younger women, those in junior roles, and Black, Indigenous, and other racialized women. Even though actual sponsorship activities are lower in these groups, the stated outcome data is positive.

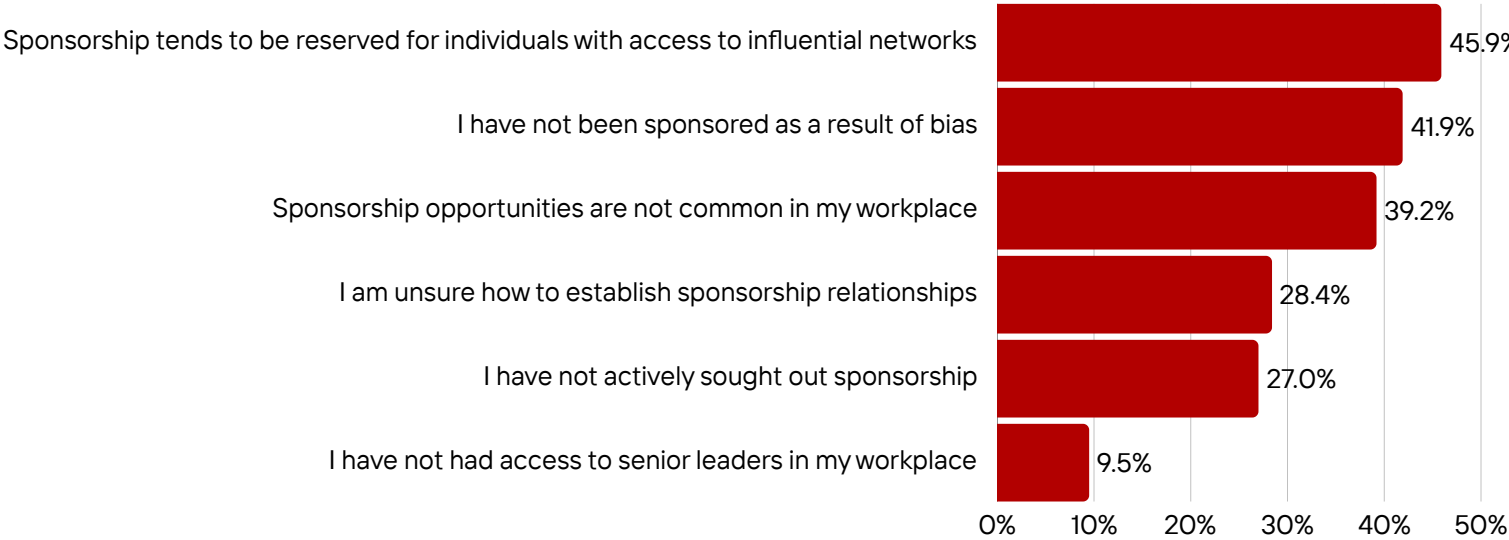
Q: To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
"Having a sponsor positively impacted my professional growth."



Appendix

Reasons For Not Receiving Sponsorship

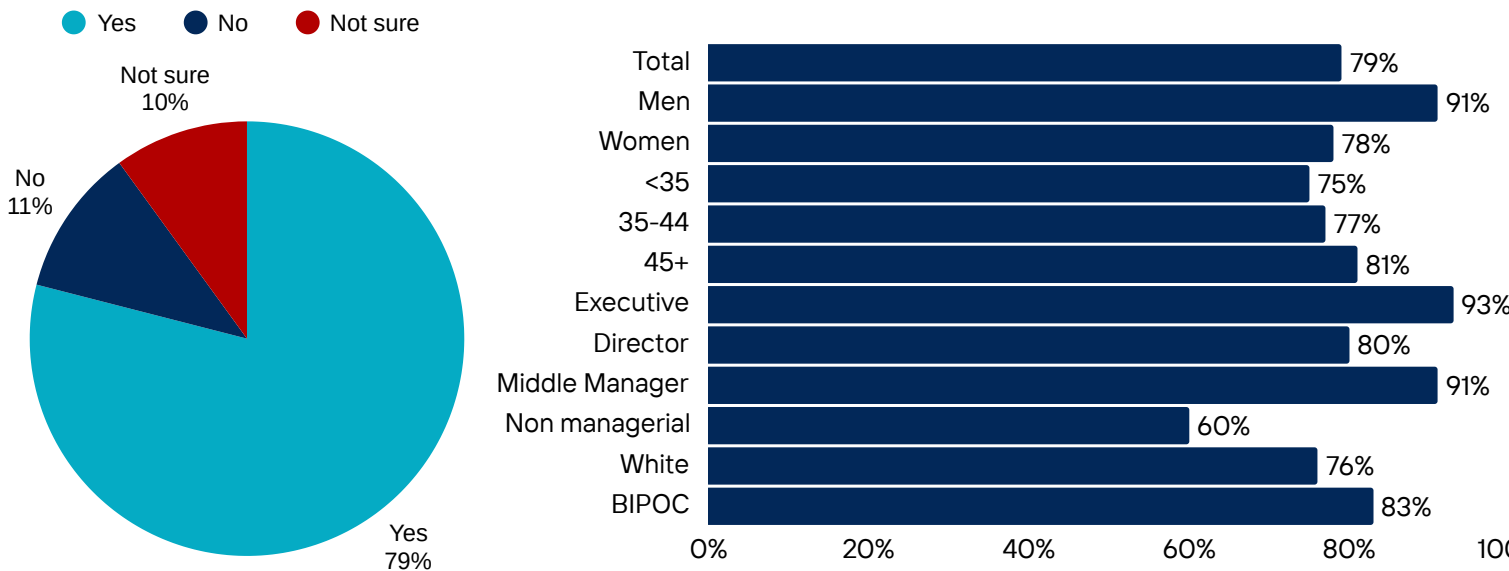
Among the 55% who say they've never received sponsorship, many perceive it as something reserved for those with privilege, shaped by bias, or simply out of reach. Notably, this perception does not align with the experiences described by those who have been sponsored (see previous page).



Incidence of Sponsoring Colleagues

We asked if the participants had ever sponsored others. We found that almost eight in ten respondents say they have.

Respondents Who Say They Actively Sponsor Colleagues

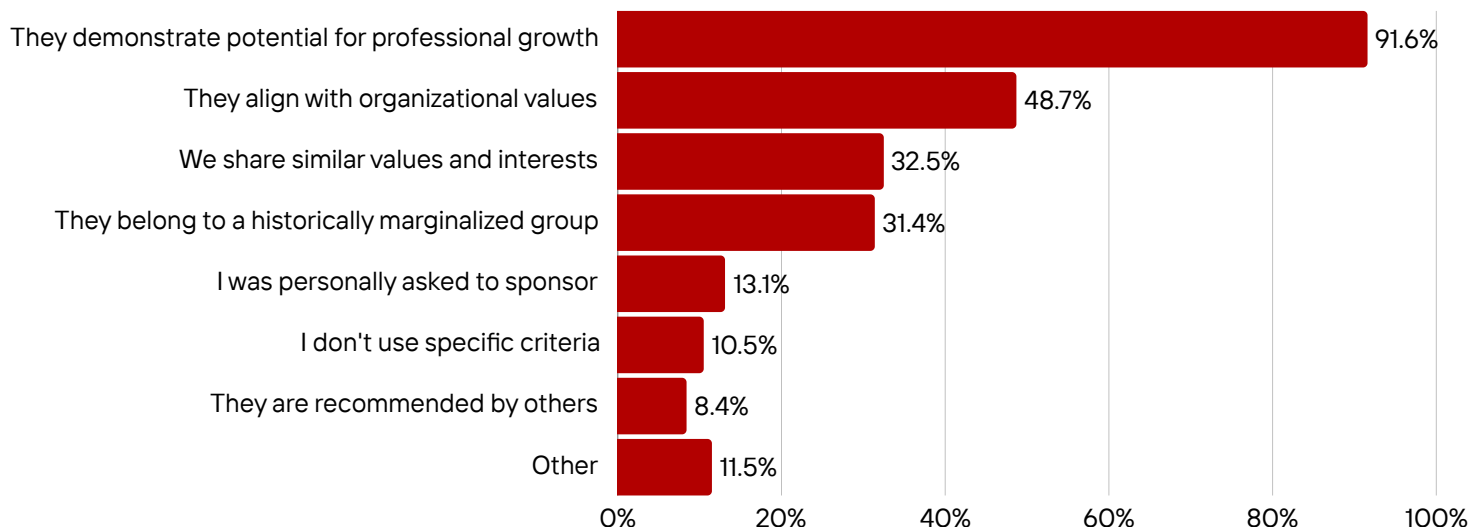


Appendix

Factors Considered In Selecting Someone To Sponsor

The vast majority who have helped sponsor colleagues say that the selection basis is “potential for growth.” Other factors include observed alignment with corporate values and personal interests, as well as engaging to help historically marginalized groups advance.

Q: What factors do you consider when choosing someone to sponsor?



Benefits of Providing Sponsorship To Colleagues

Sponsorship doesn't just benefit the recipient. Our results show that there are meaningful advantages for the sponsor as well.

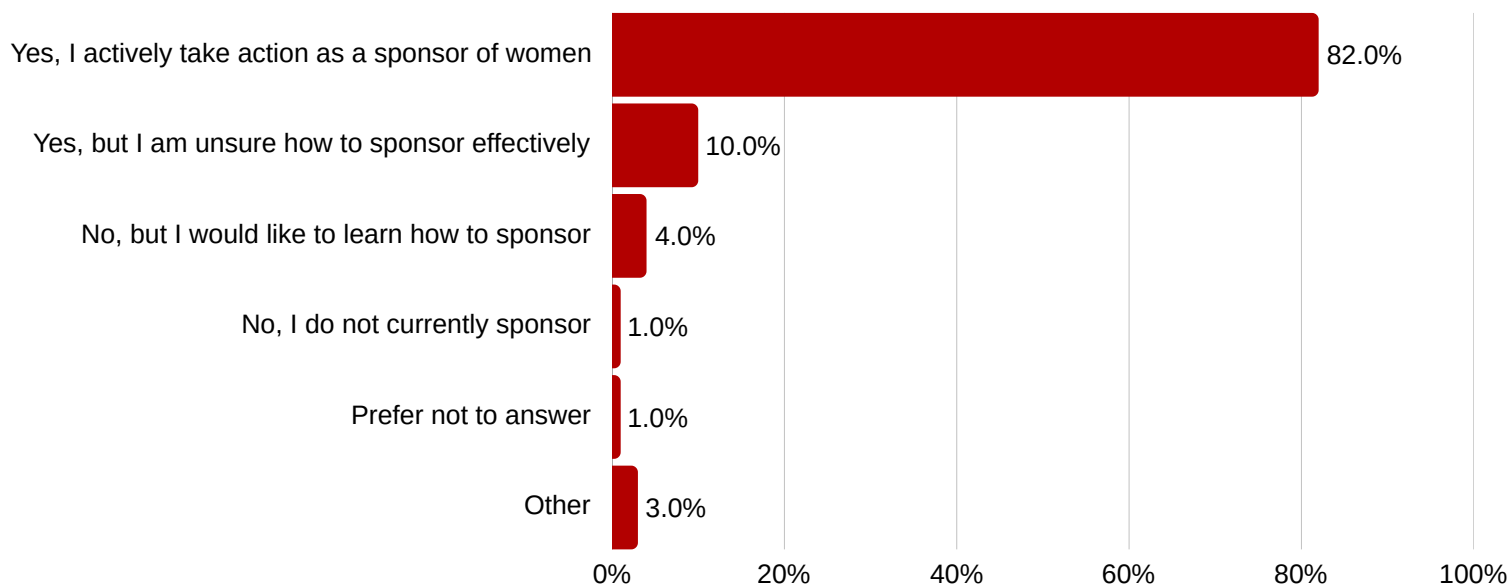
Q: What personal benefits do you experience as a sponsor?



Appendix

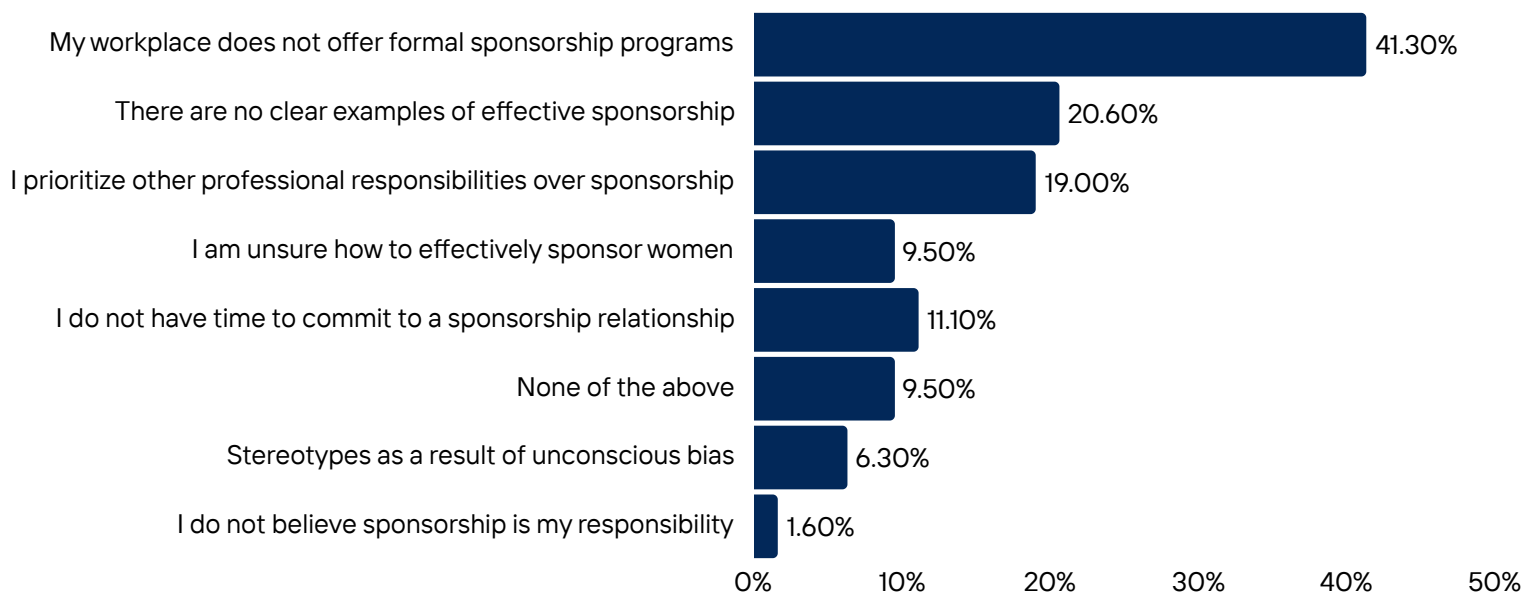
Incidence of Actively Sponsoring Women Colleagues

Most of those who are involved in sponsorship activities say they actively seek out women candidates.



Reasons For *Not* Providing Sponsorship To Colleagues

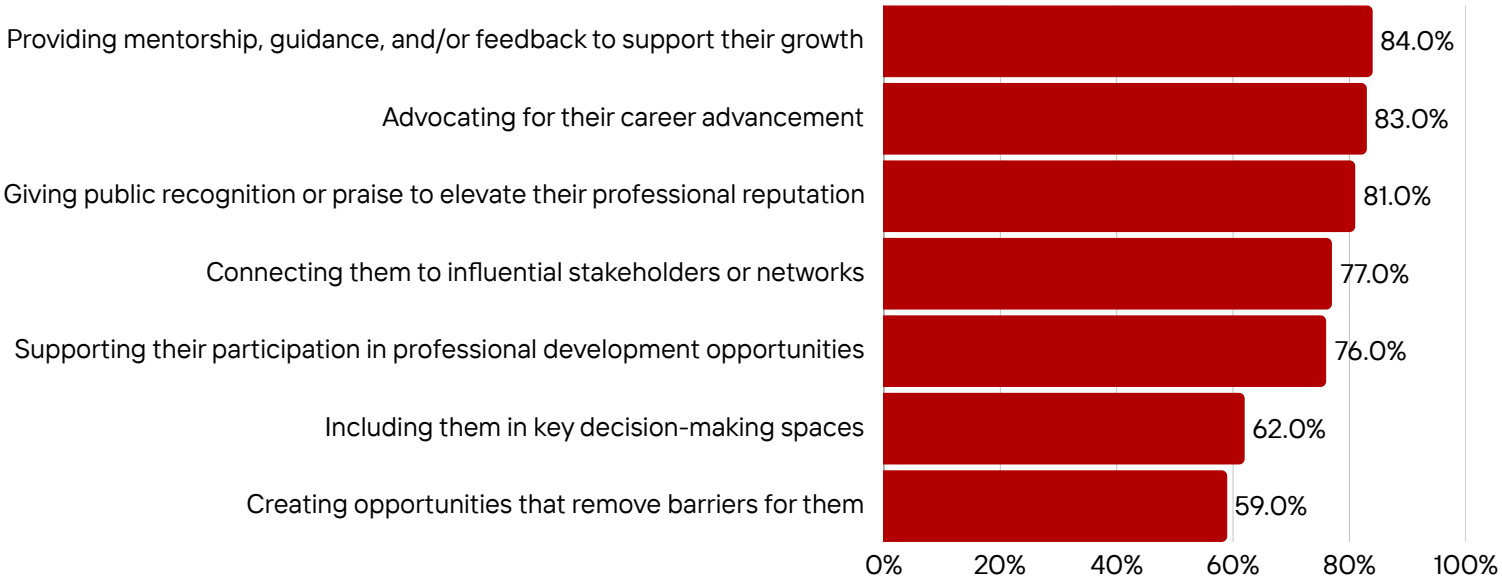
Among those who don't provide sponsorship, the most common reason cited is the absence of a formal program. But the data also reveals something deeper: many participants simply don't know how to sponsor effectively.



Appendix

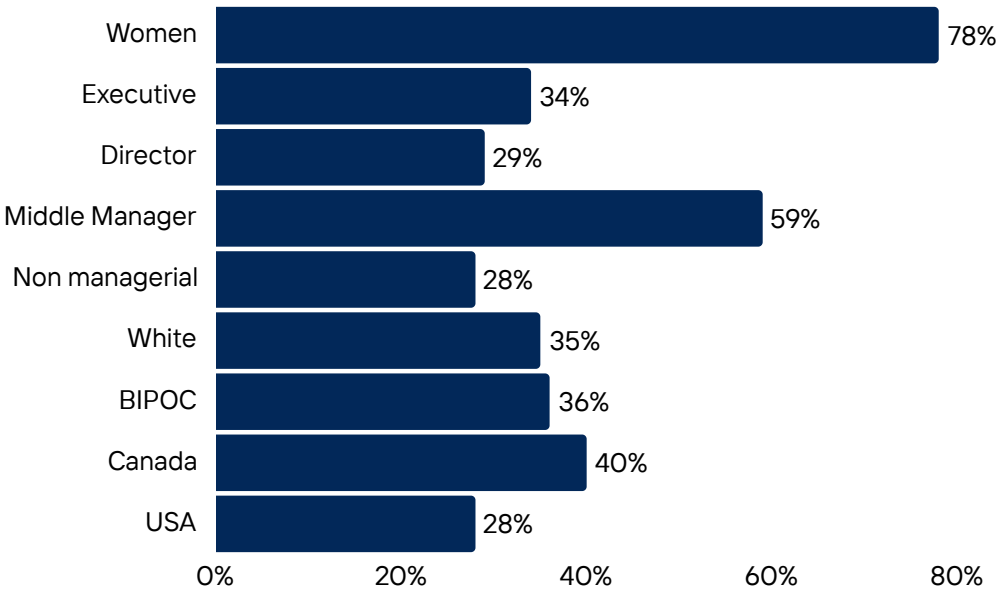
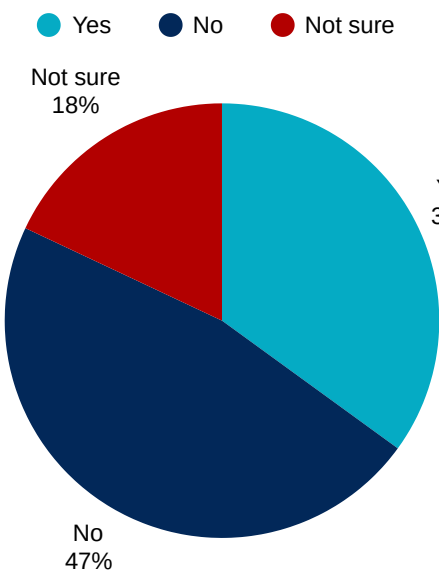
How Do You Sponsor Women?

The methodology of sponsorship takes many forms; from mentorship and guidance to advocating for advancement, and from public praise to networking assistance. Understanding the efficacy of each aspect of this journey would be valuable for future advancement.



Does Your Workplace Encourage Sponsorship?

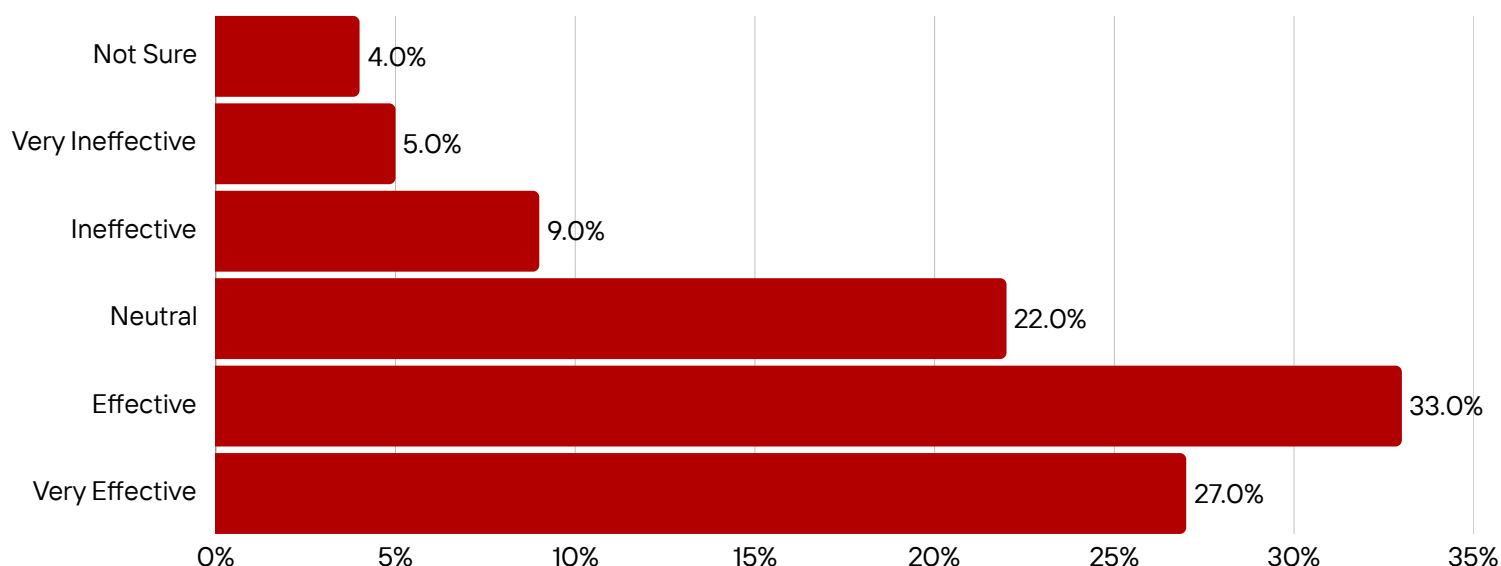
Only one third of participants say their workplace actively encourages sponsorship. Nearly half say it does not, and 18% are unsure whether such support exists within their organization.



Appendix

Perceived Effectiveness

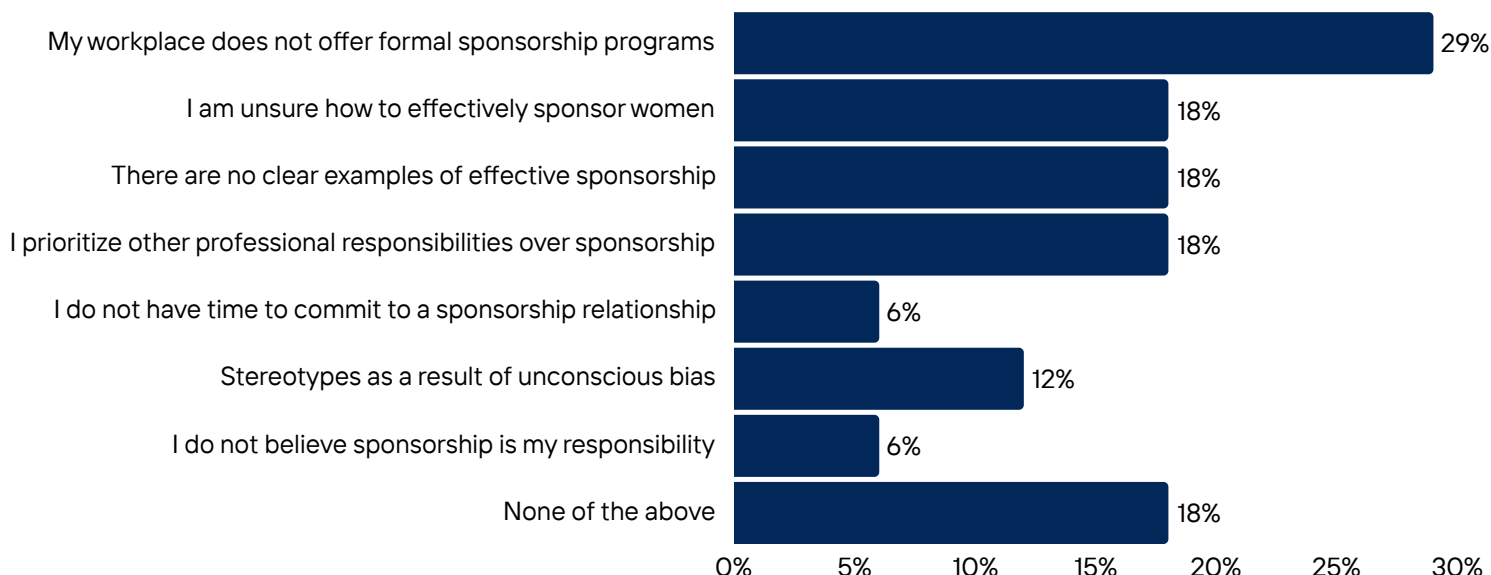
Among those familiar with sponsorship — whether as a sponsor or recipient — 60% consider it effective (27% very effective, 33% effective). While this is a positive signal, the relatively modest enthusiasm suggests there's room to strengthen both the clarity and impact of the process.



What Prevents Sponsorship?

Those who haven't engaged in sponsorship were asked what's held them back. The results point to two main barriers: a lack of formal opportunities within their organization, and uncertainty about where to begin.

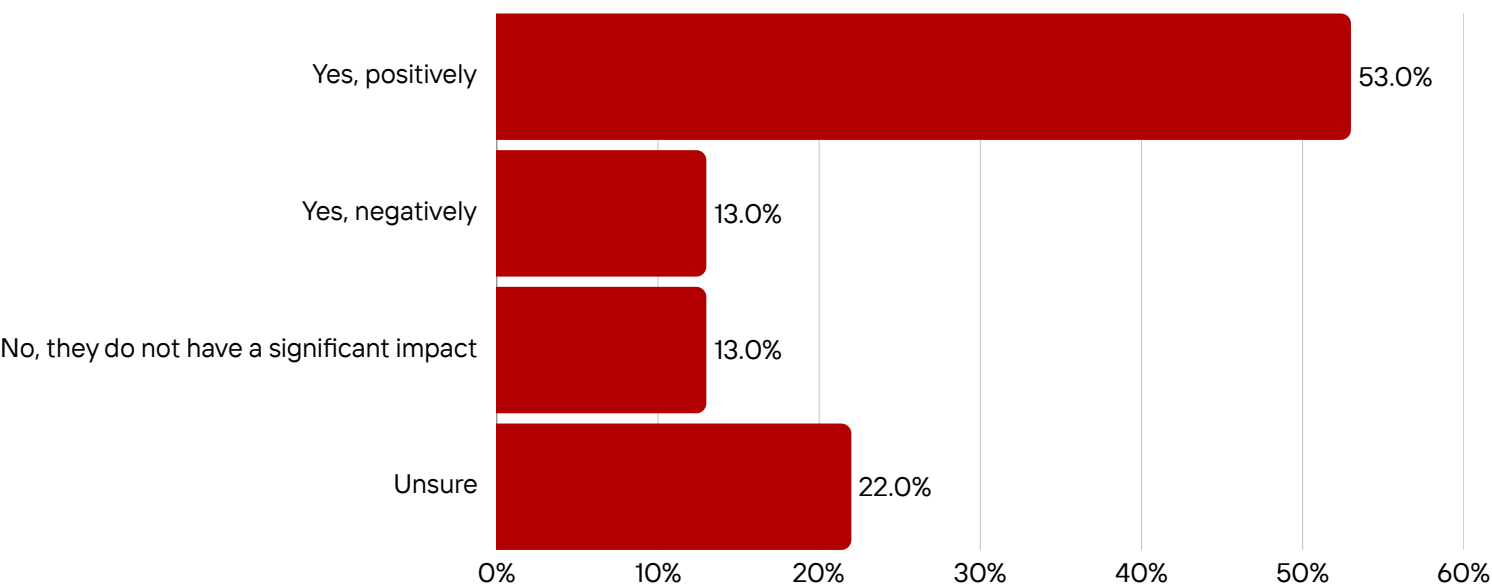
Q: Which of the following factors prevent you from sponsoring colleagues in the workplace?



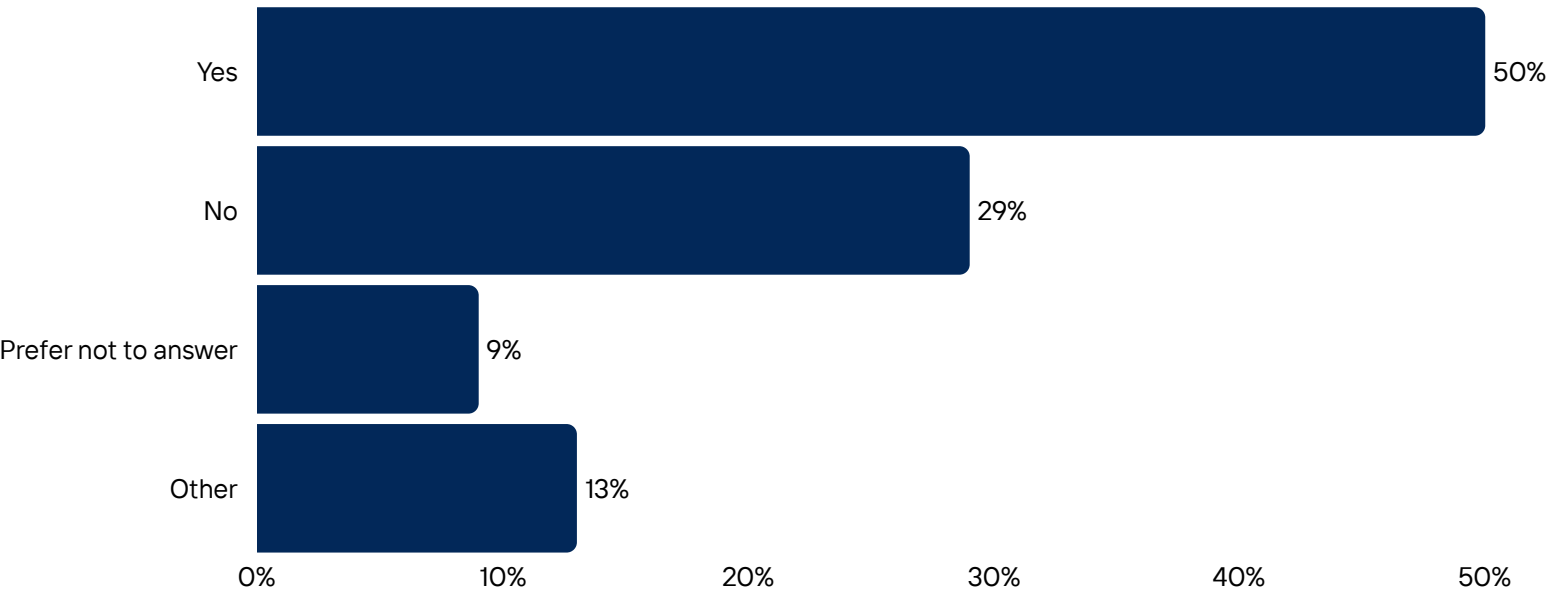
Appendix

Do Cultural or Structural Factors Influence Sponsorship Activities?

Half of respondents believe that cultural or structural factors influence sponsorship in a positive way.



Do Sponsorship Activities Address Inequities Related to Other Identities Such as Race, Gender, Age, and Disability?

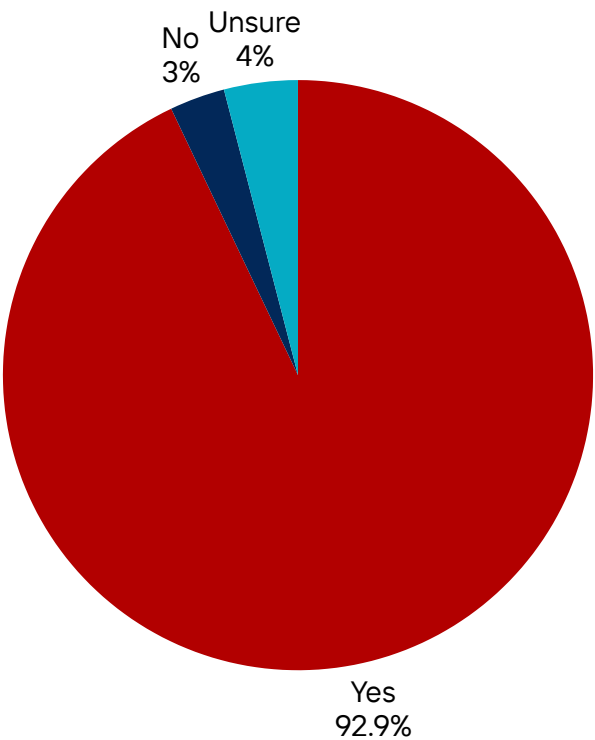
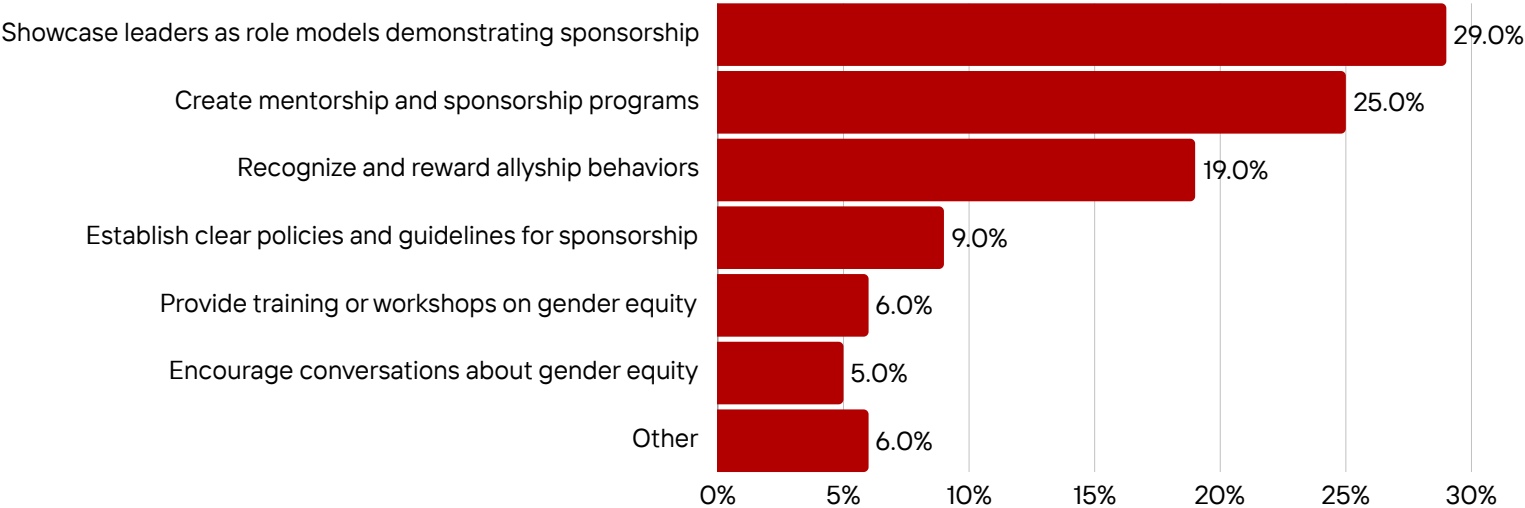


Appendix

Do More Men Need To Be Encouraged To Sponsor Women?

Nine in ten respondents say that men need to be encouraged to sponsor more women. Some suggested steps forward are offered below.

Q: In your opinion, what is the most important step to encourage more men to sponsor women in the workplace?

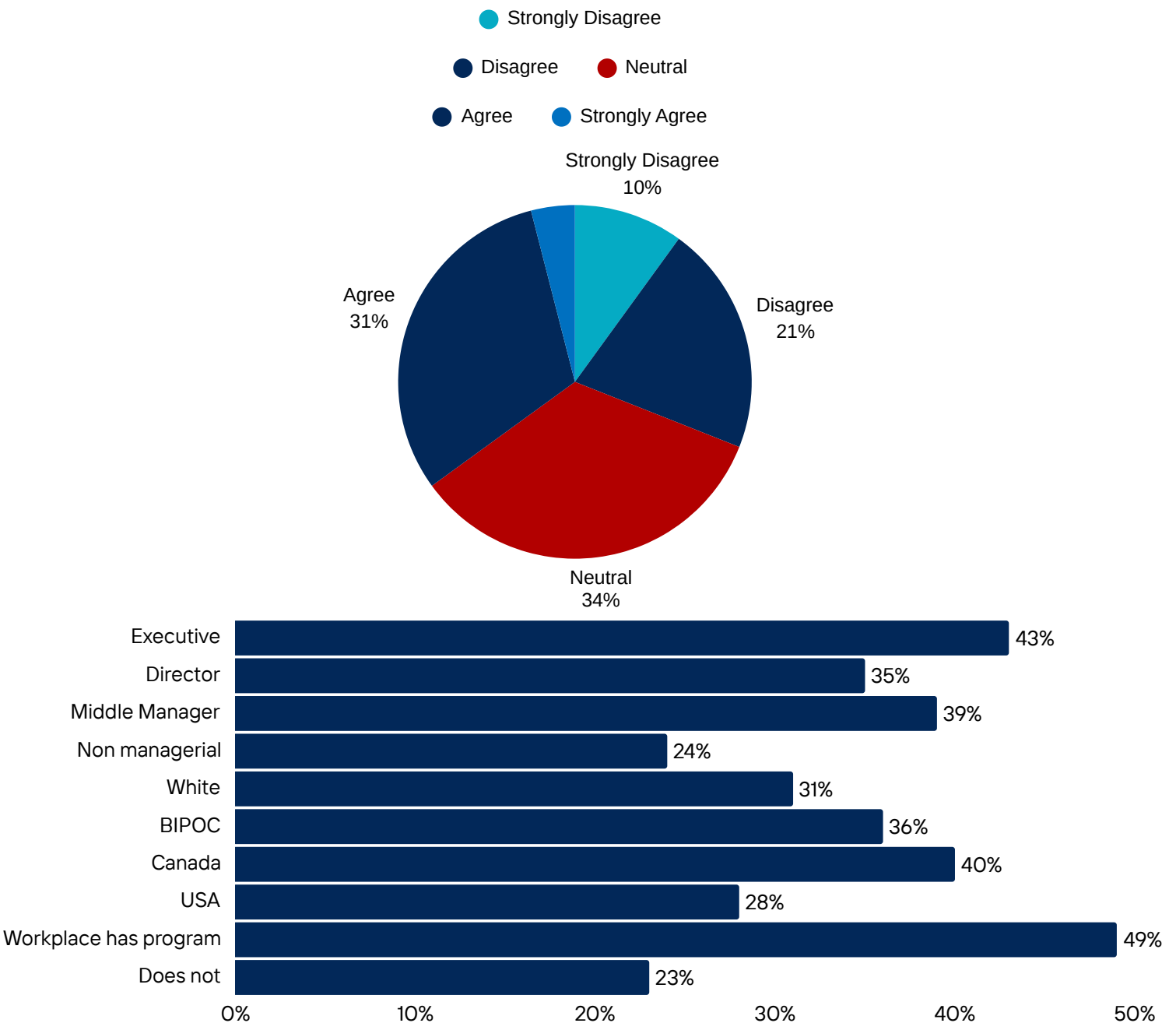


Appendix

Are Sponsorship Opportunities Improving?

Only one in three study participants believe these opportunities have improved over the past five years. This idea was strongest among the executive class. To note: these numbers are deflated mostly by those who do not see active sponsorship programs in their own companies.

Q: To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
“Sponsorship opportunities for women have improved in the last five years.”

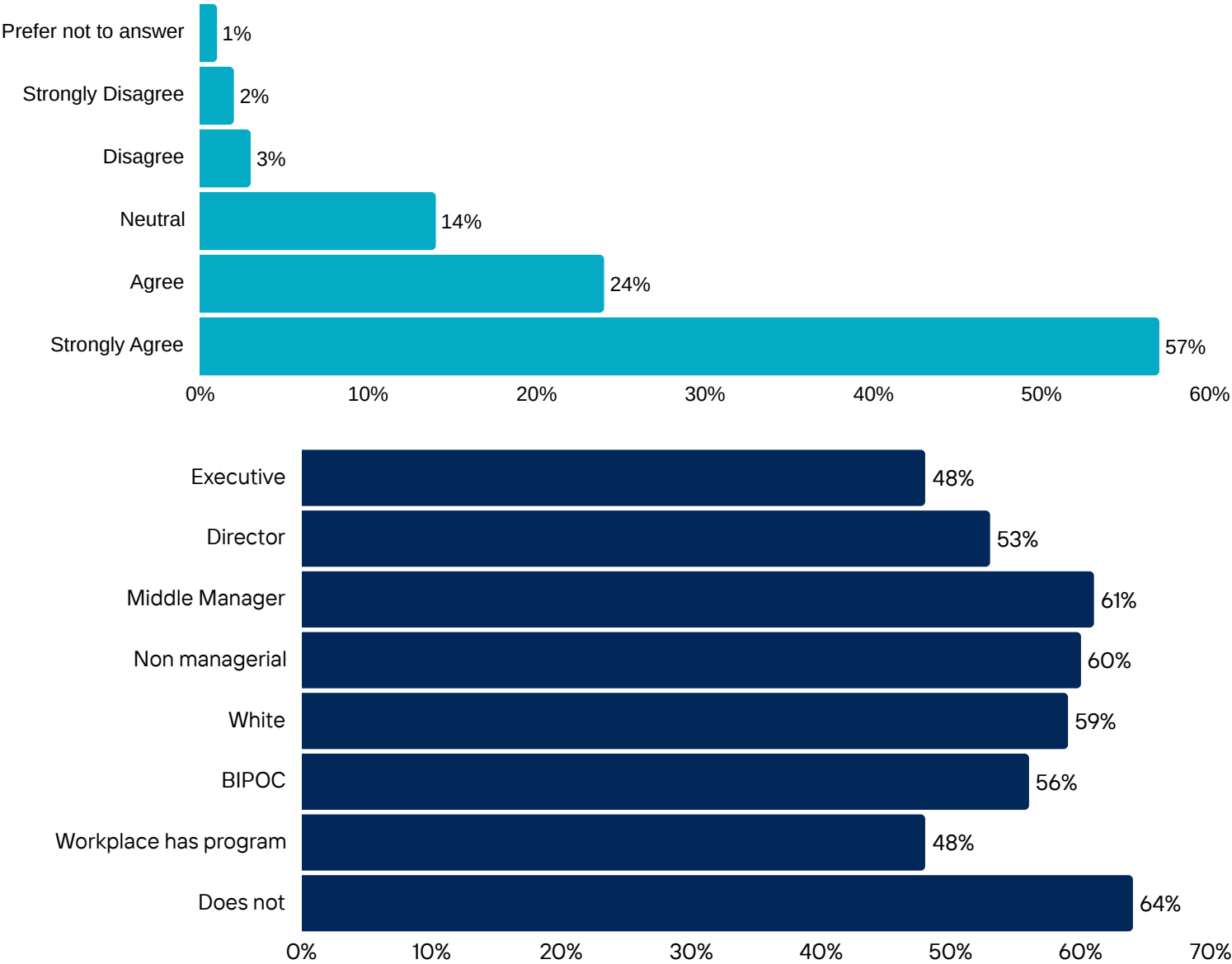


Appendix

Are Men Seen to Be More Likely To Receive Sponsorship?

Participants overwhelmingly agree that men are more likely than women to receive sponsorship today — a perception consistent across all cohorts in the sample. However, respondents from organizations with formal sponsorship programs are 16 points less likely to share this view, suggesting the gap may be less pronounced in practice where structured initiatives are in place.

Q: Men are more likely to receive sponsorship opportunities compared to women in my workplace.

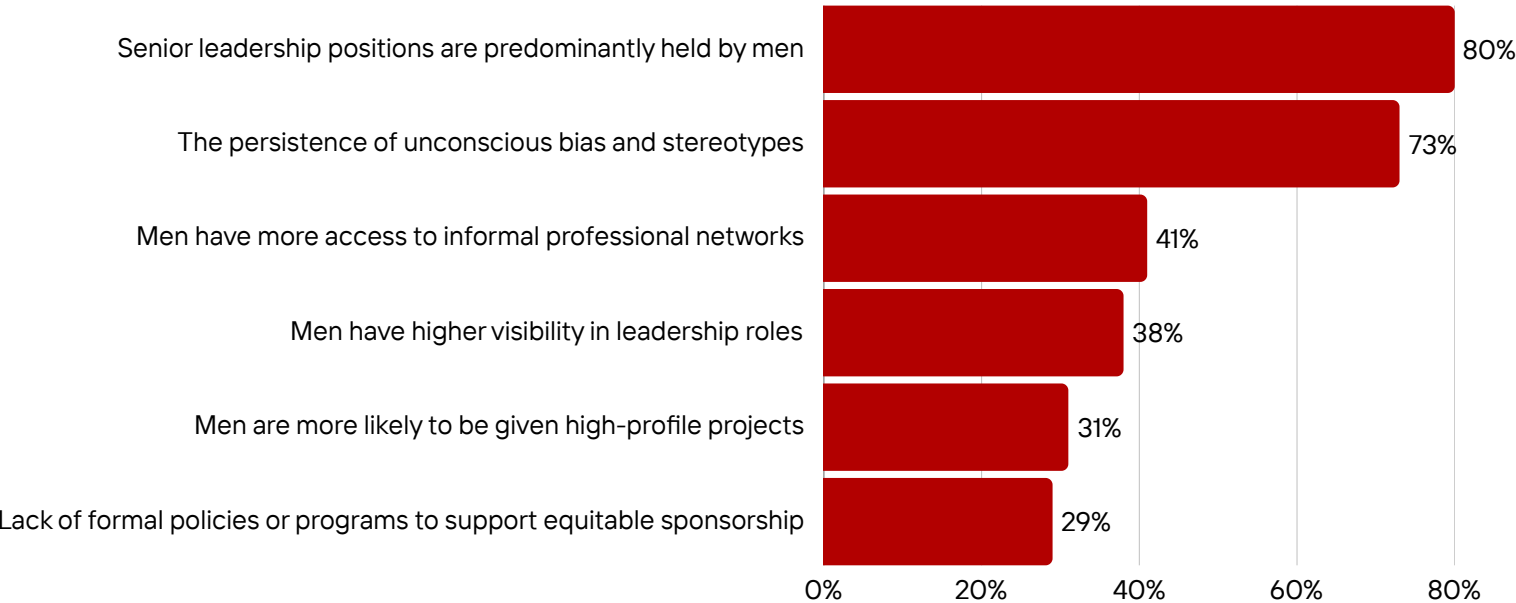


Appendix

Factors Seen to Contribute to the Perception That Men Receive More Sponsorship

The perception that men have the upper hand in receiving sponsorship is reinforced by two key factors: the visible dominance of men in leadership roles within participants’ organizations, and a belief in the influence of unconscious bias. Once again, these views are more strongly held by those in organizations without formal sponsorship programs — highlighting the role structure can play in shifting perception and, potentially, reality.

Q: In your opinion, what factors contribute to men being more likely to receive sponsorship?



Talent is everywhere, access is not — let's fix that.

The data is clear: sponsorship accelerates women's careers — but access remains uneven.

Your organization has the power to change that.

Start here:

- Make sponsorship a core leadership expectation.
- Equip leaders with the tools and training they need to sponsor intentionally.
- Audit your pipeline to uncover who's being sponsored — and who's being left out.

Women of Influence+ can help.

We work with organizations to design research-informed strategies, lead equity workshops, and build programs.

Contact us:

info@womenofinfluence.ca

www.womenofinfluence.ca/sponsorship