

DRIVERS Journal Club

Women in neurosurgery aim for recognition of merit, not tokenism: insights from an Italian survey

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Background

- Surgical specialties highly male-dominated in most nations - neurosurgery among specialties with lowest female representation (8.2%)
- Study examines gender disparities in neurosurgery → survey of female members of the Italian Society of Neurosurgery (SINch)

Aims of study:

- to get a more nuanced understanding of the current status of professional and personal lives and career paths of female members of the SINch
 - to uncover trends related to subjective experiences, motivations, and perspectives
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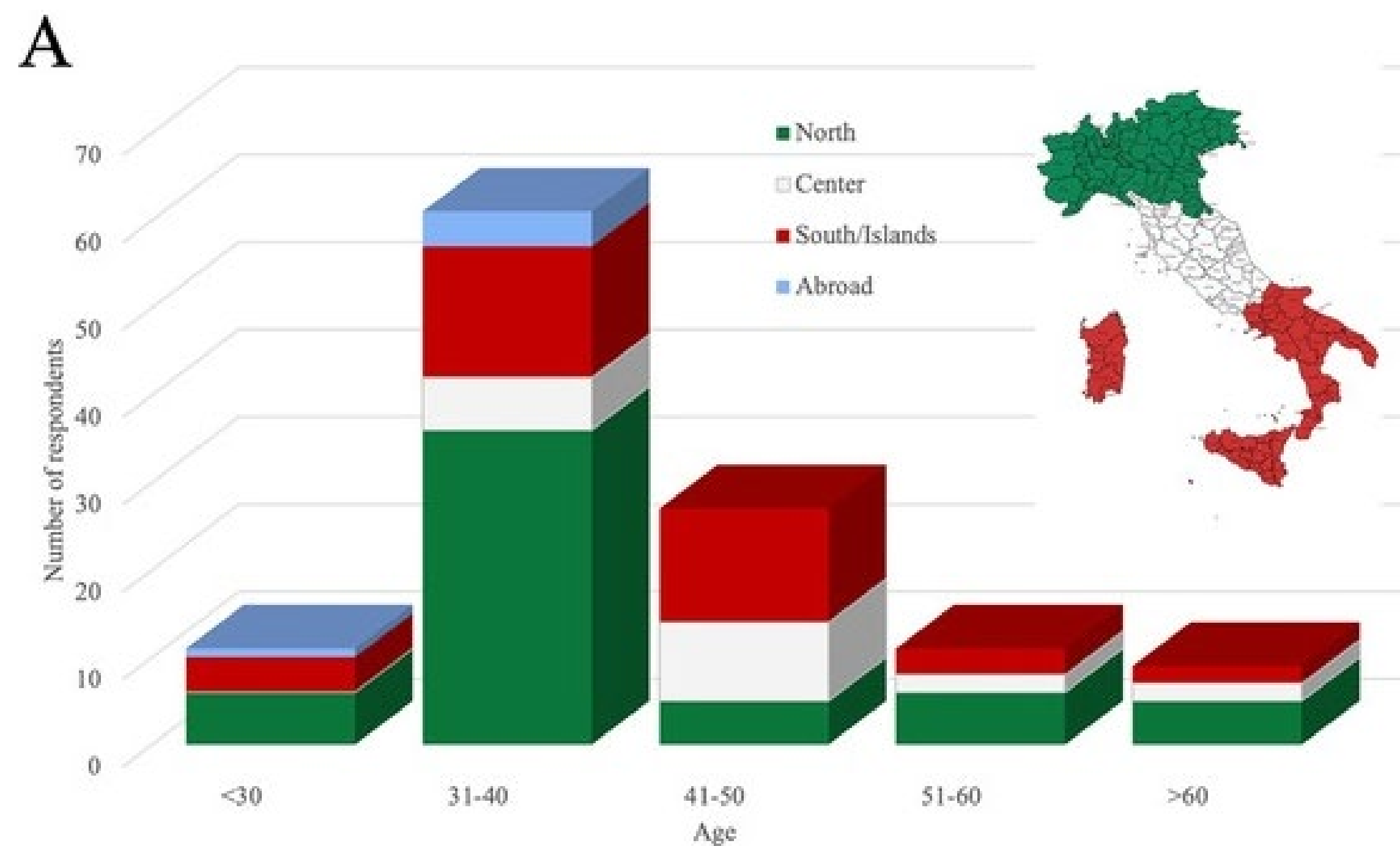
Methods

Survey:

- 49 questions on general data, career choices, work-life balance, engagement with scientific societies
 - 119 responses from female members of Italian Society of Neurosurgery gathered in 2023
 - Involvement voluntary + anonymous
 - Questions: single-response, multiple-response, free-response
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Results

- Most respondents 31-40 years, then 41-50, then over 51, then under 30



Results

The beginnings: Motivation

- Motivation and influence:
 - 89% of respondents entered neurosurgery as personal choice based on talent or interest
 - 70% faced discouragement (63% from peer colleagues, 54% from professors)
 - 89% felt supported in career choice
 - family (75%)
 - friends (42%)
 - partner (38%)
 - peer-colleagues (25%)
 - professors (20%)

5. Was your choice to become a neurosurgeon influenced by others?

- ☐ No, it was a personal choice
- ☐ I was advised by someone else
- ☐ I was discouraged
- ☐ Other

6. Why Neurosurgery? (multiple response)

- ☐ To apply my individual talents
- ☐ Because of an interest in the field
- ☐ For the relationship with patients
- ☐ Because inspired by a role model
- ☐ Other

7. Who tried to convince you that it was not a suitable choice? (multiple response)

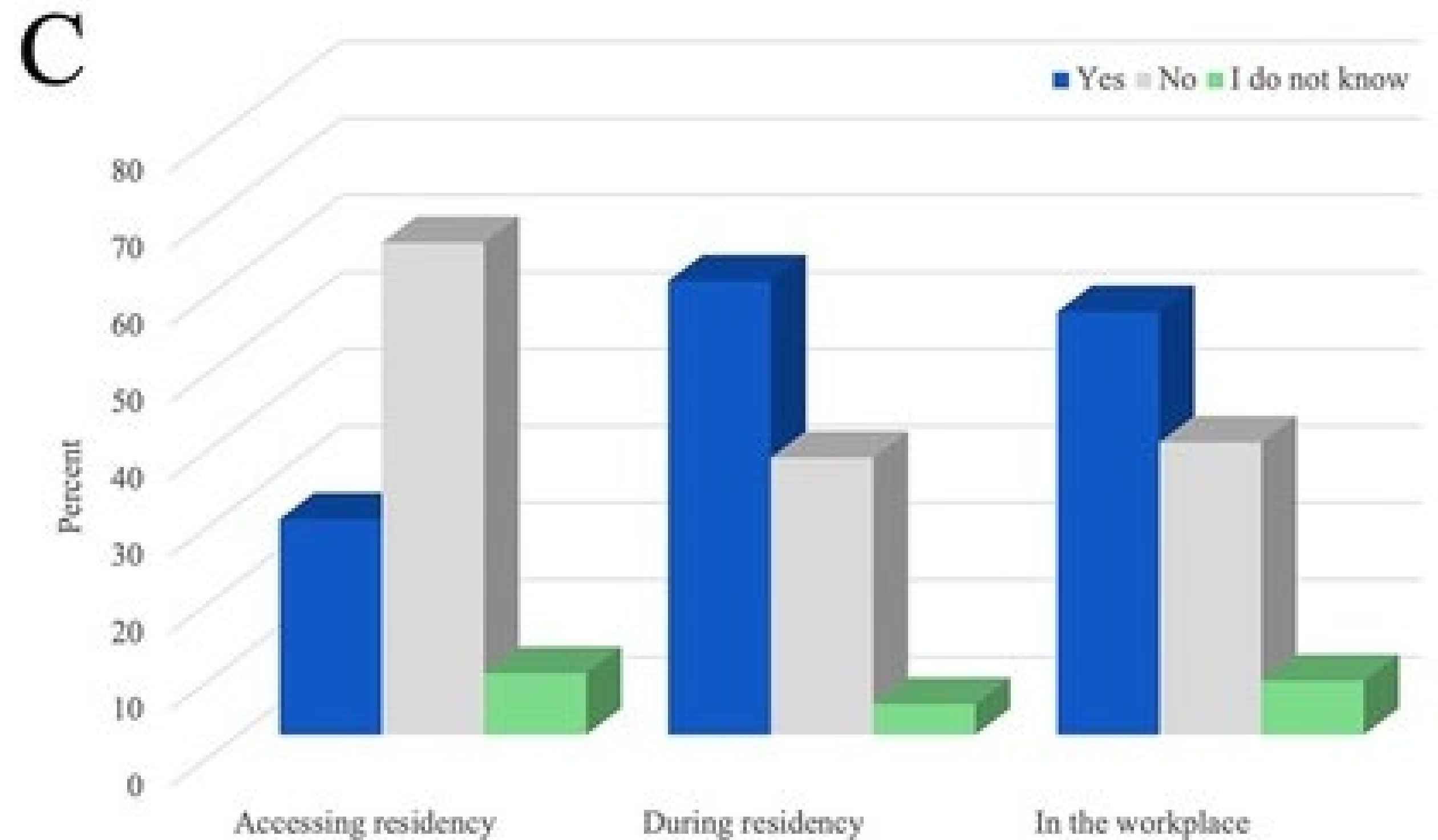
- ☐ My family
- ☐ Partner at that time
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Professors at university
- ☐ Colleagues
- ☐ Nobody

8. Who supported you in your choice? (multiple response)

- ☐ My family
- ☐ Partner at that time
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Professors at university
- ☐ Colleagues
- ☐ Nobody

Results

- Discrimination:
 - 28% during procedure for residency
 - 59% during residency
 - by tenured colleagues (39%)
 - patients (22%)
 - 55% in workplace post-residency



Results

- Perceived unfair treatment (during residency / workplace):
 - Delegated to administrative, non-surgical tasks (57% / 57%)
 - Limited access to learning opportunities (47% / 51%)
 - Verbal communication (44% / 36%)
 - Being allowed less involvement in scientific activities (34% / 27%)
 - Majority felt patients lack confidence in female neurosurgeon (71%)
 - Majority felt Director of Department did not discriminate (60%)
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Results

- Examples of discrimination:

During the specialty exam, the professor asked me why, as a woman, I chose neurosurgery since it is incompatible with having a family.

After a competition: 'You're good, but your colleague has three children, and I'm sorry, I have to hire him, poor guy (me... I wish I could have had children too)...'

After 5 years as a specialist, I cannot perform a herniated disc surgery on my own, while a newly qualified specialist can do a simple spinal procedure independently.

During one of the training periods in the hospital within the training network, a male colleague was given the opportunity to participate in multiple scientific projects. As for me, despite expressing a desire to participate in research activities, I was only given one project to do by the end of the period, and it was even nursing-oriented.

The father of a patient, at the end of the surgery, instead of speaking with me, the surgeon, only spoke with the anesthetist because he was a man.

I participated in a project that later made it to the newspapers, with the names of all my colleagues, including the residents, except mine, even though I was one of the main authors and the only woman.

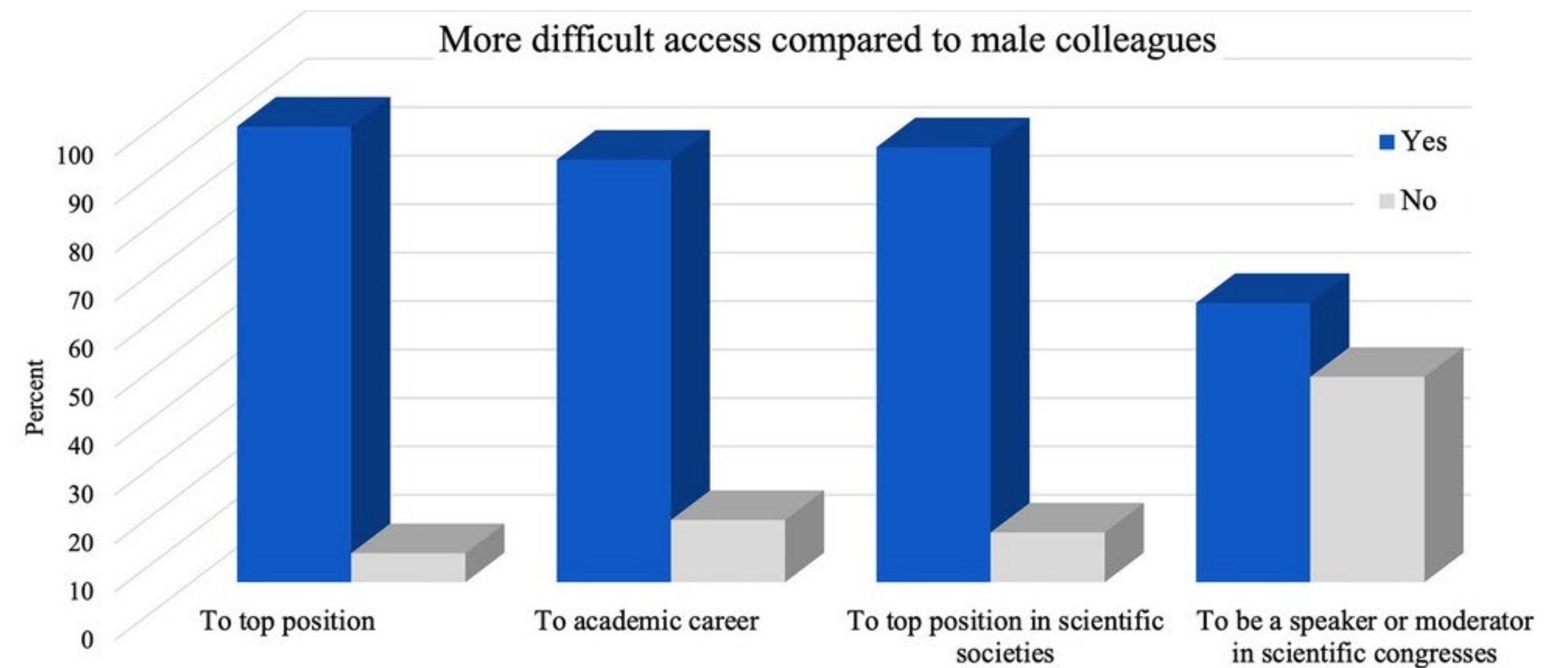
Results

- Motherhood and career:
 - 62 % no children - of those who *decided* not to, decision partially or completely based on fear of not being able to balance career and family
 - 64% believe motherhood imposes career limitations
 - 40% believe department chief limited professional growth opportunities after maternity leave
 - 7% of couples used option for paternity leave
 - Renounced opportunities: giving up training + congresses, OP duties, research careers
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Results

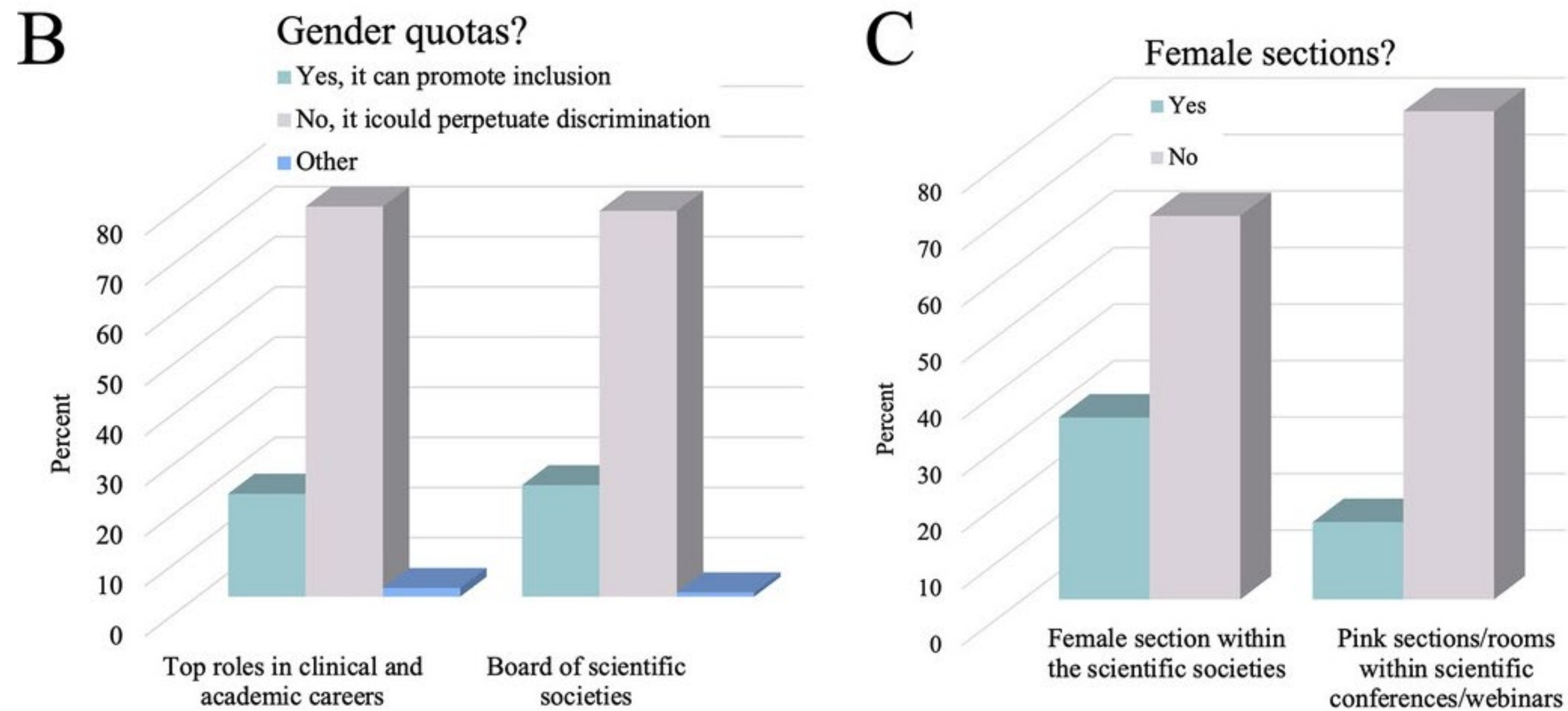
Challenges related to access:

- Access to top positions (94%)
- Achieving university career (87%)
- Top positions scientific societies (90%)
- Moderators/speakers at conferences (58%)



Results

- Majority (78%) not in favor of quotas for top roles in clinical or academic careers, or for the boards of scientific societies (77%)
- Not in favor of women's sections in societies



Results

Suggestions for improving the future path:

- 78% embrace need to establish task force within scientific societies to combat all forms of discrimination.
 - Many respondents advocate for measures for work-family conciliation, e.g.:
 - Nurseries within workplaces
 - Tax benefits for domestic assistance
 - Encouraging use of paternity leave
 - Guaranteed access to daycare facilities for healthcare professionals
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Discussion

Summary:

- Women neurosurgeons are on the whole intrinsically motivated with a deep passion for the field
 - Many respondents in stable relationships, but 84% of those who were single attributed their relationship status to the pressures of their profession
 - Nearly half delayed motherhood for work-related reasons, and 31% decided against motherhood altogether in favor of career
 - Thus, women make significant sacrifices to advance in neurosurgery
 - Strongly advocated for measures supporting work-family balance
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Discussion

Interpreting findings through history

- “...challenges faced by women in neurosurgery are best understood in relation to principles that emerged during the 17th and 18th century Enlightenment”
 - “mobility of individuals within society” viewed as rooted in abilities + contributions – not class, gender, race, religion.
 - this new perspective underlies idea of inalienable rights and equality before the law
 - contemporary shift towards identity politics threatens to undermine these principles.
 - If opportunity is given/denied based on identity rather than abilities, institutions risk returning to a pre-Enlightenment state, where one's identity determines one's fate.
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Discussion

Authors' interpretation of survey results:

- Rejection of quotas shows they don't wish to be seen as representatives of their gender, but as individuals with unique talents and contributions
 - Therefore rejection of identity politics, and desire to preserve upward mobility based on ability
 - Any move toward „enforced“ or „contrived diversity“ risks reinforcing cycle of division rather than integration
 - Training on bias is ineffective
 - Organizations like Women in Neurosurgery, while helpful at the beginning, become outdated and perpetuate division rather than integration (cf. Black associations in USA)
 - Free and fair chances for women neurosurgeons will bring to bear a much larger pool of female neurosurgeons within a few years, ready to act as mentors.
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Discussion

- Authors' final thoughts:
 - international practices and policies could provide models for reducing bias within Italian neurosurgery
 - Addressing challenges for women in neurosurgery requires commitment to professionalism and fairness
 - Need to eliminate discrimination and ensure opportunities for growth based on merit
 - Organizations + societies should enforce measures that promote fair opportunities
 - European Association of Neurosurgical Societies moving in this direction by establishing a task force focused on broader diversity issues.
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Questions

- What, if any, concerns have you heard about tokenism in your communities?
- Do you think the shift towards identity politics undermines fairness?
- What do you think about the following statements of the authors?:

„...Self-dissociation of marginalized groups, even if justified at the time of its enactment, often leads in the long term not to unity but to bifurcation“

„Free and fair chances for women neurosurgeons will bring to bear a much larger pool of female neurosurgeons within a few years, ready to act as mentors.“
