

Evaluating the Need for a Canadian Women in Ophthalmology Mentorship Program: Trainee and Physician Perspectives

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Introduction

- Gender disparities in ophthalmology remain a significant challenge where female-identifying physicians face systemic barriers that limit career advancement and representation in leadership and academic roles.^{1,2}
- Limited access to structured mentorship, particularly for residents and early-career physicians, has been identified as a major barrier to equity.³⁻⁵
- Female ophthalmologists and trainees frequently report reduced mentorship opportunities and higher rates of discrimination and unequal learning opportunities compared to male colleagues.⁶
- A Canadian study found that 69% of participants viewed relationships with female ophthalmologists at similar career stages as professionally supportive, however, women continue to report fewer available mentorship opportunities.⁷

Study Aim

This study aims to evaluate the current perspectives and needs of potential mentees and mentors among Canadian ophthalmology trainees and practitioners.

Methodology

Study Design, Survey Development, and Sampling

We used a cross-sectional survey design. The survey was adapted from the National Survey of Canadian Women in Ophthalmology (2021) and further developed based on existing literature and identified mentorship needs. We distributed the survey using a purposeful and snowball sampling strategy. Participants were recruited from the Canadian Ophthalmological Society email distribution list, Canadian Council of Ophthalmology Residents mailing list, and word-of-mouth.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

We included participants if they were:

- Female-identifying ophthalmologists or residents currently practicing or training in Canada.
- Able to provide informed consent and complete the survey in either English or French.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from free-text responses were coded and thematically analyzed. We used descriptive statistics to analyze quantitative data on Qualtrics and Microsoft Excel. Comparative analysis between subgroups (prospective mentors and mentees) were conducted using the Mann-Whitney U test.

Results

Geographical Area of Current Training or Practice (n=68)

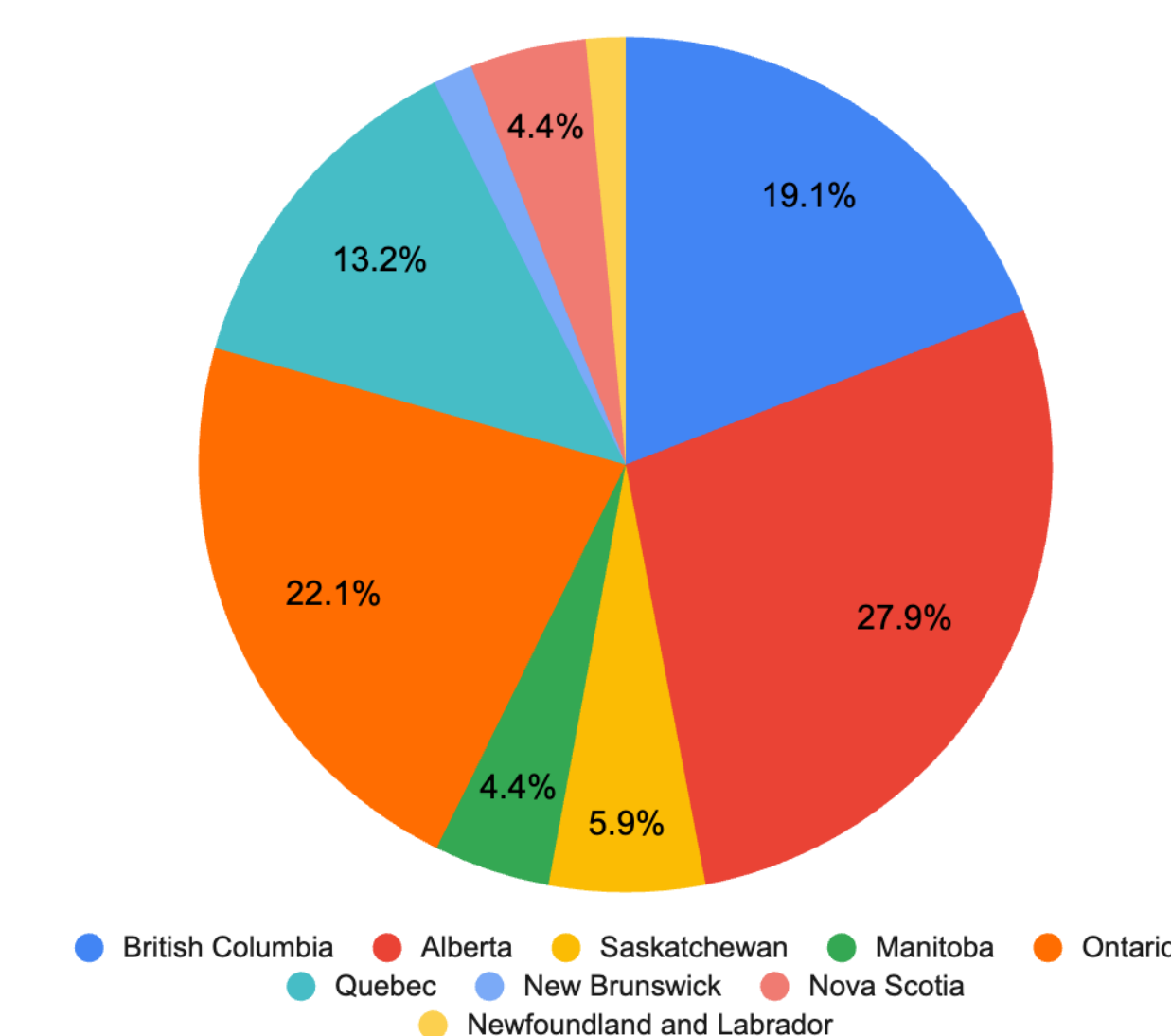


Figure 1. Demographic Details

Interest in Mentee/Mentor Partnership (n=68)

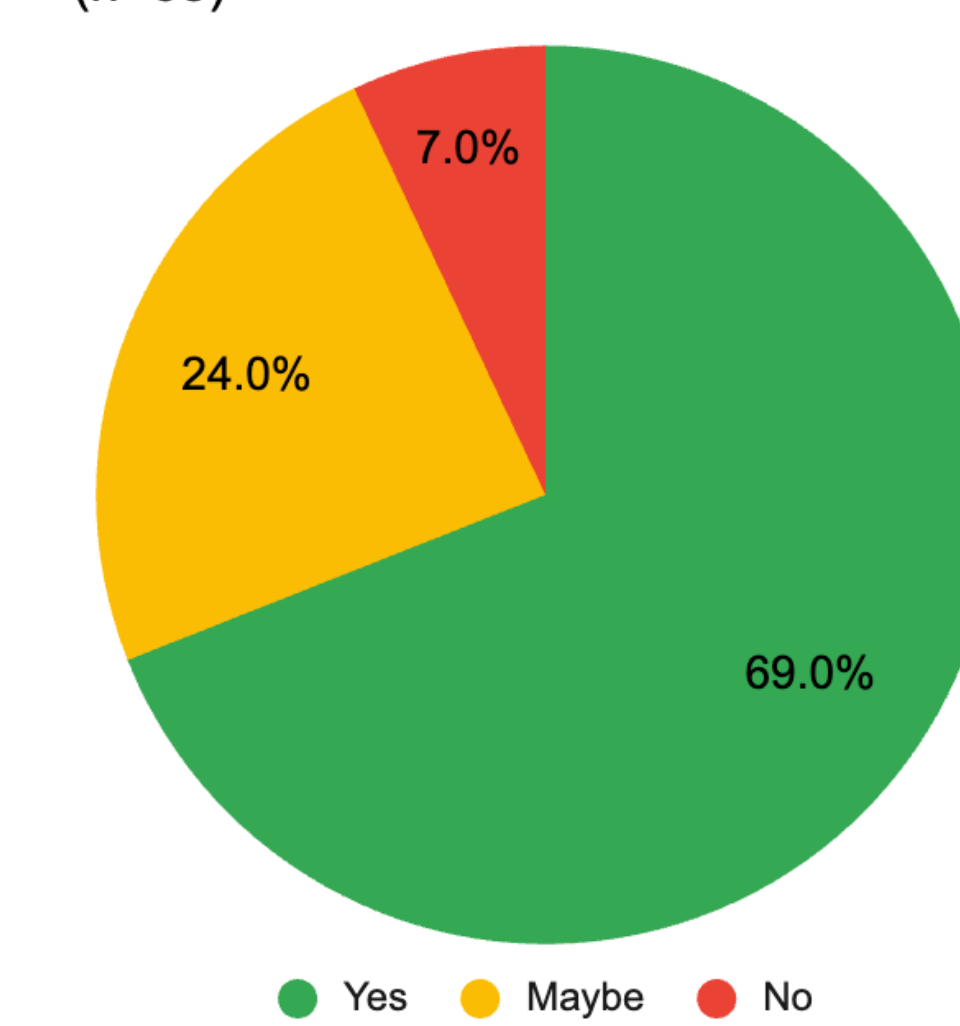


Figure 2. Interest in Mentorship Pairing

- N=68 participants (26 trainees and 42 practitioners across Canada)
- The largest proportion of prospective mentors practice as general ophthalmologists (38%), with 10-20 years in practice (41%), and combined community and academic practice sites were the most common (47%).
- For prospective mentees, over 1/3 were in their third year of residency training (35%).

Aspects of Guidance Provided by Mentors

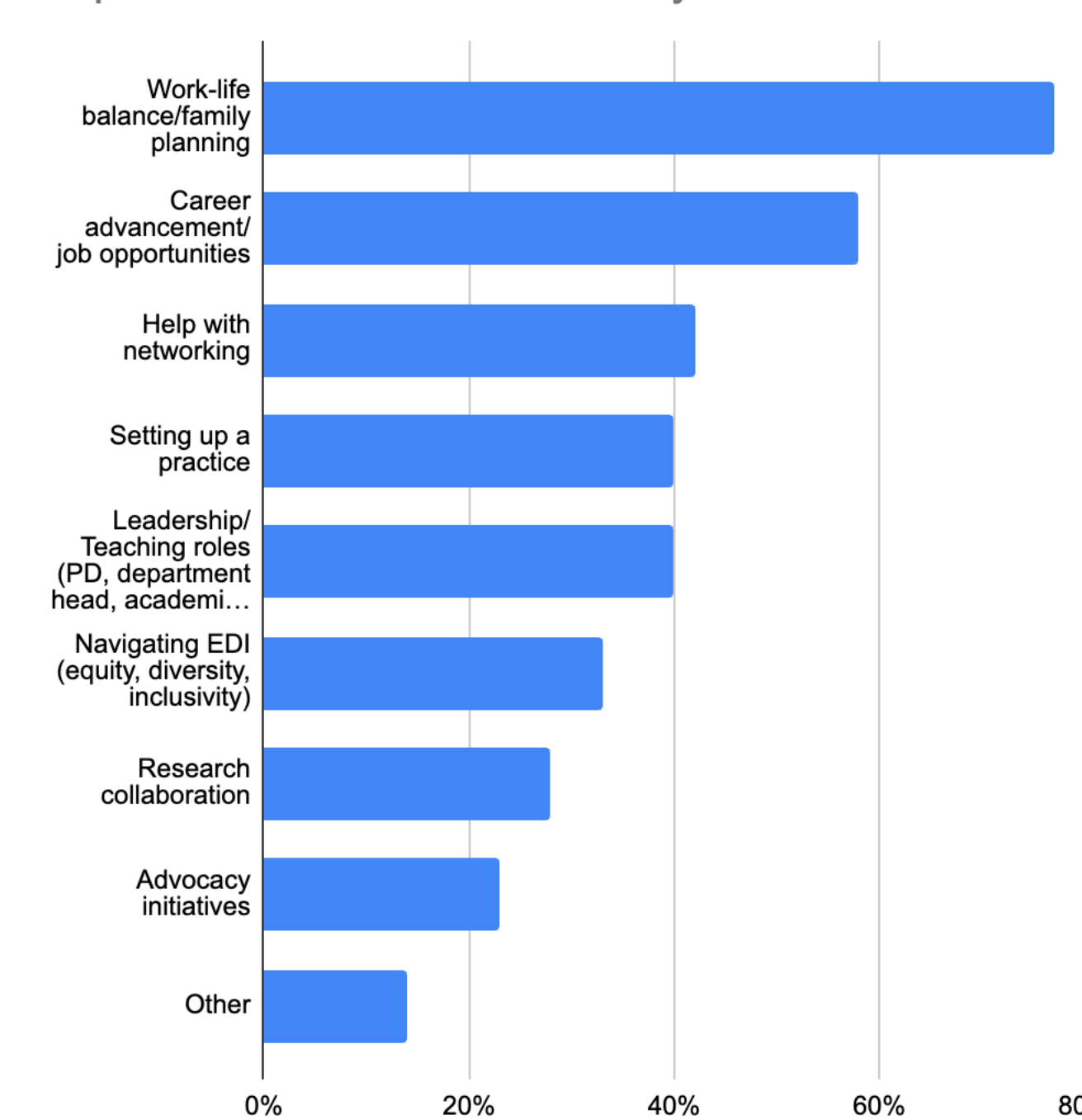


Figure 3. Mentor's Areas of Guidance

Mentees' Goals for Mentorship Pairing

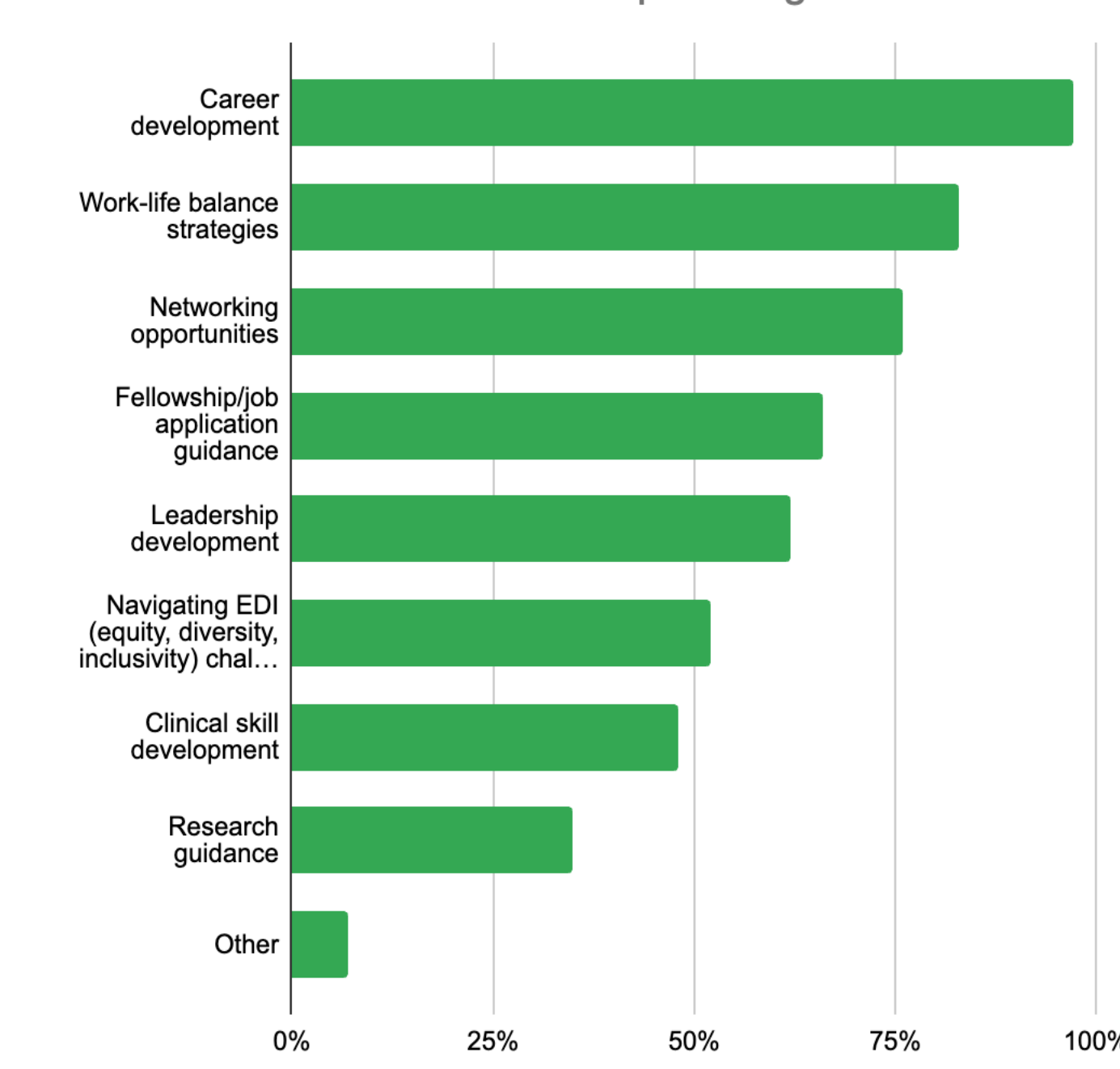
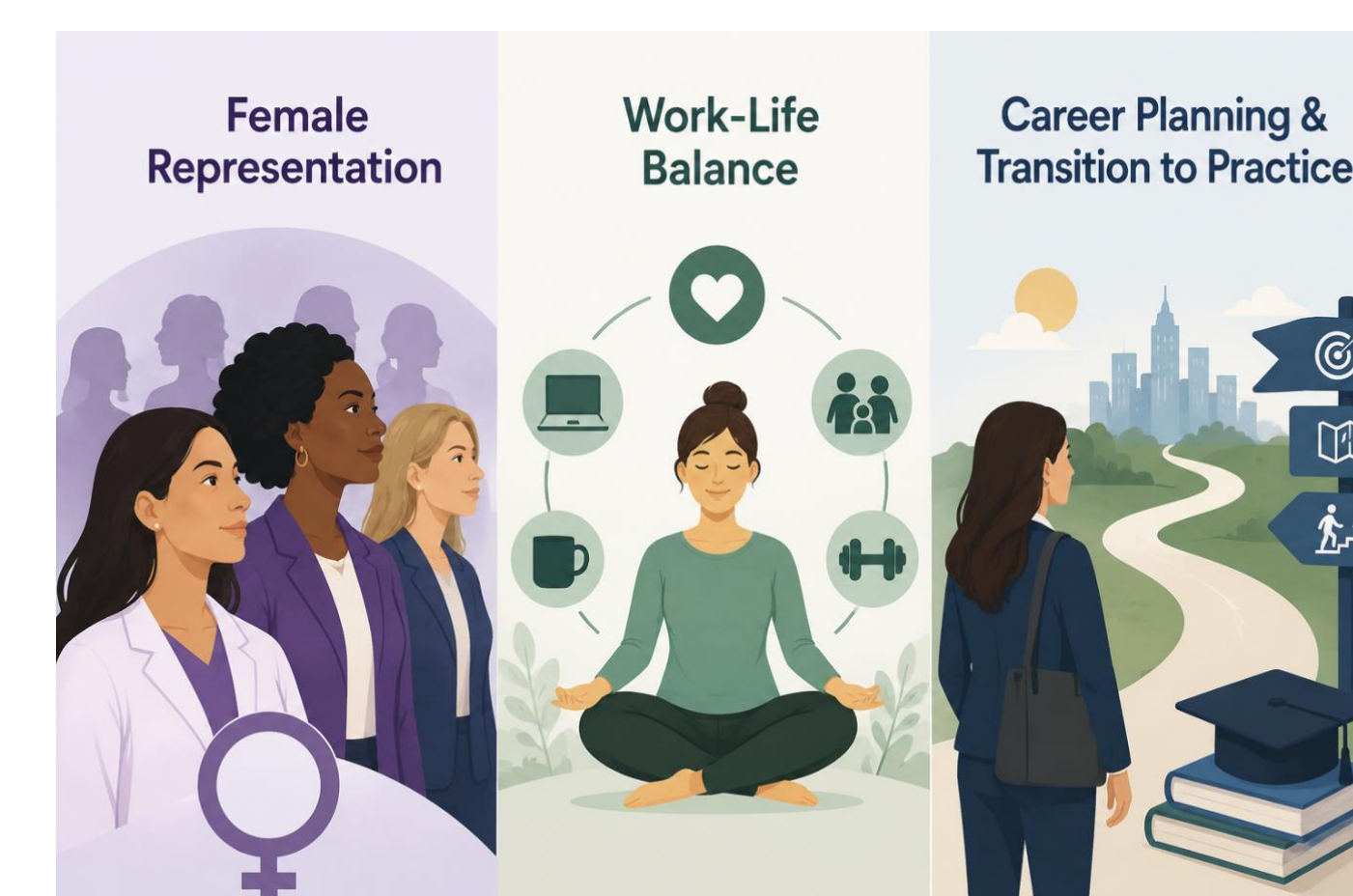


Figure 4. Mentee's Goals for Mentorship

- Both groups (mentors and mentees) demonstrated similar levels of agreement regarding the need for a national female mentorship program ($p = 0.136$).
- Practitioners reported significantly greater difficulty accessing meaningful female mentorship compared to residents ($p = 0.020$, $r = 0.26$).

Thematic Analysis

- We identified three themes that describe the mentorship gaps participants wanted addressed during both training and clinical practice:



Discussion

- Our study findings demonstrate a strong interest in a formal, national mentorship program for female ophthalmologists in Canada.
- The high concordance across prospective mentors and mentees suggests a shared recognition that there are existing gaps in female mentorship opportunities across all career stages – especially given the high demands of both residency and practice.
- Both quantitative and qualitative findings highlight that mentorship needs extend beyond traditional career guidance to include gender-specific challenges, work-life integration, and longitudinal professional development.
- These findings are consistent with prior studies demonstrating that women benefit from mentors who share similar lived experiences, particularly in male-dominated specialties, where mentorship can support identity formation, resilience, and career advancement.^{8,9}

Conclusion

- In this study, we found that ophthalmology trainees and residents across Canada expressed strong interest in a national mentorship program.
- The key features of the mentorship program that participants would like to see include flexible, cross-province matching, and the option to meet virtually or over the phone.
- The study findings can inform the future development of mentorship initiatives for Canadian women in ophthalmology, ultimately fostering professional growth, enhancing career satisfaction, and addressing gender-specific challenges in the field.

Contact and References

Contact

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