

The Intersection of Culture, Gender and Public Relations in Global Contexts: A
Comparative Study of International Communication Practices in North America
and Parts of Europe

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I. INTRODUCTION

Public relations (PR) has evolved into a global profession, with practitioners worldwide influencing one another across diverse messaging techniques and cultures. To truly grasp the complexities of international public relations, (IPR) one must navigate the challenges of engaging publics across countries and cultures. At its core, IPR involves intercultural communication, shaped by international development, historical ties and target audiences. Specifically, IPR is PR operated interculturally. Each country has unique cultural elements that impact institutions and professionals. American textbooks have historically dominated PR literature, often neglecting international perspectives (Szondi, 2009). In Western contexts, IPR is often framed around overcoming cultural barriers — such as language, legal systems, and norms — which are frequently viewed as problems. However, these should be seen as opportunities for IPR practitioners to diversify and expand their strategies, moving away from the Western-centric model that disproportionately influences the field. The Anglo-American PR approach stands as an anomaly compared to global practices.

Gender is the second, pivotal area of research, critical to understanding who comprises the diverse workforce. Despite increasing feminization in the profession since the 1980s-1990s in countries like the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom, Spain, France, Italy, Portugal and Switzerland, gender stereotypes and biases persist in the industry. Multiple, similar patterns emerge from these countries. While most PR practitioners are women, men still dominate senior management roles. Some of the most glaring issues persist like gendered skills, pay disparities, discrimination and work-life balance challenges. “One of its biggest scandals in

the public relations business is why women leave the industry mid-career and don't progress into senior roles" (Waddington, 2024). Given the prodigious talent and potential of women in the field, do women working internationally in PR share common experiences and practices?

This research explores the transformation of PR into a global profession, highlighting how IPR is shaped by cultural and gender dynamics. Despite the dominance of a Western-centric model, IPR should embrace intercultural opportunities rather than view cultural differences as barriers. By analyzing the various influences on PR practices, this project aims to demonstrate that the Anglo-American model is an outlier in global PR practices. Additionally, the research will investigate the ongoing gender disparities within the PR industry, examining how the feminization of the field has affected career progression and the continued underrepresentation of women in senior roles. With women increasingly present in media and knowledge-based industries, a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in PR could help organizations create fairer, more equitable workplaces while acknowledging their cultural influence. Women PR practitioners worldwide continue to encounter significant barriers to equal opportunity and advancement, despite comprising the majority of the industry workforce. IPR can be further understood to enrich the profession more.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The strategic communication process is an art of managing and building mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics, which is historically shaped by a Western perspective. It is safe to say that PR does indeed contribute to altering culture, since mass and interpersonal communication is the foundation of the profession. There are cross-cultural differences in the role of PR between the chosen countries. Five environmental variables are used by practitioners to design PR strategies were identified (Krishnamurthy & Dejan, 2002): political ideology, economic system, level of activism, culture and media culture Western PR assumes democratic structures reliant on public opinion, but this model doesn't apply globally.

Most PR practitioners are familiar with the Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede and his identification of five dimensions of societal culture: power distance, collectivism/individualism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance and Confucian dynamism (long-term/ short-term orientation). In IPR, a process called the “in-awareness approach” uses intercultural communication to help understand how culture influences PR. The objective is to “expose cultural assumptions and expectations that plague IPR and allow one to explore national and cultural differences between clients and practitioners in a systematic and nonthreatening manner” (Zaharna, 2001). This further explains national and cultural differences in client-practitioner-public relationships. Before we can dive into the countries’ IPR expectations, we need to understand culture can be both tangible and intangible. Any kind of intercultural communication requires expertise related to “a person's competence in effective and appropriate exchange of information with a person from another culture” (Aktaş, 2018). An emphasis on awareness and sensitivity needs to be present when researching and contributing to

the profession. Naturally, societies have cultural elements that affect the structure and employees of all institutions in that society; this can be looked further into how those institutions adapt and preserve them. Not to mention, the asymmetrical worldview approach (unbalanced, one-way communication for the benefit of the organization) and symmetric worldview approach (balanced, two-way communication for mutual understanding/ a negotiated situation with publics) directly have an impact on the PR communication activity (Vasquez & Taylor, 1994). Practitioners need to understand the views and behaviors of diverse publics to implement successful messaging and campaigns.

Ethical values form the foundation of PR, with practitioners adhering to codes of ethics that vary by country and organization. Research from communication professors Maureen Taylor and Aimei Yang concluded dominant themes across 41 countries:

1- professionalism

2- advocacy

3- moral standards

4- clients' interests

5- expertise

6- relationships

The findings indicate that global values shaping organizational relationships with the public are becoming central to professional communication practices. These values represent the foundational principles of the IPR profession. A key value in PR is collaboration, which is also reflected in societal concepts such as corporatism, collectivism and communal relationships. If we break this down further, the U.S. value clients' rights, professionalism and relationship building, Canada and the U.K. value clients' rights, professionalism, and advocacy and France

value clients' advocacy and moral standards. The International PR Association (IRPA), founded in 2011, serves as a declaration of professional and ethical standards for members and is recommended for practitioners globally. The countries that are not accounted for in the clusters above share pragmatics of regional PR ethics. "Overall, it seems that across the world, public relations associations recognize the dual-responsibility for the profession to serve both clients and society/public's interests" (Taylor & Yang, 2015). Naturally, around the world, practitioners encounter a variety of different publics and stakeholders, forcing them to adapt to competing priorities.

Generally, research on PR has often focused on practices in specific countries, with Western-centric models dominating. However, there has been a noticeable shift away from traditional American PR practices in both Western and Eastern societies, warranting further research. Comparative analysis reveals that the Anglo-American PR model is atypical and differs significantly from global practices, especially when considering various personal influence models across different regions. By the 1820s and 1830s in the U.S., the growing influence of public opinion in politics, driven by the press and grassroots activism, shaped societal change, civil rights and public perception. The Declaration Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) was founded in 1947 and spurred growth. By the 1970s and 1980s, PR became more international and inclusive. American PR models are built on the assumption of a democratic political system, where various groups compete for legitimacy, influence and public attention (Public Relations Across the Globe, n.d.).

In Canada, the modern PR industry arose in the late 19th-century practices, evolving from advertising, business writing and the work of press agents. In 1948, the Canadian PR society was formed in Montréal and the PR Association of Ontario in Toronto. The profession is

said to be fairly competitive, specifically in larger government operations and agencies. The Canadian PR Society's definition of PR is almost verbatim to the U.S.' PRSA's definition. Though, we need to keep in mind the profession is constantly evolving due to changes in society and technology, so a meaning also needs to change when appropriate. PR firms in Canada employ roughly 6,000 professionals. Over 30,000 jobs are expected to be created in the industry by 2026 (Konzelman, 2019). Practitioners have more decision-making power and control over the communication functions within the organization, as well as a direct relationship with C-suite level employees versus in the U.S. The industry thrives here and has a strong reputation for supplying innovation and talent to the PR world at large.

The first British PR agency, Editorial Services, was founded in London in 1924, followed by the appointment of the first "PR officer" a year later. Like the two countries above, PR didn't truly take off until after World War II. While PR in the U.S. focuses on relations with publics, in Europe it's seen as communication in the public sphere. The growth has been exponential with nearly a fifth of the world's 250 largest PR firms by revenue are headquartered in the U.K. The efforts primarily focus on industry topics while taking a global angle and have a strong tradition of regulatory bodies that monitor the PR industry. PR professionals in the UK prioritize ethical conduct, integrity, and a solid grasp of public interest. They emphasize strong communication skills, strategic thinking, and fostering positive relationships with key stakeholders. Their work is guided by the CIPR Code of Conduct, which underscores the importance of responsible and ethical practices within the profession.

In Spain, PR campaigns did not appear until the very late 1950s, and PR in academics began in 1971 with the creation of the Facultades de Ciencias de la Información (Schools of Communication) in Barcelona. "Educational orientation is the fulcrum around which the

limitations of public relations in Spain revolves, and a consequence of the reality that everyone can be a public relations practitioner without having a degree from an educational institution" (Arceo, 2004). This has been a limitation in the past, though it has changed in the last decade. Also, according to Arceo, the three main developments in the PR sector are:

- 1- Businesses are increasingly acknowledging the importance of effective communication.
- 2- Agencies and departments are becoming more specialized in their focus.
- 3- The term "PR" is being used less often, with terms like corporate communication, corporate image and integrated communication gaining prominence.

Some scholars argue the industry in Spain is still underdeveloped. This could be explained by the country being more decentralized, resulting in more efforts to reach most of the publics.

Le Centre Européen des Relations Publiques (EUPRERA) shaped PR in France, where practices remain traditional and the one-size-fits-all approach often reduces the impact of messages "Relations publiques" in France is mostly associated with press relations and event coordination, while terms like "corporate," "institutional," and "strategic communications" have replaced "PR," which now feels outdated, reminiscent of practices common before the 1980s. Despite its historical prominence among French communication professionals, few French universities offer PR courses; instead, they focus on organizational or strategic communications. The profession in France is widely considered to have begun in 1947, when François Lulé-Dejardin, Lucien Matrat and Jean Choppin de Janvry traveled to the U.S. on a "productivity mission" and were introduced to PR (Chaudet et al., 2015). Upon returning to France, they

pioneered PR departments in their companies. French PR agencies serve European, national, multinational and international interests and organizations with about 25% of foreign investment in France comes from the U.S.

PR in Switzerland began in the early 20th century, initially tied to advertising and corporate communication. American PR practices, brought by multinational corporations, influenced its development. In 1953, the first association, the Schweizerische PR Gesellschaft (SPRG), was founded, now commonly referred to as the Swiss PR Association and PR Suisse. During the 1990s, PR continued to evolve, with a growing focus on strategic communication, reputation management and IPR due to Switzerland's prominent role in global organizations such as the United Nations, Red Cross and World Health Organization. Switzerland has four official languages mixed with the media landscape which is relatively small and fragmented as the result of the sociocultural diversity of the country. The Swiss practice PR business formally and neatly. Swiss practitioners often work within an international framework, managing relations with global stakeholders and addressing issues that transcend national borders, such as sustainability, human rights and global health (Rogers, 2014).

PR in Portugal has faced ongoing challenges in its institutionalization, partly due to criticisms that it can both enhance citizen freedom and manipulate public opinion. Over the past 50 years, the profession has seen constant advances and setbacks. The first, small agency formed in 1976, the CNEP (now International Center for Communication). Practitioners and academics have struggled to define PR clearly, distinguishing it from advertising and propaganda which was dominant in early 20th-century Portugal. This struggle persists today with the rise of content marketing. The term PR itself causes misunderstandings in Portuguese, and while PR has gained ground academically, it risks being misrepresented as a sub-discipline of marketing, threatening

its future development (Eiró-Gomes, 2016). PR emerged in the 1910s but matured between the 1930s and the late 1940s. The term and concept of PR in Portugal were imported from the U.S., but the modern theory and practice of PR were influenced by the U.K.

Research on PR in Italy is limited, but it is generally agreed that PR development began after World War II. In the mid-1950s, the first PR agencies were established in Rome, with their communication methods and techniques heavily influenced by U.S. practices (it is said that early professionals were possibly trained by the U.S. Information Services). The Olivetti company, now an IT company, stands as a symbolic example of the early development of PR in Italy, campaigning one of the most significant global applications of PR in the country. The Italian Federation of PR (FERPI) was formed in 1970 and represents PR professionals who work with influential public figures (Valentini, 2009). Communication and methods evolved over time, particularly in the 1960s, due to economic growth, mass media, and political and social changes.

With an understanding of PR's historical development in seven countries, we can examine how gender has created both opportunities and barriers. "The work of feminist-inspired scholars has brought to our attention the centrality of gender in shaping social relations, pointing out that gender is one of the central organising principles around which social life revolves" (Daymon & Demetrious, 2010). This opens a rich area to research. PR, in contrast, functions as a profession that enables the construction and manipulation of public identities and realities to create dominant, impactful narratives. In the 1980s, the term "velvet ghetto" came about in response to the increasing number of women in the field of P.R. in the U.S. The industry was so-to-speak being accused of being a "velvet ghetto." This became a three-part research report aiming to describe the impact of the increase. The idea is that PR became a "safe haven" for women, established by companies to meet their affirmative action goals. This theory assumes

that women were invited into the PR field to keep them from disrupting or threatening men in their pursuit of higher management roles. The main assumptions are listed below (Toth, 1988):

1- Women are more likely to perceive themselves as filling a technical rather than a managerial role.

2- Women are paid substantially less than men, even when other variables are controlled.

3- When other professions have gone from male-dominated to female-dominated, those professions have all diminished in salary and status.

Clearly, data indicates that women's status has significantly improved since the period of the “velvet ghetto” study, though this is an extremely important historical piece of the puzzle for women in this industry.

The European PR Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) project acted as a key source of information, identifying a gap in literature on office culture and leadership in PR, focusing on women's experiences with workplace culture and leadership roles. This section will highlight the makeup of the research that supports the PR industry is a feminized sector in which gender inequalities persist. In 2022, women made up 64.7% of the PR workforce in the U.S., while men comprised 35.3%. Despite this gender imbalance, most leadership roles in PR are still held by men, with only about 30% of PR agencies led by women. Some reports suggest that while 75% of the industry is female, only 20% of women hold senior-level positions (Rakowski & Broniewska, 2023).

In Canada, as of 2023, women comprise approximately 53% of the sector, though they only hold 35% of management positions, including middle management. Despite the industry's

overall diversity, both racial and gender diversity sharply decline at higher levels of management. A notable gender gap exists. A 2021 survey conducted by Leger for the Canadian Council of PR Firms (CCPRF) revealed that women, regardless of race, face greater physical, mental and emotional health challenges than their male counterparts. Furthermore, the survey indicated that 30% of male respondents held executive roles compared to only 18% of female respondents, highlighting the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within the field (Canadian Public Relations Society, 2021). The survey also highlighted issues like unconscious bias and microaggressions. In the North American region, work patterns prevalent in other industries are also common in PR, characterized by long hours, poor work-life-balance and unequal career progression. Current research highlights the challenges faced by women in communications fields, including PR, where they outnumber men. The industry reflects a historical unease with feminism, resulting in performative efforts to address gender inequalities that fail to create significant change. The dominance of implicit male norms in the workplace contributes to women adopting more apologetic and self-deprecating communication styles, undermining their authority (Clayton et al., 2021). Additionally, gender-biased language in recruitment processes perpetuates the gender pay gap, as men are often portrayed as leaders and mentors, reinforcing stereotypes that hinder women's advancement in their careers.

Similar findings emerge across Europe. A Leeds Beckett University EUPRERA report shows that women in PR face exclusion and discrimination, with workplace culture shaped by gender balance. Women in male-dominated offices report being excluded from business decisions and experiencing masculine social dynamics. Cultural masculinity is often expected of women, which disadvantages them, but women who adopt masculine behaviors are viewed negatively by their peers. Female leaders face conflicting expectations: they are expected to be

softer than men yet criticized for “softness” (Topic, 2020). Other issues European women practitioners face induce the glass ceiling concept, lack of mentorship and pay gaps. Sixty-six percent of practitioners in the U.K., below the director, are female, and 34% are male. The situation is reversed in senior roles: 54% are male and 46% are female (Waddington, 2024). The pay gap problem seems to be stemming specifically from the agency's side. This could be identified with reasons like limited transparency regarding salary comparisons; differing negotiation styles between genders; instances of bullying and intimidation in the workplace; bias in the business sector that confines women to specific roles; variations in perspectives across generations; unconscious biases; and a lack of support for flexible working arrangements and family responsibilities. In male-dominated environments, women report experiencing masculine banter, social exclusion from business decisions, and a general lack of recognition for PR as a discipline.

Communication researchers Piet Voerhoeven and Noelle Aarts found that male PR professionals, except in Eastern Europe, assume greater influence on strategic decisions than female counterparts. In Spain, the pay gap is wider in agencies than in-house, with men earning more. Key findings from EUPRERA show intense self-expectations of female communication managers are noteworthy, often making it challenging, if not impossible, to find a balance between their family and professional lives while also establishing effective role models. The workplace culture remains predominantly masculine, with persistent instances of sexist comments and "jokes" that reflect a broader issue of gender discrimination (Fuentes Lara et al., 2021). The Association of Communication Consultants in Spain found the average number of women on staff in PR agencies is nearly 73%. However, the percentage of women on Spanish board committees in PR agencies is 57%.

In France, limited research shows that in 2005, 80% of the 3,000 PR professionals were women, with nearly half holding advanced degrees, with eight percent come from abroad” (Nolan, 2007). Due to France's international reputation of luxury brands, some state this could explain the higher number of women. A French practitioner reinforces the trends found from other countries, stating the feminization of PR agencies (often referred to as press agencies) is viewed as a reality that is often overlooked (Com’On Leaders, n.d). Despite this over-representation, the industry still grapples with biases and inequalities. To address this, it's crucial to raise awareness about the predominance of women in the profession and to conduct localized studies in France to gather relevant data. France has 4,500 agencies specializing in PR, of all sizes. The industry isn't as developed as some European neighbors but is definitely growing with great opportunities.

In Portugal, age and experience significantly impact women's career progression. Older women in leadership often face more constraints and adopt masculine communication styles, while younger women report greater gender equality and view age as a more significant factor in discrimination. A 2023 EUPRERA report highlights challenges like long hours and work-life balance issues. This report explores the position of women in the PR sector in Portugal, focusing on their lived experiences, challenges and opportunities. While opinions varied on the differences between male and female leadership styles, most women identified themselves as exhibiting more feminine leadership traits. Networking is seen as crucial for career development. Also, according to Enterie in Portugal, the contrast of women staff is even greater, 74% of communication departments and agencies have a majority of women, but only 37% have women as leaders (European Communication Monitor, 2020). AcadémicasPR, a collaborative and

supportive network developed by women, identified that the academic role of women working in PR has grown from Spain to Portugal and now to Brazil.

In Italy, media outlets portray women through either stereotypically masculine values such as strength and integrity or feminine values that emphasize emotional labor and conflicting feelings related to motherhood. Between 60 and 75% of practitioners of “relazioni pubbliche” are women (Ravichandran, 2024). But they are paid lower than their male colleagues and are governed by men. Overall, while in some European countries the gender gap is slowly narrowing, this is not happening in Italy. The “velvet ghetto” also resurfaces in Italian literature: “ghetto rosa.” The data goes against the grain of common opinion: 60% of PR officers in Italy are women. The trends seem to be slowly changing, but other factors contradict this progress.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research set out to examine the experiences and perceptions of female PR professionals regarding their roles, challenges and the impact of cultural and gender dynamics within their work environments. A combination of survey techniques were employed to investigate gender dynamics and perceptions within the profession, with the overarching goal of identifying systemic barriers, assessing workplace attitudes, and evaluating how gendered communication styles influence career advancement opportunities.

The study adopted a survey format to collect insights from female PR practitioners across the specified countries. Participants were recruited through professional networks, social media platforms such as LinkedIn, and web-based searches of PR associations. Efforts were made to ensure a diverse respondent pool, providing a robust understanding of varied perspectives and experiences within the field. Responses were analyzed to uncover recurring themes and connections, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods to blend numerical data analysis with in-depth narrative exploration. The survey consisted of 11 questions, including six agree/disagree scale items, designed to capture both broad patterns and nuanced insights. The qualitative component delved into participants' experiences, perceptions and behaviors as female PR professionals, while the quantitative analysis examined data patterns, trends and relationships among respondents across the two continents.

The research was conducted between September 28, 2024, and December 6, 2024, with the survey taking participants an average of 15 minutes to complete. Additionally, two, one-on-one interviews were conducted between October and December, with durations ranging from 36 minutes to one hour and eight minutes. A total of 27 women participated in the survey. The

sample was intentionally diverse, encompassing a range of ages and geographic locations, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how interconnected factors — culture, gender and PR — shape the experiences of female professionals in the field. The survey design is listed below:

Quantitative Questions:

- What type of PR do you practice?
- What is your job title?
- What is your age range?
- Have you experienced types of discrimination in your PR career? (e.g., age, disability, sexual, gender identity, pregnancy, religion, nationality, etc.)
- Would you say there is a pay gap in your profession?

Likert Scale Statements (Rate your level of agreement):

- In my workplace, I see others frame women as less powerful than men (in tasks and overall career outlook).
- I notice gendered language (language with a bias toward a particular sex or social gender) in my workplace.
- I believe the code of ethics in my country/region/organization influences my communication style and those of other women.
- I feel supported in balancing/maintaining personal and family life at my organization.
- Women at my organization support others aiming to achieve senior roles.
- I believe attaining a senior role is achievable within my organization.

Qualitative Questions:

- What country/region do you practice PR in?
- How many years of experience do you have working in PR?
- How do you, as a woman working in PR, define the profession?
- How do you think others perceive women's communication styles in PR?
- How is your organization working to get more women into management positions?
- How has the westernized PR perspective influenced PR practices within your country/career/education?

The survey was distributed electronically via Microsoft Forms, where participants were invited to complete it voluntarily. An option to provide email addresses was included for those wishing to receive the study's findings.

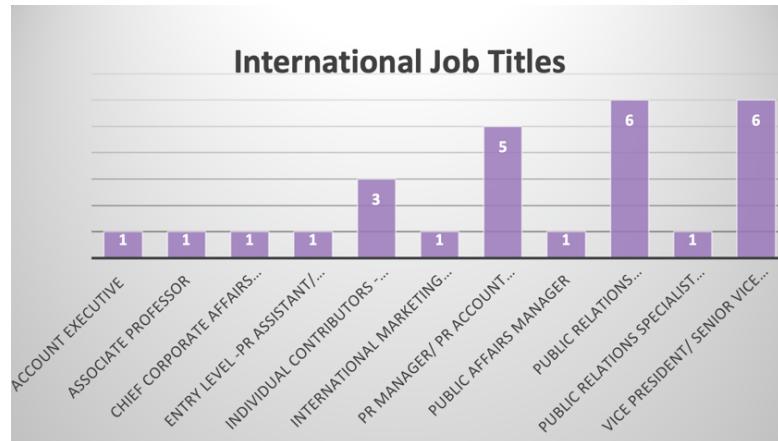
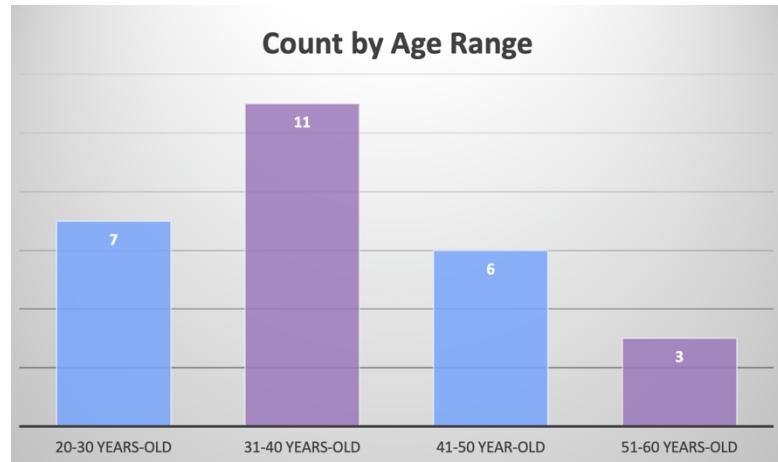
Quantitative data was analyzed using Excel, with descriptive statistics summarizing demographic details and inferential statistics exploring relationships between variables, such as the impact of experience and geography on gender perceptions in PR. Qualitative responses were examined through thematic analysis to uncover common themes, including participants' definitions of the profession, experiences of discrimination, and perceptions of organizational efforts to promote women in leadership. Interview transcripts were reviewed to identify recurring themes and patterns, offering deeper insights beyond the limitations of survey data.

The survey and interview methodologies ensured broad international participation within the study's timeframe. While the study captured diverse perspectives, limitations included a relatively small sample size and potential regional biases due to the concentration of responses from Western countries. Future research with a larger and more geographically diverse sample could provide more comprehensive insights. This survey approach enabled the researcher to reach a wide and diverse population, maximizing the study's potential to uncover varied perspectives on the intersection of culture, gender and PR.

IV. RESULTS

This study revealed the connectivity of international PR practitioners through shared and learned experiences. A total of 27 women participated in the survey, representing diverse professional and cultural perspectives. Respondents were distributed across the following countries: Eight from the U.S. (31% of the total); four from Canada (15%); three from Spain (12%); two from France (8%); two from Switzerland (8%); two from the U.K. (8%); two from the U.S./U.K. (8%); one from Italy (4%); one from Portugal (4%) and one from Europe (4%). (Some women practice across multiple countries, resulting in overlapping numbers, and one respondent didn't give specific country but is from the EU.)

When asked to define PR, participants emphasized its dynamic and multifaceted nature, blending communication, strategy and relationship-building. They described PR as the art of shaping narratives, managing reputations and fostering connections between organizations and their audiences. Many highlighted the importance of storytelling, with one participant noting that PR



requires emotional intelligence, creativity and adaptability to navigate both opportunities and crises. Location also serves as a distinct niche in which the profession is practiced. For more detailed results, please view the appendix.

A respondent from Canada shared:

“As a woman and a Black woman in PR, I define the profession as a powerful tool for amplifying diverse voices, shaping narratives, and creating spaces for stories that might otherwise go unheard, all while navigating the unique challenges of being a minority in the field.”

This reflection underscores the role of PR in not just business but also as a behavioral discipline that leverages human connection and empathy.

The summative scales are below:

In my workplace, I see others frame women as less powerful than men (from work-related tasks to overall career-outlook).

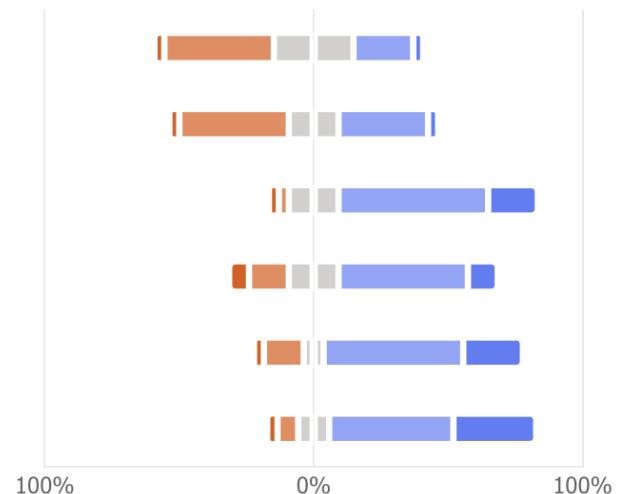
I notice gendered language (language that has a bias towards a particular sex or social gender) in my workplace.

I believe the code of ethics in my country/region/organization plays a role in my communication style and other women's...

I feel support from others to balance/maintain a personal life and/or family life at my organization.

At my organization, I think women show support to women who aim to fulfill senior roles.

I believe attaining a higher, senior role is attainable within my organization.



The survey revealed that women's communication styles in PR are predominantly described/viewed as empathetic and considerate, with 59.26% of participants selecting these descriptors compared to 33.33% who highlighted direct and clear (and 7.41% other). Two participants selected "Other," specifying "both" descriptors. The women showed an

understanding that the field demands a deep understanding of human behavior, market trends and media landscapes. This often includes cultivating relationships with journalists, stakeholders, and partners to amplify brand visibility and engagement. A significant proportion of respondents (48.15%) reported experiencing discrimination in their PR careers, including age, gender and other factors. (No, 29.63%, somewhat, 18.52%, prefer not to say, 3.7%). Concerns about salary inequality were prevalent, with 56% of respondents agreeing that there is a pay gap in the PR profession (11% disagreeing, and 33% expressing uncertainty).

Key trends included:

- Senior-level professionals (e.g., SVPs) highlighting systemic barriers within specific industries.
- A recurring acknowledgment of challenges in achieving senior roles and balancing personal life within their organizations.
- Recognition of organizational efforts, such as diversity and inclusion initiatives, aimed at supporting women in leadership roles.

Respondents noted the impact of Westernized PR practices.

Key themes included:

- Participants acknowledged the adaptation of American and British communication norms as beneficial for advancing their careers.
- Western practices have increasingly emphasized transparency, ethics and corporate social responsibility (CSR).
- Many respondents credited Western institutions with shaping their PR education and professional approaches.
- While some professionals embraced Western practices, others tailored their approaches to align with local cultural contexts.

A participant from the U.K. reflected:

“The Westernized PR perspective has significantly influenced PR practices in my country by introducing global communication standards, such as media relations, branding, and crisis management strategies.”

Overall, respondents viewed Western PR practices as providing a solid foundation for strategic, ethical, and innovative communication. However, they stressed the importance of adapting these practices to cultural and contextual nuances to maximize their global impact. (See Appendix for more.)

One-on-one interviews:

1.) Giulia Massarenti is the head of PR at Geoffrey B. Small, a luxury clothing brand, and a professor at IED Istituto Europeo di Design in Milan, Italy. She represents a niche brand catering to an exclusive clientele. Massarenti’s career journey began as a student in Spain, progressing through roles as an intern at *Vogue Spain*, a freelancer, and later a professor. Despite her achievements, she perceives the industry as “very non-inclusive,” characterized by persistent discrimination embedded in daily practices. According to Massarenti, success and recognition in the field are often contingent upon being affluent, white, male and well-connected, resulting in limited representation across gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic lines.

With nine years of experience in PR, Massarenti is vocal about the lack of support in the industry, highlighting instances of gendered language and sexist dynamics. She identifies wealth

and nepotistic networking as significant factors, enabling professionals to ascend to leadership roles. She also notes that cultural challenges are among the most difficult aspects of working internationally. Throughout her career, Massarenti has observed a pattern of fear-based interactions between senior and junior women, often influenced by age disparities. She further noted that women tend to excel in diplomacy and conflict mitigation, as evidenced through her teaching experiences.

Massarenti's observations reveal numerous forms of workplace discrimination, including illegal contracts, unpaid labor, salary inequities, threats, abusive behavior, workplace harassment (mobbing), and unequal treatment compared to male colleagues. She cited examples where identical ideas were dismissed when proposed by women but later approved when suggested by male counterparts. Although she is unfamiliar with the term "velvet ghetto," Massarenti concurs with the notion that women were historically seen as the "smarter choice" for PR roles to avoid disrupting traditional male-dominated domains. Reflecting on the future of women in PR, she expresses cautious optimism: "I would like to be positive. I feel like the younger generation, Gen Z, is opening up the conversation a little more. My generation was silent for so long."

2.) Nicola Spencer (Watson), a communication business partner for Transport for Wales, began her career through unpaid work experience at a consumer-centric agency. Reflecting on her early days, she noted the intense, fast-paced environment and long hours that shaped her initial understanding of the field. Over time, she transitioned to internal communications, a move that allowed her to observe the profession from a different perspective.

Spencer shared how her perspective has evolved. Looking back, she recognizes the bias and discrimination around her, which became even more pronounced when she entered the

corporate, in-house environment. She described these settings as hierarchical structures often dominated by senior men, creating what felt like an "echo chamber" where women's voices went unheard. This experience, she explained, is not unique to communications but reflects barriers women face across various industries.

Spencer also spoke candidly about the challenges of balancing motherhood with a career in communications. After pausing her career to have a child, she found it particularly difficult to navigate the constantly evolving nature of the field. Despite the inherent flexibility of PR and communications, being a working mother in this sector remains a significant challenge.

On the IPR front, Spencer emphasized the importance of cultural sensitivity in practices. She highlighted the need to respectfully acknowledge cultural differences while avoiding overcomplication or tokenism. Using simple and clear language, especially in global communications, is key to ensuring messages resonate across diverse audiences. She also stressed the critical role PR professionals play in shaping perceptions of businesses and advocates for building a strong foundation of consistent PR efforts. When the "velvet ghetto" phenomenon was explained, she agreed women often excel in PR due to traits such as empathy and audience understanding, which she considers inherently feminine qualities.

The discussion also touched on the liberating experience of working under a female CEO and the value of supportive connections and friendships in the workplace. Spencer underscored the ongoing struggles women face in the workforce, succinctly summarizing her views with the observation: "The world of work isn't geared toward women," and being a working mother in communication is hard.

The insights gathered emphasize the importance of continued efforts to address inequality and promote inclusive practices in the field, while maximizing its impact globally.

V. DISCUSSION

The trajectory ahead holds significant potential for progress and meaningful change. This study has shed light on key issues within the field of PR, calling action to similar attitudes, feelings and trends across continents. The dynamics found in existing research and newer research continue to perpetuate gender stereotypes and stigmas at both local and regional levels. Meaningful change appears achievable only when the professional narrative portraying women as less powerful than men is fundamentally reshaped. Relationships, regardless of gender, play an essential role in ethical decision-making, highlighting their importance in fostering equity. This has critical implications for practitioners navigating diverse workforces and establishing ethical standards and procedures. To address these challenges effectively, it is imperative to dismantle barriers such as sexism and discrimination, address the gender pay gap, and cultivate leadership styles that rise above traditional gender stereotypes.

Looking ahead, there is optimism that ongoing efforts to close pay gaps, reduce discrimination and cultivate supportive workplace environments will empower women to achieve greater representation in leadership roles within the profession. Fostering stronger support from colleagues and leadership will be crucial in addressing these persistent challenges. Future research should explore how gender perceptions influence the roles women are assigned within PR teams and whether these biases hinder their advancement into leadership positions. By investigating these dynamics, scholars can gain deeper insights into the systemic barriers impacting women in the field and develop practical, evidence-based solutions to promote equity and inclusion. The findings reveal that achieving senior roles remains a challenge for many

women, with systemic barriers such as age discrimination, gender biases and work-life balance pressures hindering their progression.

Also, for the scope of future studies, expanding a longer timeframe or a broader international reach could yield more complex findings. More conversations, even in group-settings, with women from diverse countries, regions and continents would provide valuable perspectives and demonstrate the promise for progress across different cultural and organizational contexts. The study also revealed generational shifts in addressing workplace discrimination. Massarenti's observation that younger professionals are more vocal about inequities offers a glimpse of hope for a more inclusive future. This generational shift reflects broader societal trends toward greater transparency and accountability.

From the summative scale the findings show promise. Most women surveyed work with a majority of other women, or their firm is run by women, making the results more positive correlated. An in-depth analysis is in the Appendix. The descriptive findings suggest that women's communication styles are closely aligned with emotional intelligence and interpersonal sensitivity, traits highly valued in stakeholder relationships. However, the descriptive perceptions also align with broader societal stereotypes of women, emphasizing relational strengths over traditionally "masculine" traits like assertiveness. This framing reflects the PR industry's reliance on soft skills, such as empathy and adaptability, particularly in fostering trust and managing complex dynamics.

This study's findings have implications for PR practice and policy. First, integrating cultural intelligence training could better prepare practitioners for the complexities of global communication. Second, organizations should prioritize inclusive practices, recognizing the

value of diverse perspectives in shaping narratives and fostering connections. Finally, industry-wide advocacy for pay equity and anti-discrimination policies is essential for addressing the systemic barriers identified in this study.

VI. CONCLUSION

PR has undeniably evolved into a global profession shaped by the interplay of cultural and gender dynamics. This research highlights the transformative power of IPR as an intercultural communication practice, emphasizing the need to view cultural differences not as obstacles but as opportunities for innovation and inclusivity. Furthermore, the feminization of the PR industry has brought attention to persistent gender inequities, such as pay gaps, work-life balance challenges and underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. These challenges are shared across many countries, underscoring the need for equitable practices that allow women to thrive professionally. By addressing these barriers, organizations can create a more inclusive environment that values diverse perspectives and fosters advancement opportunities for all. The shared experiences of women in the industry demonstrate the importance of continued exploration in this area. These stories would inspire both current and future female professionals, offering them extra encouragement to achieve success in their careers. For women entering the field, understanding the history, progress and vast opportunities within IPR is essential for building a more equitable and vibrant future for the profession.

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VIII. APPENDIX

Literature Review continued:

The International Public Relations Association (IPRA) has a mission "to unify the profession, raise professional standards all over the world, share knowledge for the benefit of its members, and be the global voice for PR in the public interest." This organization plays a critical role in fostering collaboration and promoting professional growth among PR practitioners globally.

In Europe, a notable initiative involved original interviews with women working in the PR industry across 50 countries, conducted to gather diverse perspectives on their experiences and challenges. This research effort sheds light on the global trends and unique issues faced by women in the field.

The European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) network, particularly its subgroup dedicated to women in PR, is experiencing significant growth in both membership and reach. This expanding network emphasizes the importance of international collaboration and knowledge-sharing to address gender disparities and support the professional development of women in PR.

These initiatives and studies collectively highlight the evolving landscape of PR with a focus on inclusivity, diversity, and global cooperation.

U.S.:

While PR largely remained domestic until the 1960s, social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, Women's Movement, Gay Rights Movement and anti-war activism utilized communication strategies to promote equity and political change. By the 1970s and 1980s, PR

became more international and inclusive, with pioneers like Marilyn Laurie, Ofield Dukes, Moss Kendrix and Inez Kaiser breaking gender and racial barriers, transforming the PR landscape. American PR models are built on the assumption of a democratic political system, where various groups compete for legitimacy, influence and public attention (Public Relations Across the Globe, n.d.).

Around six in 10 PR specialists are women, reflecting the feminized nature of the field. However, decision-making remains predominantly masculinized, and women in PR often earn lower salaries than their male counterparts. Though changes are occurring, certain progress can be seen as slow.

France:

Inspired by the oil industry, other companies sent employees to learn American PR techniques, including methods for shaping public opinion. Esso (a trading name for ExxonMobil) for example, organized public meetings, published a magazine and created educational materials to reshape the public's perception of the oil industry.

Switzerland:

The Global Alliance for PR and Communication Management is a not-for-profit organization whose services include media relations, social media management, content writing, event presence, market research, media training, crisis management and reputation management (Enterie, n.d.).

U.K.

The results indicate that women experience exclusion and discrimination in the workplace, with office culture and its inclusivity toward women heavily influenced by gender

balance. Additionally, there is a gap in research concerning office culture and leadership in PR, particularly as most existing studies are concentrated in the U.S.

Spain:

One significant challenge is the denial of such discrimination, where discussions often dismiss the existence of bias, based on unsubstantiated opinions contributing to a reluctance among organizations and even professional women to confront the issue.

Although women make up the majority of the workforce and demonstrate effectiveness in leadership roles, they face obstacles in advancing to higher positions, highlighting a complex dynamic referred to as the “female leadership advantage” logic (Hsu et al., 2022). This phenomenon encounters limits, particularly in securing investment opportunities, which further exacerbates the gender pay gap for female executives. The theory elucidates these challenges by suggesting that traditional perceptions of leadership, which favor male attributes, render women less aligned with management roles. Consequently, women are often perceived as vulnerable and conflict-averse, while men are viewed as more competitive and assertive. Moreover, women from ethnic minority backgrounds encounter even greater challenges.

Italy:

Through strategic PR efforts, Olivetti transformed from a geographically peripheral company into a central market player, first in Italy and later the international stage.

Portugal:

In Portugal, a qualitative study focused on understanding women's perspectives on workplace culture, socialization, and leadership styles within the PR industry. Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 women, including eight in leadership positions,

between March and July 2020. This research provided valuable insights into gender dynamics, organizational culture, and the barriers women encounter in advancing their careers.

In-depth survey results:

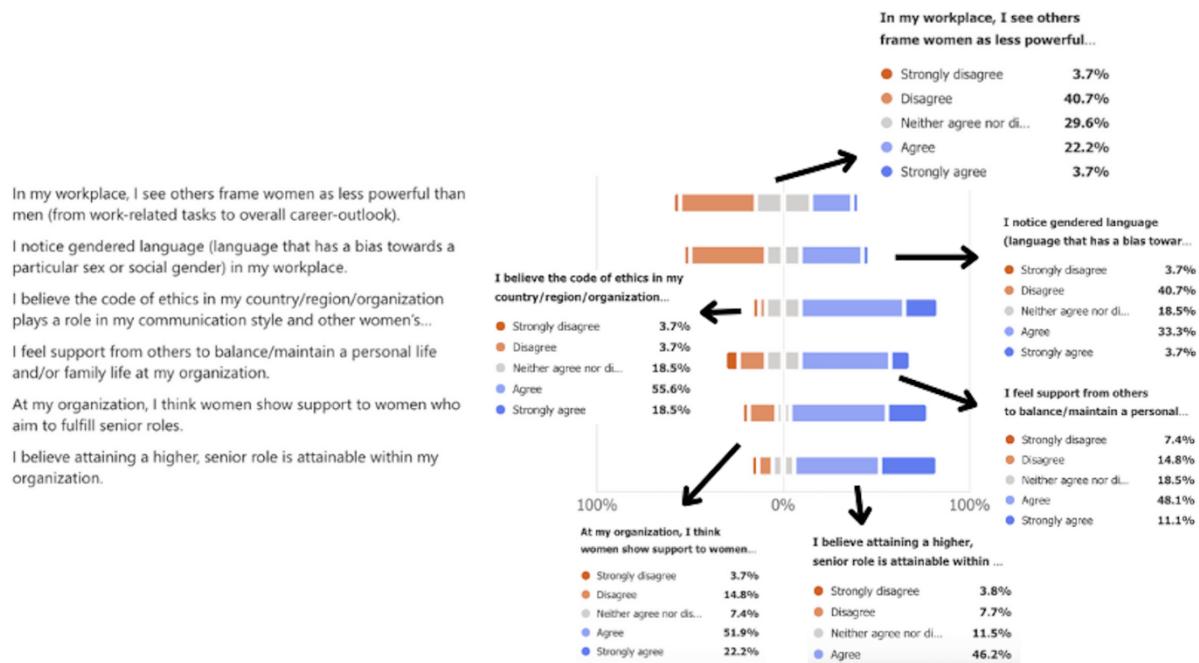
Count by age range: The participants represented an average age range of 36.9 years. Most women were 31-40 years-old (41%). The average number of years of experience in PR for the participants is approximately 13.5 years. Experience ranges from one year to 30 plus years.

International job title: Their workplaces were distributed as follows: 13% in media relations, 13% in strategic communications, 10% in-house, 10% in crisis management, 8% in agency setting, 8% in event management, 8% in global PR, 8% in reputation management, 8% in online/social media communications, 4% in public affairs, 4% in investor/financial relations, 3% in government relations and 1% in community relations. (The majority of women practice multiple types.) The top three most held job title groups were: PR Office/Head of PR/President, Vice President/Senior Vice President/ Senior Manager/Director and Other.

Likert scale in depth:

In the workplace, the majority (40.7%) of women disagree that others frame women as less powerful than men, with 22.3% agreeing and 40.7% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. As for noticing gendered language in the workplace, the majority disagrees (40.7%), with 33.3% agreeing and 18.5 neither agreeing nor disagreeing. The code of ethics in one's country/region/organization plays a vital role in communication styles (55.6% agreeing, 18.5% neither agreeing nor disagreeing and 3.7% disagreeing). Forty-eight percent of women show that others at their organization show support to maintain/balance a personal life and/or family life.

As for women showing support to other women fulfilling senior roles, there is high agreement (51.9% and 22.2% strongly agree, though 14.8% disagreed and 3.7% strongly disagree). Finally, 46.2% of respondents believe attaining a higher, senior role is possible within their organization, 11.5% neither agree nor disagree and 7.7% disagree.



Results to how the westernized PR perspective shaped PR practices within respondents' country/career/education:

Survey responses highlight that the westernized PR perspective has significantly influenced global PR practices, careers and education in both positive and adaptive ways. Several participants emphasized the adoption of British or American communication styles as a career strategy, with some noting the agility required to adapt these approaches to local

contexts. Westernized PR practices, particularly media relations, storytelling, reputation management and alignment with business objectives, have become foundational across industries, ensuring global standards and measurable outcomes like ROI, brand awareness and audience engagement.

Some respondents acknowledged the influence of Western trends, such as DEI which have prompted a shift toward more inclusive and culturally adaptive PR strategies. Others noted the pressure from local clients to appeal to international media due to online accessibility, which demands a "global" angle in PR campaigns. While the westernized perspective provides structure and strategic focus, many respondents highlighted the importance of balancing global PR principles with the unique cultural voices and values of underrepresented communities, ensuring campaigns resonate authentically.

How the respondents defined working in the PR field, as a woman (continued):

Women reveled a multifaceted definition of the profession, emphasizing its dynamic and strategic nature. PR is widely described as the art of storytelling reputation management and relationship-building, where professionals craft impactful narratives to connect brands with their audiences. It is seen as a behavioral and communication-focused discipline that also aligns closely with business objectives and requires strategic foresight.

Several respondents touched on the unique experiences of women in PR. Some noted the strong presence of women in the field, especially in leadership roles, while acknowledging ongoing challenges such as competitiveness among women or the lack of diversity, particularly for

BAME women. Others highlighted the power of PR to amplify diverse voices, shape underrepresented narratives, and create spaces for inclusivity.

How the respondents see their organization moving forward to get more women into management positions:

Some respondents highlighted that women already represent a significant proportion of their workforce, with many occupying senior leadership roles, reflecting a strong commitment to gender equity. For example, some organizations have women CEOs and leadership committees focused on female empowerment. Several organizations have formal mentorship initiatives to connect aspiring female leaders with senior professionals, fostering guidance and growth opportunities. However, some respondents indicated a lack of intention or clear plans to improve gender representation in management, citing challenges like male-dominated industries or structural constraints. Smaller agencies and industries with existing gender inequalities face particular challenges in achieving equity. Overall, while some organizations have made notable progress, others continue to struggle with implementing actionable steps to uplift women into senior roles.