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CAN WOMEN HAVE IT ALL?
CHALLENGES IN NAVIGATING WORK-FAMILY BALANCE
IN THE CONSULTING INDUSTRY

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Abstract

This thesis explores the challenges women face in the consulting industry, focusing on navigating career progression and balancing work and family. Through qualitative analysis using 22 semi-structured interviews with female consultants, the research identified key systematic barriers, such as gendered biases and work-family conflict. To illustrate these findings, we conceptualized a theoretical framework demonstrating how the interplay of consulting culture, family compatibility, and gender dynamics creates compounded challenges. The findings suggest that while progress has been made, significant obstacles remain, especially for women seeking senior roles. The study provides managerial implications for consulting firms to foster an environment prioritizing inclusivity, flexibility, and equity.

Keywords

Women in Consulting, Career Progression, Work-Family Conflict, Work-Family Balance, Gender Barriers, Gender Dynamics, Female Leadership

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, global representation of women in corporate leadership has seen notable progress, with women now holding 29% of executive positions, up from 17% in 2015. However, this progress masks systemic imbalances along the corporate ladder: While women account for 48% of entry-level positions, men disproportionately dominate by comprising 69% of executive roles (McKinsey & Company 2024b). These figures highlight the persistent barriers to gender equality in senior management, demonstrating that corporate leadership falls short of achieving equitable representation.

In Germany, the imbalance is even more pronounced, where women hold just 17.4% of management board roles and a mere 4.4% of CEO positions (AllBright Stiftung GmbH 2023). The proportion of women diminishes sharply as roles become more senior, reflecting deeply ingrained structural barriers that continue to hinder gender equality in corporate leadership.

The consulting industry in Germany reflects these broader trends. While women now account for 28% of consultants overall, their representation significantly declines at senior levels. Female consultants make up 38% of entry-level positions, but the share drops to 25% at mid-level roles and just 14.5% at senior positions (Lünendonk 2024).

It is noteworthy that a considerable number of consulting firms have already initiated measures to address this imbalance, including the implementation of mentoring programs and events aimed at promoting diversity. These efforts reflect a growing recognition across the general workplace that diversity enhances performance, with research indicating that greater gender diversity on boards positively affects firm value (Campbell and Mínguez-Vera 2008). Moreover, gender diversity is seen to be particularly advantageous in complex settings like consulting, where dynamic challenges and multifaceted decision-making benefit from diverse leadership styles and problem-solving approaches (Francoeur, Labelle, and Sinclair-Desgagné 2008).

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However, despite the prestigious nature of consulting careers as well some industry progress, many women still either struggle to secure or maintain such positions (Lünendonk 2024). The persisting gender disparities make the consulting industry a compelling case to examine systemic dynamics and deeply-rooted factors to female career advancement, proposing the existence of unique barriers that amplify inequality and disproportionately affect women. The research is guided by the primary question:

- *What challenges do women face in balancing the demands of their careers alongside family responsibilities?*

By addressing this question, this thesis seeks to examine whether women can truly “have it all” – successfully balancing the demands of work and family. Moreover, it aims to contribute to the understanding of deeply rooted structural and cultural barriers that hinder women’s advancement and offers managerial recommendations for fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for female consultants at all career levels.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview of the Consulting Industry and Culture

This brief overview aims to provide a foundational understanding of the consulting industry, offering a scientific perspective as a basis for analyzing the experiences of women in this field. Despite the consulting industry’s substantial practical importance and its role in shaping the strategic direction of organizations worldwide, academic research on consulting remains relatively scarce (Nissen 2019). Broadly, consulting encompasses professional services that assist organizations in improving performance, addressing complex challenges, and driving strategic growth. It is defined as the provision of specialized guidance to clients to address business challenges or accomplish organizational objectives (Kubr 2002; Kipping and Clark 2012). Prominently, McKinsey & Company, Boston Consulting Group (BCG), and Bain & Company – collectively known as MBB or the Big Three – are recognized as the leading strategy consulting firms globally. They are esteemed for their extensive client portfolios, global presence, and

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significant influence on industry standards. Throughout this thesis, MBB will serve as primary examples to provide context and insights into the consulting industry.

Consulting firms, particularly MBB, act as career catalysts by emphasizing growth and development through skill-building, exposure to high-impact projects, and access to influential networks. Consultants gain expertise and experiences that make them highly sought after by prestigious companies or prepare them to launch their own ventures. This emphasis on accelerated career growth and rapid learning positions consulting as a launchpad and key motivator for ambitious young professionals seeking to build a strong career foundation (Adams 2022).

Generally, the consulting industry is defined by a high-intensity culture that emphasizes constant availability, long working hours, intense workloads, and full dedication, where commitment is often equated with visibility and presenteeism (Taminiau et al. 2022). This culture is further reinforced by its traditionally male-dominated nature, which values masculine traits such as assertiveness and competitiveness, and reinforces the underrepresentation of women, particularly in senior roles. Career progression in consulting relies on informal networks and internal visibility, with social activities such as after-work gatherings playing a crucial role in networking and advancement (Taminiau et al. 2022; Heilman, Caleo, and Manzi 2024). These prevailing norms, aligned with stereotypically masculine attributes, contribute to the perception that women are less suited for leadership positions. Heilman, Caleo, and Manzi (2024) found that, even when women do succeed in these environments, they often face additional scrutiny and pressure to demonstrate their competence while also navigating the biases that arise from gender stereotypes.

Despite incremental progress in gender parity initiatives, disparities remain, as illustrated in **Appendix 2**, which summarizes the gender composition across the three major consulting firms. While the MBB firms have seen some progress in the representation of female leaders, women remain significantly underrepresented in key leadership positions. This underscores the

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persisting challenges of gender equality in consulting and illustrates the importance of our study (McKinsey & Company 2024a; Boston Consulting Group 2024; Bain & Company 2024).

2.2. Dynamics of Work-Family Balance (Individual Part – Victoria Henkel)

‘Work-family balance’ refers to a state of equilibrium between work and family domains, where resources and demands are effectively managed to enable participation in both areas, marked by the absence of conflict (Jain and Nair 2013; Duncan and Pettigrew 2012).

Work-family balance extends the concept of ‘work-life balance’ by emphasizing the particular challenges women face. Especially the ‘work-family conflict’ remains a significant barrier to women’s progression into senior management roles (Buddhapriya 2009).

2.2.1. Work-Family Conflict: A Barrier to Balance

Work-family conflict arises from the inherent incompatibility of work and family responsibilities (Sirgy and Lee 2018; Rincy and Panchanatham 2014). Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) first conceptualized work-family conflict as the interference of work with family responsibilities, emphasizing the challenges individuals face in managing competing demands (Thompson, Beauvais, and Lyness 1999). For women, this dual responsibility often intensifies after motherhood (Lakshmi and Prasanth 2018). Frone, Russel, and Cooper (1992) later introduced a bi-directional concept of work-family conflict identifying two distinct approaches: ‘family interference with work’ and ‘work interference with family’ (Boyar et al. 2008). These dynamics can significantly impact overall life satisfaction as emotions or demands transfer between domains, a process explained by Spillover Theory (Boles, Howard, and Howard Donofrio 2001). Negative spillovers increase work-family conflict, while positive spillovers can improve work-family balance, such as happiness at work enhancing happiness at home (Byron 2005; Sundaresan and Lakshmi 2014). Greenhaus and Powell (2006) expanded this view with the ‘work-family enrichment’ framework, highlighting how experiences in one role can enhance performance and well-being in the other (Jain and Nair 2013).

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Work-family conflict has tangible consequences, particularly for women, as it imposes significant constraints on their career choices, limits advancement opportunities and forces them to navigate a challenging crossroad: pursuing an active career or prioritizing family (Buddhapriya 2009). A successful work-family balance is achieved when individuals can engage fully in both work and personal roles while minimizing conflict.

2.2.2. Factors Influencing Work-Family Balance and Conflict

Factors influencing work-family conflict can be grouped into three main categories: work-related variables, non-work-related variables, and individual or demographic factors (Byron 2005; Van Der Lippe, Jager, and Kops 2006). Work-related factors typically increase work interference with family, whereas non-work-related factors raise family interference with work. However, some variables like stress, significantly affect both work interference with family and family interference with work (Byron 2005).

2.2.2.1. Work-Related Factors

Work-related demands, such as job responsibilities, long hours, or work overload, create time- and strain-based conflicts, intensify work interference with family, especially in high-intensity careers, where work requirements frequently intrude on family time and that demand constant availability as well as full commitment (Kossek and Lee 2017; Bianchi and Milkie 2010; Byron 2005; Jain and Nair 2013; Taminiau et al. 2022).

Consulting culture, as defined above, further increases these challenges, particularly for women balancing work and family. Despite HR policies promoting flexibility, cultural expectations of presenteeism and visibility and the reliance on informal networks for career progression often limit the effectiveness of such measures, disproportionately impacting women (Taminiau et al. 2022).

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Work-related support and organizational resources like work environment and policies, significantly influence employees' ability to balance work and family responsibilities and can mitigate work-family conflict (Brotheridge and Lee 2005). Resources such as flexible work arrangements, job autonomy, and remote work opportunities enhance employee satisfaction by providing support and flexibility, improving work-family balance through reduced commuting time, enhanced productivity, and freed-up personal time (Glendon, Thompson, and Myers 2007; Jain and Nair 2013; Facer and Wadsworth 2008; van der Lippe and Lippényi 2020).

For women in particular, flexible work arrangements play a crucial role in employment decisions, as many are likely to leave organizations that fail to provide such flexibility (Deloitte 2024). A study by Lünendonk (2024) confirms the particular importance for women, revealing that 76% of women desire greater flexibility in working hours, compared to just 36% of men.

Beyond conflict mitigation, these organizational resources also create opportunities for positive spillover, fostering work-family enrichment (Jain and Nair 2013).

However, the presence of flexible work policies alone is insufficient, as cultural biases, stigma, and fears of negative career consequences often discourage employees, particularly in high-intensity industries like consulting, from utilizing these options (Kossek and Lee 2017; Sirgy and Lee 2018; Rebelo 2019), underscoring the need to address these barriers to fully realize the benefits of flexible work arrangements (Piszczek and Berg 2014).

To make these policies effective, organizations must foster a culture that actively supports their use – a 'supportive work-family culture'. Research indicates that a supportive work-family culture can significantly reduce work-family conflict, particularly for women who often bear greater family obligations (Byron 2005; van der Lippe and Lippényi 2020). Managerial support plays a crucial role in the success of these initiatives and the creation of a supportive work-family culture. Family-supportive supervisors who actively promote work-family balance by informing employees about available policies and offering emotional and logistical support can

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significantly decrease work interference with family (Kossek and Lee 2017). Leadership that emphasizes flexibility not only reduces stress but also fosters work-family enrichment, which can, in some cases, even decrease the need for formal flexible work arrangements (Kyei-Frimpong et al. 2024; Kim and Gong 2017). In high-stress industries like consulting, empowering leaders are particularly effective in establishing work-family balance.

While a supportive work-family culture benefits both men and women, their needs differ: Men often prioritize career satisfaction, whereas women frequently require emotional and logistical support to manage family responsibilities (Clark et al. 2017).

Appendix 3 provides an overview of family-support initiatives implemented by leading consulting firms. McKinsey's 'Parent Support Program' offers coaching for expectant parents, childcare support, and flexible work arrangements. BCG's 'Parents@BCG' combines seminars, coaching, and peer mentoring. Other firms, such as Kearney, Roland Berger and Accenture offer fully paid parental leave, phase-back period, childcare subsidies, peer programs. These initiatives highlight the commitment of these firms to fostering work-family balance, supporting parents, and promoting an inclusive workplace culture.

2.2.2.2. *Family-Related Factors*

Family-related factors, such as family size, caregiving responsibilities or social support by family members, contribute to both work interference with family and family interference with work, challenging earlier assumptions that family demands primarily influence family interference with work (Byron 2005; Jain and Nair 2013).

Notably, caregiving responsibilities continue to fall disproportionately on women. Recent data reveals that half of women handle the majority of childcare duties, with only 12% reporting their partner as the primary caregiver and 26% indicating equal division of responsibilities. Even among female primary earners, many still manage most household chores and childcare

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(Deloitte 2024). Moreover, households with young children experience heightened work-family conflict, often shaped by gender norms. While mothers are more likely to reduce working hours or take on flexible roles for childcare, fathers typically adjust their schedules without reducing work hours (Young and Schieman 2018). This reflects persistent societal expectations placing the primary childcare responsibility on mothers, even in dual-income households.

The unequal division of caregiving roles intensifies work-family conflict and heightens stress (Reimann et al. 2022). Shared household responsibilities, on the other hand, significantly reduce work-family conflict by distributing caregiving pressures more equal, while emotional family support improves job satisfaction and reduces stress, as it provides the psychological stability needed to cope with work demands (Leung, Mukerjee, and Thurik 2020).

Support networks at home are vital for reducing work-family conflict (Brotheridge and Lee 2005) and fostering work-family balance, energy, and engagement (Russo, Shteigman, and Carmeli 2016), emphasizing the importance of fostering collaborative caregiving dynamics.

2.2.2.3. Individual or Demographic Factors

Research highlights that individual and demographic factors, such as coping strategies, gender, income, and cultural expectations around household and childcare responsibilities, significantly influence work interference with family and family interference with work (Byron 2005). Individual and effective coping skills and mechanisms, such as ‘boundary management’, play a more critical role in managing work-family conflict than demographic characteristics alone (Byron 2005; Zhang and Liu 2011; Kim, Kim, and Kim 2019).

Boundary management is defined by creating segmented or integrated boundaries to navigate transitions between work and family roles (Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate 2000). By definition, ‘segmented’ boundaries reduce conflict but require mental effort to shift between the different roles, while ‘integrated’ boundaries promote flexibility but may increase conflict by enabling work interference with family (Kossek and Lautsch 2012; Bianchi and Milkie 2010). While

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segmentation strategies can reduce work-family conflict, they may also limit positive spillover between roles. Conversely, integrated boundaries can foster work-family enrichment. Ultimately, balancing segmentation and integration is critical for managing work-family conflict, particularly in demanding careers like consulting (Kossek and Lautsch 2012; Leduc, Houliort, and Bourdeau 2016). Additionally, gender plays a significant role in boundary management. Women often face greater challenges due to societal expectations to prioritize family responsibilities. Female managers are more likely to rely on flexible work arrangements to address work interference with family, often at the expense of career progression, while men are more likely to control schedules to avoid compromising advancement (Magnusson 2021; Young and Schie-man 2018; Kim and Gong 2017; Mellner, Aronsson, and Kecklund 2014).

Moreover, work-family conflict is influenced by personality traits, with resilience and self-efficacy helping reduce conflict, while neuroticism intensifying it (Jain and Nair 2013).

Furthermore, cultural norms also play a critical role in shaping work-family conflict. In nations with greater gender equality, individuals report lower work-family conflict, but higher expectations to excel in both domains can paradoxically increase stress (Hagqvist, Gådin, and Nordenmark 2017). National policies, such as parental leave and childcare support, encourage organizational adoption of family-supportive practices (Kossek and Lee 2017).

2.2.3. Consequences of Work-Family Conflict

The literature indicates that work-family conflict ultimately results in work-family imbalance, with its consequences falling into three primary categories: work-related, non-work-related, and stress-related outcomes (Kossek and Lee 2017; Nayak and Pandey, n.d.).

2.2.3.1. Work-Related Consequences

For women, becoming a parent often coincides with career stagnation, particularly in high-demand fields like consulting. Female managers who reduce their working hours or shift to

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part-time roles often face negative perceptions such as being viewed as less committed, which hinders career progression (Taminiau et al. 2022).

Work-family conflict also affects employees' relationships with their organizations. Family interference with work reduces affective commitment, leading to lower emotional connection to the employer, disengagement, decreased job satisfaction, and higher turnover intentions (Zhang, Griffeth, and Fried 2012; Kossek and Lee 2017). Employees experiencing high levels of work-family conflict often seek organizations that better support work-life balance, a trend particularly evident in high-pressure industries like consulting, where work interference with family is common (Zhang, Griffeth, and Fried 2012).

Additionally, work-family conflict negatively impacts concentration and productivity. Surveys of Fortune 500 employees reveal that over 50% of women report work-family stress as a factor affecting their job performance (Lakshmi and Prasanth 2018).

2.2.3.2. Non-Work-Related Consequences

Beyond the workplace, work-family conflict significantly impacts personal life as the ongoing struggle to balance competing demands often leaves individuals feeling overwhelmed, diminishing their sense of fulfillment and happiness. Those experiencing work-family conflict report lower life satisfaction, as job pressures detract from the quality of personal and family life, affecting their well-being and ability to fully engage in and enjoy personal time (Zhang, Griffeth, and Fried 2012). Additionally, work-family conflict negatively influences marital and family satisfaction, highlighting its impact on personal relationships (Kossek and Lee 2017).

2.2.3.3. Stress-Related Consequences

Poor work-family balance has particularly severe consequences, especially for women managing multiple roles, resulting in high levels of stress and anxiety (Sundaresan and Lakshmi 2014). The stress-related impacts of work-family conflict manifest in acute and chronic psychological

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(e.g. depression, burnout, emotional exhaustion) and physical (e.g. fatigue, illness) health consequences (Poms, Fleming, and Jacobsen 2016; Kossek and Lee 2017; Brotheridge and Lee 2005). These symptoms and a persistent sense of being overwhelmed gradually erode mental health, make recovery challenging by leaving individuals mentally and physically drained, and further compound the difficulty of achieving work-family balance (Zhang, Griffeth, and Fried 2012). This pressure not only reduces life satisfaction and strains family relationships but also amplifies guilt over not being fully present in either role, creating a cycle of stress that underscores the immense strain work-family conflict places on individuals, highlighting the challenge of maintaining a healthy balance (Sirgy and Lee 2018). Furthermore, stress and lack of exercise caused by work-life imbalance contribute to health issues, which in turn diminishes productivity and resilience among working women (Lakshmi and Prasanth 2018).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Context

This exploratory study examines challenges for women in the consulting industry through qualitative research, employing semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth insights (Marshall and Rossmann 2016; Dickinger 2007). A qualitative, inductive approach was chosen due to the value of qualitative data in generating additional insights and guiding future research (Marshall and Rossmann 2016). Semi-structured interviews, characterized by open-ended questions that adapt to interviewee responses, foster reflection, encourage personal expression, and allow follow-up questions for deeper exploration (Dickinger 2007; Qu and Dumay 2011). This method supports an inductive approach, enabling concepts and theories to emerge organically from the data, while fostering a conversational atmosphere for sharing personal experiences and perspectives (Magaldi and Berler 2020; Bryman 2016; Qu and Dumay 2011; Kallio et al. 2016). A literature review on female career progression and work-family dynamics in the consulting industry established the theoretical foundation, incorporating peer-reviewed articles, books, and

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chapters to align empirical findings with existing research.

For the analysis, Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 2017) and the Gioia Methodology (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2012) were integrated to ensure a systematic and inductive approach to concept development. Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2012) present a structured, iterative approach to systematically organize and interpret data to develop grounded theories by grouping the data into codes, identifying themes, and, finally, synthesizing these theoretical dimensions based on differences, commonalities, or connections.

The consulting industry was selected as the context for this study due to its unique characteristics, positioning it as an ‘extreme case’ where gender-related workplace challenges are particularly pronounced (Hällgren, Rouleau, and de Rond 2018; Kriegesmann and Striewe 2010).

3.2. Setting

In qualitative research, the aim is frequently to achieve transferability by selecting samples that adequately reflect the context under investigation (Patton 2015). Careful selection of interview participants is crucial, as they must possess sufficient expertise and relevant experience to provide meaningful and reliable responses (Bryman 2016). The consultants interviewed for this study are a group of 22 female professionals based in Germany, representing a diverse array of consulting firms. These companies vary significantly in terms of size, industry focus, and areas of expertise, reflecting the broader spectrum of the consulting landscape. The diversity within this group of interviewees extends to their professional backgrounds, ages, specializations, and levels of job seniority. Such variety allows for a comprehensive perspective on the consulting profession, as each consultant brings unique insights influenced by individual career paths and organizational contexts. Consequently, the sample includes a wide range of job descriptions. Furthermore, the interview participants were categorized into three cohorts based on their positions within the consulting hierarchy: entry-, medium-, and senior-level (see **Appendix 4**).

3.3. Empirical Material

The field study was conducted remotely between August and November 2024. A total of 19 female consultants, two HR representatives, and one female leadership expert participated in semi-structured interviews arranged through initial outreaches on the professional networking platform ‘LinkedIn’. The final sample, as illustrated in **Appendix 4**, represents a diverse range of professional experience within the consulting field with ~33% at entry-level, ~44% at mid-level, and ~22% in senior positions. Notably, ~47% of the consultants interviewed had children. Among our participants, ~19% worked at small consultancies, ~43% at medium-sized firms, and ~38% at large organizations, reflecting a diverse range of company sizes and perspectives within the consulting industry.

Each interview, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes, was conducted remotely and served as the primary data source for this study, focusing on topics such as personal career trajectories, and experiences with gender equality and work-family balance. The interview guide outlining the main questions is presented in **Appendix 5**.

Due to the interviewees’ geographical distance from the researchers, the interviews took place via ‘Microsoft Teams’, leveraging its ease of use and the dual video-audio functionality to capture both verbal and nonverbal cues. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis under the respective labels, Transcript #1 to #22, and systematically anonymized (e.g., [Company #1]) to ensure confidentiality. The 22 interviews conducted yielded a total of 286 transcript pages, providing a comprehensive dataset for qualitative analysis. The anonymized transcripts can be made available upon request, subject to compliance with confidentiality and data protection agreements.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted progressively in three stages, guided by the Gioia Methodology and supported by Grounded Theory to enhance the robustness and validity of the findings (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2012; Creswell 2013).

In the first phase of the analysis, interviewee statements were coded based on their commonality across categories and topics, establishing a set of 28 distinct first-order codes. This iterative and flexible process ensured detailed categorization into meaningful units reflecting participants' perspectives. First-order codes were then aggregated into broader, second-order themes through discussions, interpretation, and integration of theoretical frameworks.

In the final step, the second-order themes were synthesized into broader theoretical dimensions to illustrate relationships between identified concepts. This provided a coherent framework to contextualize participants' experiences. The process of theme development arose from joint discussions among the research team, ensuring consistency and depth in the thematic analysis (Locke 2001). Several rounds of review were conducted, leading to a consensus on the final set of theoretical themes. An overview of the analytical process is presented below, while the comprehensive framework, detailing the progression from raw data to theoretical dimensions (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2012; Creswell 2013) is provided in **Appendix 6**.

4. Results

4.1. Work-Family Balance (Individual Part – Victoria Henkel)

The interview data reveals nuanced insights into how female consultants with children navigate the challenges of balancing work and family within the demanding consulting industry and helps to understand the complex dynamics. The findings are structured according to the aggregate dimensions identified in the framework, centering around two main areas: *Assessing enablers and barriers*, exploring the interplay between support mechanisms, structural changes,

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and cultural challenges; and *assessing burdens and demands*, highlighting misalignments, cultural expectations, and emotional and physical strains of navigating dual roles. This section of the analysis focuses on consultants who have children. By comparing their responses with those without children we aimed to identify differences and commonalities. While only minor differences were observed, any significant disparities are highlighted where they occur.

4.1.1. Assessing Enablers and Barriers

Personal support system. All consultants with children in our study emphasized the critical importance of a flexible, and dependable personal support system. This often includes shared caregiving and parental responsibilities with partners, support from nearby family members, such as grandparents, and hiring external support such as nannies, household help or utilizing daycare. Without these, many find it impossible to balance the dual demands of consulting and family life. For many, the ability to trust their support system provides the peace of mind needed to focus on their demanding careers.

“Honestly, I couldn’t do any of this without a strong support system – it just would not work.”
[Transcript #12]

Consultants without children also recognized the importance of a strong personal support network for managing the balance between consulting and family life.

Organizational support system. In our study, female consultants with children highlighted the importance of organizational support, such as flexible work arrangements or parental leave policies, and many mentioned that they actively chose or switched to firms that prioritize flexibility and better accommodate family needs. Consultants especially emphasized flexible work arrangements, such as remote work, part-time schedules, reduced workweeks, and flexible hours, that allow them to manage childcare emergencies, participate in school activities, and handle personal commitments without sacrificing productivity. However, the effectiveness of organizational resources often depends on the firm’s culture and available leadership support. While some organizations actively promote flexibility, many consultants feel pressured to maintain

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high performance, making them hesitant to fully utilize these policies out of fear of being perceived as less committed. Consultants further emphasized the need for improved formalized support, such as structured return-to-work programs, and more part-time options for senior levels, to better support working parents and retain top talent in the industry.

“I actually switched firms a few years back because my previous employer wasn’t flexible at all. I was constantly stressed about missing school events or, you know, not being there when my kids needed me. So, I made the decision to move to a company that offered better work-life balance and more remote work options.”

[Transcript #20]

“My firm allows for some flexibility, like working from home a few days a week, which is crucial for me.”

[Transcript #2]

Consultants without children also recognized the importance of organizational support systems in enabling parents to manage both consulting careers and family responsibilities and acknowledged that flexible work arrangements are increasingly essential in today’s industry.

Cultural sensitivity and enhanced awareness. Consultants with children emphasized the growing acceptance of setting boundaries, such as limiting after-hours email, as leaders in consulting increasingly recognize and respect these. Many recalled that in the past consulting was often inaccessible to women, particularly those with family responsibilities, however, the industry and societal expectations have evolved, with more flexible work arrangements enabling women to participate with fewer sacrifices. Enhanced awareness and increased leadership support have created a more inclusive environment, reflecting a shift toward greater cultural sensitivity.

“Well, I think the consulting industry has changed a lot [...] Things are different nowadays because there are more part-time models and working from home is much more accepted.”

[Transcript #14]

“At my current firm, the leadership is vocal about supporting work-life balance, which creates a more understanding atmosphere.”

[Transcript #19]

Consultants without kids recognized that success in balancing consulting work with family life is possible, especially when clear boundaries are set. They acknowledged that many mothers manage this balance effectively despite the industry’s demands.

“The question is based on whether this is possible in the consulting industry? Yes, you can. [...] It’s also about setting clear boundaries.”

[Transcript #18]

Structural change. In our study, consultants with children remarked significant transformative structural changes in the consulting industry, amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, that made the industry more accessible, particularly for women with family responsibilities. A key shift has been the reduction in travel requirements, as remote work has become widely accepted by both firms and clients. This change has alleviated one of the major barriers for women, who previously faced challenges balancing caregiving duties with the expectation of frequent travel and overnight stays. Nowadays, many firms have normalized flexible work arrangements and this flexibility has not only improved autonomy and time management but also reduced commuting hours, making it easier for consultants to balance professional and personal commitments. Additionally, the increased availability of part-time options has allowed women to remain in the industry without having to sacrifice their personal lives.

“So I don't think it would have been possible without working from home and everything until four years ago.”

[Transcript #15]

“In terms of my company's support, I'd say they've made a genuine effort to be flexible, especially post-COVID. We have a lot more autonomy now in terms of where and when we work, which, to be honest, has been a game-changer. I usually work from home two to three days a week, which cuts down on commuting time and allows me to be more present for my kids.”

[Transcript #20]

Consultants without kids also acknowledged COVID helped easing structural challenges and made consulting more family-friendly and sustainable for parents.

“In theory, I would say it's actually a really good place to have kids. And now also with less traveling, it's better.”

[Transcript #5]

Shared caregiving responsibilities. During the interviews, consultants with children noted a growing shift towards a more equal treatment of mothers and fathers in the workplace, fostering a more balanced and inclusive environment. With increased involvement of men in family responsibilities, companies are also implementing flexible work arrangements and equitable parental leave policies for both men and women. This cultural shift not only creates a more supportive workplace but also helps challenge traditional gender norms, making it easier for

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women to pursue promotions and leadership positions without facing biases.

“But with the evolution of work culture and more initiatives to empower women, there have been positive changes. For example, I now see male colleagues who are more involved in family responsibilities, which helps create a more balanced environment. This shift means that there’s more understanding when a woman steps up for a promotion or leadership role.”

[Transcript #14]

Consultants without children also recognized the gradual shift toward greater equality for mothers and fathers in the consulting industry.

“I think the difference is getting smaller and smaller because men simply want to play a more active role in raising children and in family life than it was the case in the past.”

[Transcript #16]

Influence of role models. Consultants with children emphasized the vital role of role models in navigating the challenges of being working mothers in consulting. Many consultants expressed the importance of having visible female senior leaders, such as female partners with children, who successfully demonstrate that achieving both career success and family is possible. However, the presence of female role models varies greatly across firms. In firms where female role models are absent, women often feel isolated about how to navigate the dual demands. Moreover, mentorship programs, particularly those led by experienced working mothers, provide valuable guidance on managing client relationships and work-life balance. Re-entry programs further support returning mothers by pairing them with mentors and support networks to ease transitions back into work after maternity leave. Overall, role models help reduce stigma and provide valuable guidance.

“Having a mentor, especially one who understands the demands of being a working mother in consulting, has been invaluable. It’s helped me feel more grounded, and I’ve learned a lot from her experience on how to handle client relationships and balance it all.”

[Transcript #11]

“Also, there are actually many female rolemodels who showcase that it is possible to combine both which really makes a difference for me. At my previous firm, there was not a single female partner with children.”

[Transcript #19]

Consultants without children emphasized the significant impact of having visible role models who balance work and family successfully. Seeing colleagues with children advance to leadership positions inspires younger consultants by showing that it is possible to manage both.

Individual Part

“I think that the presence of role models would be very important here as it would help to encourage others by showcasing that it is indeed possible to successfully balance family and work.”

[Transcript #6]

Impact on career progression. Consultant with children remarked that career progression for them is often hindered because the dual demands of balancing professional growth and family responsibilities often leads to compromises. While some have made decisions, such as working part-time or turning down travel opportunities, to be present for their children these often come with trade-offs. In consulting, networking, such as after-work drinks or social events, play a significant role in career progression. However, family responsibilities frequently prevent women’s participation, reducing visibility among colleagues and leadership, resulting in fewer opportunities for promotions or high-profile projects. While some find ways to balance their ambitions with family life, others express the need for stronger organizational support and leadership commitment to ensure that family responsibilities do not disproportionately limit career progression.

“Which is a bit of a challenge for me now and where I would actually need a bit more support, [...] is how I can get on with my career under the new conditions (Note: working part-time) or how I can develop further.”

[Transcript #15]

Consultants without children agreed that career progression in consulting is challenging for women when starting families as the timing of family planning often clashes with critical career stages. Temporarily stepping away can limit access to high-profile projects, affecting growth.

“Unfortunately, it can also have an impact on career progression. Not all projects are as flexible, and sometimes it means you can't work on the really prestigious assignments or clients because they often require even more time and travel.”

[Transcript #18]

4.1.2. Assessing Burdens and Demands

Unequal parental treatment. Many female consultants who have children expressed that they still perceive a double standard in how family responsibilities are viewed for men versus women, despite progress in recent years. Even though cultural shifts have encouraged more male colleagues to actively participate in family duties, such as taking time off to care for sick children or leaving work early for school pick-ups, many still rely on partners at home to handle

Individual Part

the majority of daily childcare and household responsibilities, enabling them to focus on careers with minimal disruption. Additionally, paternity leave for men is often viewed as a temporary break, while societal expectations continue to place long-term caregiving roles on women. This double standard becomes evident as fathers are often praised for actions seen as routine for mothers, while mothers are criticized or penalized for prioritizing the same responsibilities.

“[...] there are still differences. Even though men are more involved now, I think there’s still a subtle perception that when a woman has to prioritize her children, it might be seen as a bigger compromise or commitment than when a man does. Women, myself included, often feel the need to prove that they’re not letting their home life affect their work, while men can sometimes be praised for being ‘hands-on’ dads even when they’re doing the same things women have done all along.”

[Transcript #14]

Consultants without children observed that men are typically perceived as less impacted by family responsibilities, as social expectations still place a heavier childcare burden on women, creating an implicit pressure that men do not face to the same extent.

“It’s not that the men don’t face challenges with balancing, but it just seems like the burden is often heavier on the women.”

[Transcript #7]

Physical and emotional strain. Consultants with children mentioned physical and emotional challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities. Many expressed perceptions of constant guilt, feeling that they fall short both professionally and as parents. This is a particularly evident during the transition back to work after maternity leave, a period marked by internal pressure and the struggle to regain professional footing. Balancing client demands with parenting frequently leads to emotional exhaustion, self-doubt, and overwhelming pressure.

“There’s this constant guilt, like if you’re doing well at work, then maybe you’re not spending enough time with your kids, and vice versa. It’s a delicate balancing act, and honestly, some days I feel like I’m failing on both fronts.”

[Transcript #20]

Consultants without children observe that balancing consulting's demands with parenting is particularly tough for mothers, given the physical recovery from childbirth.

“But I still believe that we women are at a biological disadvantage. Simply because we are the ones who have to carry the child.”

[Transcript #17]

Individual Part

Invisible mental load. Many consultants remarked that the invisible mental load is a significant source of stress. It encompasses the constant coordination of work tasks, family schedules, and household management, which often fall disproportionately on women, even when they have supportive partners. This unseen burden, described as ‘constant juggling’, adds a layer of cognitive and emotional strain to the already intensive demands of consulting. Women frequently reported feeling as though they never truly have a break, moving seamlessly from work responsibilities to family obligations. This unrelenting pace, heightened by the mental tracking of countless micro-tasks, can lead to chronic stress, as they struggle to stay on top of everything.

“Lastly, there’s the mental load that many working women talk about – the constant juggling of work, family, household responsibilities. Even with a supportive partner and a great team at work, I often find myself coordinating everything, from the kids’ school schedules to major project deadlines. It’s an invisible kind of work that adds to the regular workload and can be exhausting over time.”

[Transcript #12]

“And this mental load basically says exactly that. I don’t just have my career, but I have all the micro to-dos that are in our heads, so to speak, and which, when an overload develops at some point, lead to the typical burnout syndromes or negative stress symptoms.”

[Transcript #21]

Consultants without children acknowledged the mental load, noting that the constant dual burden can be overwhelming and mentally exhausting.

“I can also imagine that there’s also the mental load of always having to think about both work and home stuff at the same time. It’s not just about the hours; it’s about constantly switching between work mode and parent mode.”

[Transcript #7]

Incompatibility with leadership role demands. Consultants both with and without children noted that they perceive a timing clash between major life events, like starting a family, and career advancement, like the progression to senior roles. The structural and cultural demands of leadership roles, like high expectations for availability, long hours, and frequent travel, are for most incompatible with the flexibility needed by working mothers.

“Actually, being a [...] mom, working part-time, you can’t do career.”

[Transcript #14]

“Thinking about it, I just realized that the fact that I do not have or see a woman that is successfully managing the balance in my direct professional environment is also already kind of a statement or sign or description of the status quo.”

[Transcript #16]

Individual Part

Expectation of constant availability. Despite the presence of supportive policies, the demanding culture of consulting often undermines the effectiveness of flexible work arrangements. The industry's expectation of constant availability creates significant challenges. Long hours, unpredictable travel, and intense workloads make it difficult to balance work and personal commitments, leading many to feel forced into unsustainable trade-offs. Even part-time arrangements or flexible hours often fall short, as client demands frequently override planned schedules. This lack of predictability deters many women from advancing in consulting or pursuing it altogether, especially those with young families or considering family planning. Additionally, consultants working part-time or setting boundaries often feel judged as less committed, further intensifying the struggle to balance work and family.

“Like, if I can't attend a late meeting or I have to leave early for a family obligation, there's often this unspoken question of whether I'm as committed as my colleagues.”

[Transcript #11]

“Another challenge is the work culture itself - consulting is an intense environment that expects a lot in terms of hours, travel, and constant availability. For me, balancing these demands has been tough, especially with kids at home.”

[Transcript #12]

Consultants without children recognized that the time commitment and inconsistency of the industry can be overwhelming, particularly for those with family responsibilities. While they find it easier to navigate these demands without personal obligations, they acknowledge the unique struggles faced by their colleagues with families.

“What I've heard from others, I guess the challenges are mostly related to the time that you spend traveling away from home, and the lack of consistency.”

[Transcript #6]

“A big one is just the about time commitment – consulting hours can be really long, and trying to juggle that with kids at home is tough.”

[Transcript #7]

5. Discussion

This study reveals the nuanced challenges female consultants face, synthesizing key findings

with existing literature to explore the intersection of career progression and work-family balance. By integrating interview findings with existing literature, this discussion contextualizes these challenges within broader societal and organizational contexts. The proposed framework illustrates how the consulting industry's unique characteristics amplify barriers for women.

5.1. Challenges in Navigating Career Progression

The focus on female career progression paints a nuanced picture of a unique consulting environment characterized by both opportunities and challenges for women, highlighting a paradox that is simultaneously contradictory and complementary. The findings reveal a duality in women's perceptions of consulting: on the one hand, it is viewed as a promising field for career advancement, yet on the other, it is also fraught with structural and cultural barriers.

Consulting firms are often seen as catalysts for career growth, offering dynamic learning opportunities and a launchpad for ambitious professionals (Adams 2022). The interviews underscore this perception by describing consulting as a desirable environment to start the career, providing exposure to diverse topics and industries. Consistent with literature that frames the industry as a meritocracy for ambitious individuals (Eagly and Carli 2007), many participants emphasized consulting's potential to facilitate rapid career progression. Moreover, women's unique contributions – such as fostering collaboration, inclusivity, and innovative team dynamics – were highlighted as increasingly valued by clients, reflecting a growing recognition of the value of diverse perspectives in improving organizational outcomes (Francoeur, Labelle, and Sinclair-Desgagné 2008; Quental and Kelan 2015).

However, while many women entering the consulting field initially perceive it as gender-neutral, this belief often conflicts with their later professional experiences. Gender-based disparities, particularly in the form of differential treatment, vary across industries and organizational contexts and are reported to be especially pronounced in traditionally male-dominated client environments, such as the automotive or banking industries.

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In line with this emerging complexity, the interviews confirmed Eagly and Carli's (2007) labyrinth theory as a compelling metaphor for women's career advancement in the consulting industry. This metaphor encapsulates the multifaceted challenges and obstacles women face due to gendered biases and barriers. They navigate a complex and intertwined set of hurdles that hinder their progression, reinforcing the labyrinth as a framework for understanding the dynamics of gender inequality in consulting. Here, the resulting decline of female representation at higher hierarchical levels despite near gender parity at entry-level positions, as described by the leaky pipeline phenomenon, becomes particularly visible (Kelan 2012).

The findings also illuminate the persistently underlying gendered challenges women face in consulting. Subtle biases, such as perceived underestimation and the need to continually prove themselves, remain significant hurdles and emerge clearly from the data, consistent with Heilman's (2012) findings on gender stereotypes. These biases are further compounded by systemic barriers, such as exclusion from informal male networks (boys' clubs), which restrict access to career-advancing opportunities such as mentorship and high-profile projects (Cullen and Perez-Truglia 2023). Additionally, the dominance of a masculine success model, which prioritizes traits such as assertiveness and constant availability, continues to disadvantage women, as documented by Kumra and Vinnicombe (2008) and Savall et al. (2019).

This tension highlights a contradiction inherent to the field of consulting. Despite its reputation as a meritocratic domain offering significant career opportunities, inequities persist in access to crucial resources, including mentorship and high-profile projects. This is consistent with the argument put forth by Heilman, Caleo, and Manzi (2024) that theoretical equality often conceals systemic disparities. Moreover, the inflexible up-or-out culture has a disproportionate impact on women, aligning with the labyrinth framework's portrayal of career progression as a complex and multifaceted journey (Eagly and Carli 2007; Kelan 2012).

The findings highlight the critical role of both organizational resources and personal support

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systems in overcoming these barriers. Initiatives such as mentorship programs, women's networks, targeted recruitment initiatives, and quotas are viewed as vital mechanisms for fostering inclusion and career advancement. However, their effectiveness is often undermined by the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles and the lack of broader cultural integration. This mirrors Fisher and Kinsey's (2014) insights on the scarcity of female role models and the limiting impact this has on women's aspirations. Visible female leaders play a crucial role in shaping women's professional ambitions and resilience, as emphasized in representation theory (Kanter 1977; Beaman et al. 2012; Dahlerup 2007; Sealy and Singh 2010).

While the findings largely align with existing literature, new insights emerge regarding the reported perceived equal treatment in certain contexts. This suggests progressing industry developments but underscores the need for further structural and cultural transformation to address lingering disparities comprehensively. Participants emphasized the importance of integrating inclusive cultural practices that extend beyond quotas and formal initiatives, echoing calls in the literature for a shift toward systemic change to dismantle structural barriers (Atinc, Srivastava, and Taneja 2022). In this way, the unique environment of consulting, characterized by both individual and structural opportunities and challenges, can evolve into a space where opportunities are amplified and challenges are minimized, paving the way for equity.

5.2. Challenges in Navigating Work-Family Balance

According to the literature, work-family balance is defined by the successful combination of work and family domains, marked by the absence of conflict (Jain and Nair 2013; Duncan and Pettigrew 2012). The work-family conflict theory suggests that conflicting demands between professional and personal domains create stress and hinder career progression, particularly for women (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985). The consulting culture characteristics further increase this challenge and intensify gender disparities, as highlighted by Kossek and Lee (2017). During the interviews, female consultants with children often reported significant difficulties managing

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the dual demands of their roles. Even when firms offer remote work options or part-time schedules, consulting culture continues to demand constant availability and commitment, especially during critical project phases and for leadership roles. This aligns with the bidirectional work-family conflict model, which explains how family responsibilities interfere with work and workplace demands impede personal life, as described by Frone, Russel, and Cooper (1992).

Participants in our study frequently emphasized the importance of a strong personal support network – including partners and reliable childcare arrangements – to manage the pressures of balancing work and family life. This finding is supported by Byron (2005) and Van Der Lippe, Jager, and Kops (2006), who highlight how non-work-related factors, such as equally distributed childcare responsibilities, influence work-family conflict and how addressing these factors can significantly reduce family interference with work.

Additionally, participants stressed the need for organizational support, flexible work arrangements, and supportive leadership which aligns with the findings of Glendon, Thompson, and Myers (2007). These researchers argue that a supportive work-family culture and flexible work arrangements are critical to mitigating work-family conflict and enhancing employee satisfaction. In our study, participants also highlighted that they actively choose or switch to firms that prioritize flexibility, offering flexible work arrangements and provide better support to achieve work-family balance. This finding is also supported in the literature as flexible work arrangements play a crucial role in employment decisions, and women are likely to leave organizations that fail to provide them (Deloitte 2024). However, while flexibility measures are increasingly available in consulting, they often remain underutilized due to stigma. This was also emphasized during our interviews and supported by Rebelo (2019) and Piszczek and Berg (2014) who highlighted how cultural biases against utilizing flexible work arrangements discourage their practical adoption, emphasizing the need to address these barriers. Consultants therefore stressed the importance of supportive leadership and organizational culture.

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Both, in the literature and during the interviews, the importance of boundary management was mentioned. The literature suggests that segmented boundaries can reduce interference and work-family conflict (Kossek and Lautsch 2012; Leduc, Houliort, and Bourdeau 2016). Interview participants echoed this need for boundaries; however, the intense demands of consulting's work culture make it challenging to maintain these, highlighting the necessity for adaptable leadership models and structural reforms.

A key issue raised in the interviews was the persistent unequal parental treatment, supported by recent data from Deloitte (2024), which shows that only 26% of surveyed working women reported an equal division of childcare responsibilities. Persistent societal expectations still place the primary responsibility for childcare on mothers (Young and Schieman 2018). Our participants support the literature's findings, remarking a double standard in how family responsibilities are viewed, as fathers are often praised for actions seen as routine for mothers.

Beyond childcare, mental load emerged as another significant challenge, along with physical and emotional factors that disproportionately disadvantage women in consulting. While the literature focused rather on physical and psychological challenges for women, such as depression, burnout, and emotional exhaustion (Poms, Fleming, and Jacobsen 2016; Kossek and Lee 2017; Brotheridge and Lee 2005), our participants highlighted the cumulative impact of mental load. Additionally, consultants called for greater awareness and support to alleviate the hidden pressures and protect women's well-being. They emphasize that women face more exhaustion due to balancing dual roles, compounded by unique biological challenges, such as childbirth.

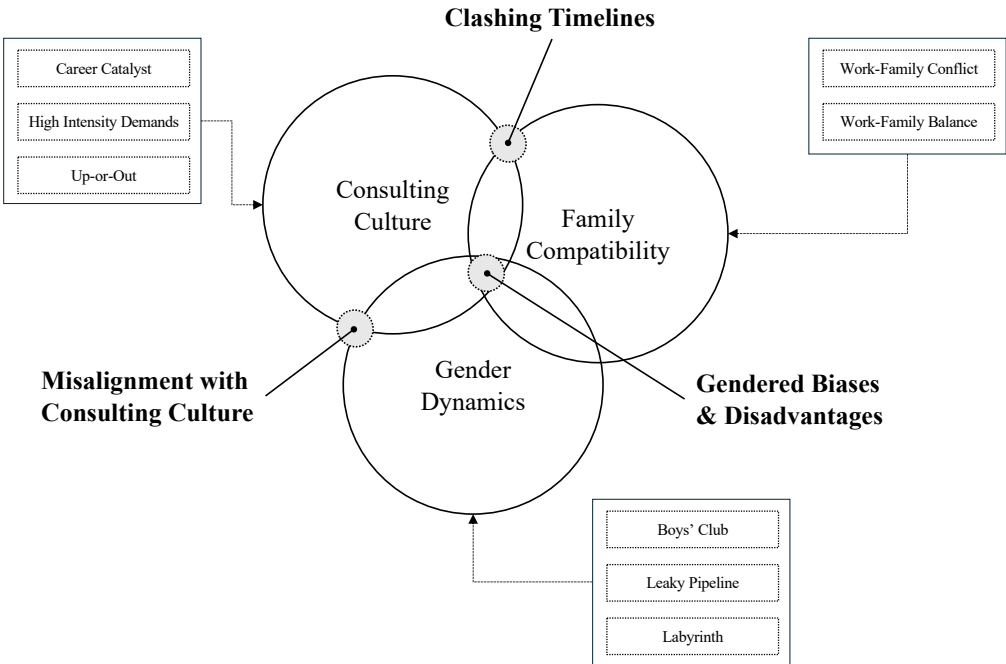
One particularly important point, which is not prominently discussed in the existing literature, is the misalignment between the flexibility required by working mothers and the timing of career advancement. The timing of family planning often clashes with critical career stages, and stepping away during these pivotal moments can limit the progression to senior roles and access to high-profile projects, significantly impacting career growth.

5.3. Intersection of Career Progression and Work-Family Balance: A Synthesis

A critical theme that emerged from this study, intersecting both career progression and work-family balance, is the lack of female role models in senior consulting positions. This absence serves as a significant barrier that perpetuates the challenges faced by women in navigating the consulting industry. With few women in leadership roles, aspiring female consultants often lack access to relatable mentors or visible examples of success, contributing to a vicious cycle that hinders women's career advancement. The underrepresentation of women at the top not only limits opportunities for mentorship but also reinforces systemic inequalities and the perception that senior roles are unattainable for women.

Drawing on our findings, we conceptualized a theoretical framework, presented in **Figure 2**, to illustrate the interconnected challenges women face in the consulting industry. This framework highlights the overlapping dynamics of *Consulting Culture*, *Family Compatibility*, and *Gender Dynamics*, each shaped by distinct factors that influence women's experiences within the industry. The intersections of these core domains reveal three compounded challenges that emerge from the interaction between these factors.

Figure 1 Intersecting Systematic Challenges for Women in Consulting



1) Misalignment with Consulting Culture

Leadership roles in consulting demand long hours, extensive travel, and constant availability, which not only conflict with the flexibility required by working mothers but also pose challenges for women without children. The rigid up-or-out culture, which prioritizes continuous progression and visibility, offers little room for alternative career paths or temporary breaks, forcing women to navigate unique pressures. Women without children often face expectations to demonstrate extreme dedication and availability to counter implicitly gendered biases, while those who step back for caregiving responsibilities risk exclusion from high-profile projects and diminished career progression opportunities.

2) Clashing Timelines

Family planning often coincides with critical career milestones, such as promotion to senior leadership roles, creating significant challenges for women striving to balance professional and personal demands. Senior roles in consulting, characterized by heightened responsibilities, come with explicit and implicit expectations of constant availability. These demands, driven by external clients and internal teams, make compatibility with family responsibilities difficult.

3) Gender Dynamics and Bias

Structural disadvantages persist in consulting, with informal male-dominated networks and gendered skill perceptions continuing to favor men. The boys' club culture provides men with greater access to mentorship and career advancement, while women are judged against a masculine ideal that undervalues traditionally feminine traits. These biases remain significant barriers to gender equity in the labyrinth of the consulting industry by limiting women's access to informal networks, sponsorship, and advancement opportunities, thereby perpetuating a culture that disproportionately disadvantages women, regardless of parental status.

This model underscores the complexity of the challenges women face in consulting, exacerbat-

ing the underrepresentation of women in senior roles. The overlaps highlight how these challenges are interconnected, compounding the difficulties of achieving work-family balance and career progression. This creates a cyclical challenge that is responsible for the leaky pipeline and underscores the urgent need for systemic and cultural change.

6. Managerial Implications, Limitations, and Future Recommendations

6.1. Managerial Implications

Based on our research, we propose practical implications for consulting firms to support women in navigating career progression and work-family balance, emphasizing the need for a deep cultural and structural transformation focused on four pillars:

1) Recruitment efforts should move beyond entry-level initiatives and test the expansion of internal gender quota targets to medium- and senior-level roles. While many firms already apply quotas for junior positions, extending these targets can ensure the consistent representation of female talent across the career ladder to seal the leaky pipeline. Additionally, female-focused recruiting events, which emerged as effective in our study, should not only be continued but also scaled to maximize their impact in attracting women into the field.

2) Retention must become a central focus, particularly for medium- and senior-level consultants. Support structures, such as formalized flexible work arrangements, including part-time roles and shared project management responsibilities at leadership levels, are critical for creating flexibility for consultants with and without children. Consulting firms should institutionalize such practices to create sustainable career paths for working mothers and others with caregiving responsibilities. These changes can mitigate the loss of experienced women during critical career phases and lessen work-family conflict, contributing to a better work-family balance.

3) Advancement requires significant investment in education and transparency. Mandatory anti-bias training for all employees, including men, can increase awareness of gendered biases

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and foster a culture of inclusivity. To address systemic issues, consulting firms must also establish clear and transparent criteria for career progression. This includes explicit accommodations for alternative work arrangements, such as part-time leadership roles, ensuring equitable evaluation processes. These measures are particularly relevant for small- and mid-sized firms where informal practices often dominate. Taken together, this can help to successfully navigate the complex consulting labyrinth.

4) Representation is equally crucial to driving cultural change. Structured mentorship programs should prioritize pairing female junior employees with senior female mentors, emphasizing shared life experiences, e.g., motherhood, to enhance their effectiveness. Formalizing these programs ensures they are accessible and impactful, reducing reliance on male-dominated informal networks and combatting the boys' club phenomenon. Furthermore, women in senior leadership should increasingly be positioned as visible role models, with dedicated time away from project work allocated within their roles to support mentoring and advocacy. Additionally, strengthening horizontal women's networks across firms can foster connections and collaboration among women in similar roles or seniority levels across different companies. This enables female leaders with opportunities to exchange knowledge, and champion systemic change collaboratively.

6.2. Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the relatively small sample, due to time and scope restrictions, limits the findings' generalizability. While theoretical saturation was achieved within the sample, a larger pool of participants could have strengthened the conclusions' validity. Second, the study focused on consultants in Germany, potentially limiting its applicability to other regions. Moreover, the exclusive focus on female consultants is another limitation. Without a comparison group of male consultants,

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the research may miss insights into gender-specific challenges and differential treatment. Finally, the study's reliance on qualitative interviews means that findings are based on self-reported experiences, which can be influenced by individual and organizational biases. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the challenges of women in consulting, offering a foundation for further research to explore these dynamics in a broader context.

6.3. Recommendations for Future Research

To expand on the findings of this study, multiple areas for future research can be explored: Replicating the findings with a larger sample could improve the reliability and validity of the conclusions. Additionally, exploring consultants' perspectives in different geographical regions may reveal insights into how cultural contexts influence work-family balance and career progression in consulting. A comparative study between European, American, and Asian consulting firms could determine whether the challenges identified are universal or region-specific. Further, quantitative studies could statistically test the correlation and interplay of the identified themes. Moreover, longitudinal studies could investigate how evolving industry norms and increasing focus on flexibility impact career trajectories over time, especially as younger generations enter the consulting industry. Additionally, examining gender quotas in consulting firms could reveal their impact on gender equity and female leadership. Furthermore, comparative research could explore similar challenges in other high-demand industries, such as investment banking. Lastly, exploring the experiences of male consultants with and without caregiving responsibilities could provide a more holistic view of gender dynamics in consulting, shedding light on whether the challenges faced by women are indeed gender-specific or part of broader industry pressures.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the challenges women face in the consulting industry by analyzing two interconnected dimensions, aiming to answer the research questions "*What challenges do*

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women face in navigating career progression in consulting firms?” and “What challenges do women face in balancing the demands of their careers alongside family responsibilities?”.

By combining semi-structured interviews with female consultants of varying seniority levels and parental statuses with a review of existing literature, our research revealed systemic barriers and gender-related biases in consulting firms, where structural and cultural challenges disproportionately hinder women’s career advancement despite opportunities for professional growth.

Three main findings emerged from the study, shedding light on the broader challenges women face and can be summarized in our proposed framework of the triangular interplay: **Misalignment with Consulting Culture, Clashing Timelines, and Gender Biases and Disadvantages.**

Our framework highlights that the challenges women face are not merely individual struggles but deeply rooted systemic issues that demand cultural and structural change. Addressing these barriers requires consulting firms to reimagine leadership roles, promote flexible career paths, and actively combat gender biases within their organizations.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the understanding of how women navigate the complexities of career progression and work-family balance in the consulting industry. As one senior-level consultant shared during our interviews: *“But, I do also firmly believe that you can have it all, but you can't have it all at the same time”* [Transcript #16].

This statement underscores that while female career advancement is attainable, it becomes significantly more challenging when family responsibilities are introduced. It highlights the critical need for consulting firms to foster organizational cultures that prioritize inclusivity, flexibility, and equity to support women’s career progression effectively.

Indeed, the growing gender balance among business school graduates offers a promising indication of the potential for positive change in the industry (AllBright Stiftung GmbH 2023). The pipeline is filled with ambitious women who are prepared to play a pivotal role in shaping the future of the industry. By fostering environments that value diversity, dismantle gender biases,

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and support work-family enrichment, consultancies can not only empower women to reach their professional potential, but enable them to spearhead this transformation and strengthen the consulting industry.

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Appendix

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Appendix I List of Abbreviations

BCG Boston Consulting Group

MBB McKinsey & Company, Boston Consulting Group, and Bain & Company

HR Human Resources

Appendix 2 Gender parity status quo at the world's three largest consultancies

	2021	2023		2021	2023		2021	2023	
	McKinsey			Bain			Boston Consulting Group		
Females as a % of global workforce	48%	48%	=	45%	46%	↑	45%	47%	↑
Females as a % of global new hires	49%	48%	↓	46% (US data only) 43% (Consulting; US data only)	52% (US data only) 44% (Consulting; US data only)	↑	41% (of entry-level associate and consultant roles)	46% (of entry-level associate and consultant roles)	↑
Females as a % of leadership	26%	28%	↑	31%	34%	↑	35% (Executive Committee)	39% (Executive Committee)	↑
Females as a % of managers	45%	45%	=	n.a.	n.a.		n.a.	n.a.	
Females as a % of client-serving workforce	37%	39%	↑	41% (US data only)	42% (US data only)	↑	n.a.	n.a.	

Source: McKinsey & Company 2024a; Boston Consulting Group 2024b; Bain & Company 2024

Appendix 3 Best Practices by Leading Consulting Companies: Family Support Programs

Existing Initiatives			
Firm	Initiative name	Description / Comment	Programs
McKinsey	<i>Parent Support Program</i>	With the Parent Support Program, McKinsey supports (expectant) parents before, during and after parental leave. The program offers parent-specific coaching, family-friendly home office arrangements, daycare places or experienced help in finding care at home.	
	<i>Paid Parental Leave</i>	As a mother (or primary parent in the case of adoption), McKinsey employees will receive an additional 26 weeks of leave with full pay (in addition to the state parental), which can be taken after the birth. As the other parent, McKinsey employees get 12 additional weeks, which you can be used at any time between the birth and the child's first birthday.	<i>Family @ McKinsey</i>
	<i>All in Initiative</i>	The All-In initiative aims to create a more diverse and inclusive working environment and is working on a variety of measures to support parents and caretakers in particular, e.g. parental leave and return to work as well as childcare.	
BCG	<i>Network</i>	The Family@BCG network aims to support BCG employees across functions, cohorts, gender and family situations so that they can successfully manage family commitments and a career in parallel. BCG implemented a forum of more than 150 parents and nonparents share their perspectives on work and family life, from crowdsourcing tips on selecting a nanny to more personal tips on how to manage work and family commitments.	
	<i>Awareness Initiatives</i>	BCG delivers a number of initiatives to help its employees balance work and family commitments, and aims to ensure there is transparency around the options available, including leave policies, flexible working models and FlexiTime.	<i>Family@BCG</i>
	<i>Affiliation initiatives</i>	BCG created a Parents@BCG booklet and is developing a series of videos showcasing personal stories and experiences of how a variety of BCG employees combine their work with being a parent. BCG hosts quarterly events on a variety of family topics and implemented a buddy programme pairing those employees who have been through similar family experiences to help them navigate.	
Kearney	<i>Support Package</i>	Kearney is supporting families with six months of fully paid parental leave, a six-month part-time phase-back period, financial aid for fertility and adoption, monthly childcare subsidies, and enhanced pregnancy loss support.	<i>Family Flex</i>
Roland Berger	<i>Support Initiatives</i>	Roland Berger is committed to supporting working parents with flexible models, tailored solutions, and peer initiatives to navigate the challenges of parenting.	<i>families@RolandBerger</i>
Accenture	<i>Paid Parental Leave</i>	Permanent and part-time employees of all genders receive 18 weeks of paid parental leave. Surrogacy arrangements receive eight weeks.	<i>well-being at work and at home</i>
	<i>Your family's well-being</i>	Accenture offers personalized support and training for parents and caregivers, including guidance on raising children, developmental challenges, and living healthy, fulfilling lives.	

Source: (McKinsey & Company, n.d.; BCG, n.d.-a; Accenture, n.d.; Roland Berger, n.d.-b; Kearney, n.d.-a)

Appendix 4 Interview Sample

Transcript ID	Company Size	Experience Level	Marital Status	Parental Status
#1	Medium	Entry-Level	No	No
#2	Large	Entry-Level	Yes	Yes
#3	Medium	Entry-Level	No	No
#4	Large	Entry-Level	No	No
#5	Large	Medium-Level	Yes	No
#6	Large	Entry-Level	No	No
#7	Large	Entry-Level	No	No
#8	Large	-	No	No
#9	Large	-	No	No
#10	Medium	Medium-Level	No	No
#11	Medium	Medium-Level	Yes	Yes
#12	-	Medium-Level	Yes	Yes
#13	Medium	-	Yes	No
#14	Small	Senior-Level	No	Yes
#15	Small	Medium-Level	No	Yes
#16	Large	Senior-Level	Yes	No
#17	Small	Medium-Level	No	No
#18	Medium	Senior-Level	Yes	No
#19	Medium	Medium-Level	Yes	Yes
#20	Medium	Medium-Level	Yes	Yes
#21	Small	-	Yes	Yes
#22	Medium	Senior-Level	Yes	Yes

Exemplary Classification Company Size

Company Size	
Nr. Of Employees Worldwide	Size Classification
2.000+	Large
100 – 2.000	Medium
0 – 100	Small

Exemplary Classification Experience Level

Experience Level		
Role	Years of Experience	Classification
Consultant / Associate / Senior (Associate) Consultant	1-3 years	Entry-level
Project Manager / Senior Project Manager / Strategy Manager	3-10 years	Medium-level
Associate Partner / Senior Partner / Director	10+ years	Senior-level

Appendix 5 Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Interview Guide

1. Interviewer Name	
2. Participant Name	
3. Interview Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	
4. Interview Time (hhmm-24hr clock)	-

Step 1: Complete Q1-4 above before the interview.

Step 2: At the beginning of the interview, introduce yourself; thank participant for taking part in the interview.

Step 3: Read Section A below to participant.

Step 4: Ask participant permission to record interview.

Step 5: Conduct interview.

Step 6: At the end of the interview, thank the participant and ask if she/he has any further questions; document time interview ended in Q4 above.

Step 7: Ask if the participant is interested in being re-contacted with study results; if yes, document appropriate email.

Step 8: Complete demographic questionnaire.

SECTION A: Information about this study

1. Short introduction of the interviewer and the research topic
2. Explanation of the interview process
3. Asking for permission to audio-record the interview

SECTION B: Questions

I would like to begin the interview by getting a sense of your experience in the consulting industry.

1. Can you tell me about your career path and professional journey? What were your key milestones?
2. Why did you choose consulting in particular?

Thank you for these insights, now we will turn to more specific questions about being a woman in consulting.

3. Can you describe some of the specific challenges you have encountered as a woman in the consulting industry?

4. Do you think men and women have equal access to opportunities, or are there differences? What factors do you believe contribute to these differences?
5. How do you think gender dynamics have shaped your career progression in consulting?
6. What is your perception of the culture in the consulting industry in terms of gender equality and support for women? Does it differ from the organizational culture of your employer?
7. In terms of promoting gender equality, which initiatives do you see in the industry and in your firm? Are or have you been involved in any? If yes, please elaborate on the effectiveness of the program.
8. We observed two different types of programs/initiatives. We labeled the first one as “soft” initiatives, containing **Leadership and Cultural Initiatives**, and the second one as “hard” initiatives, describing rather institutionalized **Mentorship and Engagement Programs**. Which type would you categorize the before-mentioned program/initiative as? Please also state your opinion on the effectiveness of the two types.
9. How do you manage the demands of consulting with your personal life? Does your company support flexible working arrangements? Are there special or dedicated initiatives for women? (part time / maternal leave)
10. In what ways has work-life balance or the lack thereof impacted your job satisfaction and career progression?
11. Speaking of life satisfaction, do you feel fulfilled in your career? What aspects of your job bring you the most satisfaction or joy?
12. Have there been moments where you felt uncertain or dissatisfied in your consulting career? What contributed to those feelings?
13. Now turning to the topic of children, do you have any children?

----- *if yes* -----

13a. How has having a family influenced your career decisions, and how do you feel supported (or unsupported) by your employer in this regard?

13b. If you have children, can you describe the support system that helps you balance your work and family life?

13c. What differences, if any, have you noticed in how your male colleagues with children balance their professional and family responsibilities compared to you?

----- *if no* -----

13a. Do you believe it is possible to successfully balance having children and pursuing a professional career? What factors do you think influence this balance?

13b. Have you noticed any challenges your female colleagues with children face in balancing their work and family responsibilities? How do you think these challenges impact their career progression?

13c. What differences, if any, have you noticed in how your male colleagues with children balance their professional and family responsibilities compared to your female colleagues?

14. How do clients perceive and treat you in your role as a consultant? Have you noticed any gender-related biases in client interactions?
15. If you were to start your career over today, would you choose consulting again? Why or why not?
16. What advice would you give to young women entering the consulting field now?

That's the end of the questions that I have for you today. Do you have any final thoughts or questions that you'd like to ask?

I want to sincerely thank you for your time and for the helpful information that you provided.

SECTION C: Demographic Questions

- **Current Job Role:** What is your current job title and role within the consulting industry?
- **Company:** What is the name of your company?
- **Years of Experience:** How many years have you worked in consulting?
- **Industry Sector:** In which industry sectors do you primarily consult (e.g., finance, technology, healthcare)?
- **Type of Consulting:** What type of consulting work do you specialize in (e.g., strategy, IT, operations)?
- **Work Arrangement:** Do you work primarily remotely, in-office, or a combination of both?
- **Working Autonomy:** Do you have the autonomy to decide in which days you can work remotely or is this predetermined by the company?
- **Gender:** How do you identify your gender?
- **Nationality:** What is your Nationality?
- **Age:** What is your age?
 - 20 – 25
 - 25 – 30
 - 30 – 35
 - 35 – 40
 - 40 – 45
 - 45 – 50
 - 50 – 55
 - 55 – 60
- **Company Size:** What is the approximate size of the company you work for (e.g., small, medium, large)?

- **Family Status:** Do you have children? If yes, how many and what are their ages?
- Are you **married**?
- **Educational Background:** What is your highest level of education?

Appendix 6 Gioia Analysis

