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CAN WOMEN HAVE IT ALL?  
CHALLENGES IN NAVIGATING FEMALE CAREER PROGRESSION

EMILY SOPHIE GREINER

Work project carried out under the supervision of:

Assistant Professor Filipa Rodrigues

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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 two primary questions:

- *What challenges do women face in navigating career progression in consulting firms?*

By addressing these questions, this thesis seeks to examine whether women can truly “have it all” – successfully navigating career progression and 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 1**, 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 Female Career Progression (Individual Part – Emily Greiner)**

### **2.2.1. Gender Bias and Stereotypes of Women in the General Workplace and Consulting**

#### *2.2.1.1. Gender Bias and Stereotypes of Women in the General Workplace*

The literature on gender bias and stereotypes presents mixed findings. While most studies highlight gender-based attributions and perceptions of certain, stereotypically female attributes in women's working and management styles, e.g., being too emotional, intuitive, creative, or less numbers-focused (Heilman 2012), some studies find limited evidence of gender bias in this domain. For instance, Kaiser and Wallace (2016) report no differential attributions or ratings for women leaders, which they assign to the recent diversity and inclusion movement in the workplace, fostering a shift in social norms as well as an increased acceptance and openness toward women in leadership roles. However, the authors caution against overgeneralizing these findings, highlighting that this absence of bias against female leaders may not be universally transferrable to the workplace context as a whole.

A recent study confirms this distinct impact of different workplace conditions in either perpetuating or alleviating gender bias and discrimination. Contrary to the above findings, the scholars conclude that gender stereotypes fuel biased judgments and decisions, reinforcing perceptions of women's incompetence in male-dominated fields and hindering their career progression (Heilman 2012; Heilman, Caleo, and Manzi 2024).

#### *2.2.1.2. Gender Bias and Stereotypes of Women in Consulting*

The perpetuation of stereotypes and the reinforcement of biases become particularly evident when examined through the lens of the consulting industry, highlighting its role in exemplifying these dynamics. Here, the literature is rather unanimous about a differential perspective of male

and female consultants and a gendered imbalance (Quental and Kelan 2015; Kumra and Vinnicombe 2008). The experienced differential treatment is largely attributed to the industry's inherent presence of a unique set of structural and cultural attributes. These characteristics include the 'up-or-out' rule, a relatively flat organizational hierarchy, standardized career paths for all professionals (including a distinct partner promotion process), a generally uniform set of skills and experiences, and a strong preference for an internal labor market, where senior roles are almost exclusively filled by internal candidates (Kumra and Vinnicombe 2008).

Tomenendal and Boyoglu (2014) further link the gendered imbalance to pre-vailing consulting success models that prioritize qualities such as constant availability, flexibility, confidence, and toughness, traits that are often perceived as rather masculine and reinforced by male leadership. This structure disbenefits women and thereby impacts their career advancement.

The partner promotion process is highlighted as particularly relevant in this context, as it entails a self-managed advancement system that requires individuals to demonstrate exceptional performance, build strong client relationships, and consistently deliver results over time (Stumpf 2009). In this process, Kumra and Vinnicombe (2008) emphasize that female consultants are not only required to navigate the rigorous demands of career advancement but are also expected to conform to a predominantly masculine success model. This expectation places women at a significant disadvantage and contributes to the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions. Similarly, Quental and Kelan (2015) discuss the gendered construction of skills within the promotion process, emphasizing the (de)valuation of certain competencies based on gender, which perpetuates workplace inequalities by aligning specific skills with stereotypical gender roles (Acker 1990; Adkins and Lury 1996). Adding to this discourse, Savall et al. (2019) describe the promotion process as a rat race, highlighting the organizational and structural barriers that disproportionately impede women's career progression.

## **2.2.2. Theories on Gender Dynamics**

### *2.2.2.1. Social Capital Theory: The Boys' Club Phenomenon*

In recent years, studies have increasingly explored factors contributing to gender disparities in career progression. Alongside gender bias, social capital provides an additional explanation, highlighting the importance of informal networks and interpersonal relationships in facilitating resource exchange, trust, and collaboration within organizations (Bourdieu 2008; Coleman 1988). However, these networks often manifest in ways that disproportionately benefit men, further entrenching gender inequalities. A common and influential example of this is the so-called '(old) boys' club'.

It refers to an informal network of male colleagues in a workplace who hold power and influence within the organization, creating exclusive environments for connections and interactions that predominantly benefit men (Cullen and Perez-Truglia 2023; Deng and Lu 2024). These networks operate as a self-perpetuating cycle, where male managers tend to promote a disproportionately high number of male employees, who, in turn, are more likely to continue uplifting other men (Cullen and Perez-Truglia 2023). This culture can result in limited access for women to career-advancing opportunities like mentorship, networking, and high-profile projects.

According to a vast body of research, the boys' clubs' effects become apparent in the less favorable treatment of women in the managerial field, the attribution of less effective leadership styles, and the need to overcome gendered barriers by engaging in traditionally masculine strategies by approximating the boys' club through converging to its features (Prime et al. 2008; Powell 2012). The resulting lack of access to social capital is a critical factor in the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions.

The boys' club phenomenon also has significant implications for the availability of female role models. The scarcity of women in leadership limits opportunities to observe successful career paths, constraining professional development (Sealy and Singh 2010; Fisher and Kinsey 2014).

However, role models are vital for building social capital through the provision of mentorship and the facilitation of network access, with their absence forming a key barrier to women's professional advancement.

Additionally, women's networking behaviours are perceived as a double standard. If they engage in self-promotional or strategic networking, they are often judged more harshly than men, whose similar behaviours are viewed as ambitious and effective. This discrepancy further limits women's ability to build and leverage social capital, perpetuating their exclusion from key networks and opportunities (Merluzzi and Sterling 2016).

#### 2.2.2.2. *Leaky Pipeline Phenomenon*

The 'leaky pipeline' phenomenon refers to the observed trend wherein women enter organizations in numbers comparable to men; however, their representation diminishes progressively at higher hierarchical levels (Kelan 2012).

Within the field of consulting, the limited existing literature has identified three main sources of the leaky pipeline: "the up-or-out culture, the client-facing nature of consulting, and the dominant idea that men rather than women are consultants" (Kelan 2012, p. 502). Up-or-out relates to the extreme working culture with excessive workload and a fast-paced, client-pleasing mode of work. In this environment, the literature argues, career structures often lack flexibility and there are few, if any, opportunities to transition in and out seamlessly, implying highly restricted options to temporarily step away while staying in touch with the organization (Kelan 2012; Hewlett and Luce 2005). While this up-or-out culture holds true for both men and women, the rigid approach tends to be especially challenging for women, whose career paths often follow less linear patterns due to various life-stage transitions (Kelan 2012).

Secondly, it is argued that another significant factor contributing to the talent attrition in consulting firms is clients' potential preference for male consultants (Berry 1996; Kelan 2012).

This appears as an additional burden to women in consulting when compared to the corporate

world, where client interactions are not part of the day-to-day business. As a consultant moves up the career ladder, the degree of client exposure and contact increases, which then accordingly disfavors women in more senior consulting roles (Boni-Le Goff 2012).

Lastly, it is argued that the ideal consultant is often characterized by traditionally masculine attitudes and attributes, which inherently exclude women by disregarding or undervaluing traits typically associated with femininity (Tomenendal and Boyoglu 2014; Shirtz 2020). Across the literature, the ‘ideal consultant’ is, or has historically been, characterized as the stereotypical man fulfilling masculine attributes, traits, and manners (Tomenendal and Boyoglu 2014; Savall et al. 2019; Kelan 2012).

Taken together, the consulting industry’s unique characteristics make its pipeline particularly ‘leaky’, meaning that career progression for women is hindered by a combination of rigid career structures, biases, and the reinforcement of traditionally masculine ideals.

### **2.2.3. Female Career Paths – From Glass Ceiling to Labyrinth**

#### *2.2.3.1. The Glass Ceiling in the Workplace and in the Consulting Industry*

Throughout the literature and public discourse, the ‘glass ceiling’ phenomenon has been the subject of discourse regarding women’s career advancement. Since the 1990s, the term has been used to describe an invisible barrier to women’s career progressions, particularly in the corporate context. It represents biases rooted in beliefs, attitudes, and cultural norms, that impede women’s career advancement beyond specific levels as they approach senior leadership positions (Stewart 2022; Federal Glass Ceiling Commission 1995).

According to Elacqua et al. (2009), the perceived differential, gendered treatment of women as described by the glass ceiling is significantly influenced by the interplay of beliefs about interpersonal and situational factors, including mentoring opportunities, the existence of the above-mentioned boys’ club, and insufficient objective evaluation criteria.

When narrowing down the scope to the consulting industry, the characteristic partner promotion

process provides compelling evidence of the glass ceiling's prevalence and underlying gender-based advancement barriers.

**Appendix 2** depicts a typical consulting career path, highlighting entry, medium, and senior-level roles at the leading firms. The hierarchical structure and standardized progression emphasize barriers for women advancing to senior positions, fostering an environment where the obstacles associated with the glass ceiling are notably prominent.

#### 2.2.3.2. *Labyrinth instead of Glass Ceiling – A Progressed Perspective*

More recently, the presence of women in executive and partner roles challenges the notion of the glass ceiling as an absolute barrier, shifting the focus to a 'labyrinth' metaphor, which captures the multifaceted complexities women face in advancing to senior positions. While the top is theoretically attainable, the labyrinth represents a complex journey with various implicit and explicit hurdles and roadblocks that can be summarized into the following five key areas (Eagly and Carli 2007; Stamper and McGowan 2022):

**Vestiges of prejudice:** Women continue to face lower earnings and slower promotions compared to men, reflecting persistent gender-based discrimination that exists across all organizational levels rather than being confined to higher-level roles.

**Resistance to women's leadership:** Leadership is frequently associated with traditionally masculine traits, such as assertiveness and dominance, which contrasts with the societal expectations of women to exhibit warmth and collaboration. This disparity illustrates the above-mentioned gender biases and associated consequences for women in senior leadership positions.

**Issues of leadership style:** As a result of the above, female leaders frequently encounter challenges in developing a leadership style that combines the warm traits expected of women with the assertive traits associated with effective leadership, creating the challenge of integrating it within male-dominated environments.

**Demands of family life:** Family obligations often lead to reduced work hours, career interruptions, and implicit biases, slowing career progression and exacerbating work-family conflicts.

**Underinvestment in social capital:** Limited participation in networking due to work-family balance pressures restricts women's access to essential career-advancing opportunities in male-dominated spaces. The literature addressing the latter two dynamics will be discussed in detail in **Section 2.3.**

#### **2.2.4. Strategies for Promoting Female Career Progression**

The interplay of the labyrinth and leaky pipeline phenomena creates measurable gender disparities across the consulting industry's hierarchy, with near gender parity at entry-level positions steadily declining through the rigidly structured career stages (Kelan 2012) (see also **Appendix 1**). The consulting sector has implemented a variety of initiatives and strategies to promote female career advancement, which are examined in the following sections with regards to their status quo and effectiveness.

##### *2.2.4.1. Quotas*

In both academia and practice, gender quotas are a widely debated topic, extensively analyzed across a variety of fields (Wang and Kelan 2013; Adriaanse and Schofield 2014; Kim and Fallon 2023). Despite the substantial research, a significant gap remains in examining their impact within the consulting industry.

By definition, gender quotas serve as policy interventions aimed at fostering gender equality and addressing structural barriers to women's career advancement by setting and enforcing a minimum threshold of women in leadership roles (Pande and Ford 2012). Representation theory suggests that greater female visibility in senior positions challenges stereotypes, normalizes women's leadership, and inspires others, thereby reducing psychological barriers and fostering greater acceptance of female leaders (Kanter 1977; Beaman et al. 2012; Dahlerup 2007).

A notable example includes Germany's 2016 legislation mandating a minimum of 30% female representation on supervisory boards of large, publicly listed companies that has led to a significant increase in women's participation in these roles. A study by Fedorets, Gibert, and Burrow (2019) found that this quota effectively raised the proportion of women on supervisory boards. Additionally, the introduction of this quota has stimulated broader public debates on gender equality, highlighting the need for more inclusive leadership structures and prompting discussions on expanding such measures to other sectors (Ekin 2018). By 2024, the average female representation on supervisory boards of DAX-listed companies exceeded 40%, indicating a positive trend in gender diversity at the leadership level (DPA 2024).

However, quotas can also create challenges, including perceptions of women as 'quota hires', suggesting their selection is based on gender rather than qualifications, which can undermine their credibility and authority (Elstad and Ladegard 2012; Zimmer 1988). Kanter (1977) highlights this tokenism as a barrier, emphasizing the need for quotas to be complemented by reforms such as transparent selection processes, leadership development programs, and measures to counteract unconscious bias (Bohnet 2016). For example, Australia's Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) mandates transparent reporting of gender equity metrics, ensuring that quota-based hiring is perceived as meritocratic (Cassells and Duncan 2021).

Accordingly, the mixed literature on gender quotas demonstrates that, while they can enhance representation and address inequities, their effectiveness depends on thoughtful implementation and the integration of supportive organizational initiatives (Atinc, Srivastava, and Taneja 2022).

#### 2.2.4.2. *Existing Organizational Solutions*

Organizations can complement gender quotas with voluntary initiatives aimed at addressing gender biases and advancing women's careers. These include targeted talent development, leadership training, diversity programs, flexible work arrangements, and collaborations with women-focused advocacy groups (Elkhwesky, Salem, and El Manzani 2023). Such initiatives

aim to dismantle structural barriers while fostering skill development, mentorship, and networking opportunities.

**Appendix 3** highlights initiatives by leading consulting firms to support female career advancement. Examples include McKinsey's 'Women at McKinsey' program, focusing on mentorship through 'You Grow'; Bain's 'Women at Bain', emphasizing leadership preparation via the 'True North' Scholarship; and BCG's 'Women@BCG', combining career development with recruitment initiatives like 'Female Intensiveship' and 'Pygirls'. Other firms, such as Roland Berger, Kearney, Deloitte, and PwC Germany, offer mentorship, workshops, and leadership training, including Roland Berger's 'EmpowHER' and Kearney's 'BoostHER'. These efforts showcase diverse strategies to engage and support female talent by offering distinct programs tailored to women's needs in professional settings.

### **3. Methodology (Group Part)**

#### **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

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literature review on female career progression and work-family dynamics in the consulting industry established the theoretical foundation, incorporating peer-reviewed articles, books, and 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.

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Furthermore, the interview participants were categorized into three cohorts based on their positions within the consulting hierarchy: entry-, medium-, and senior-level (see **Appendix 6**).

### **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 6**, 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 7**.

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.

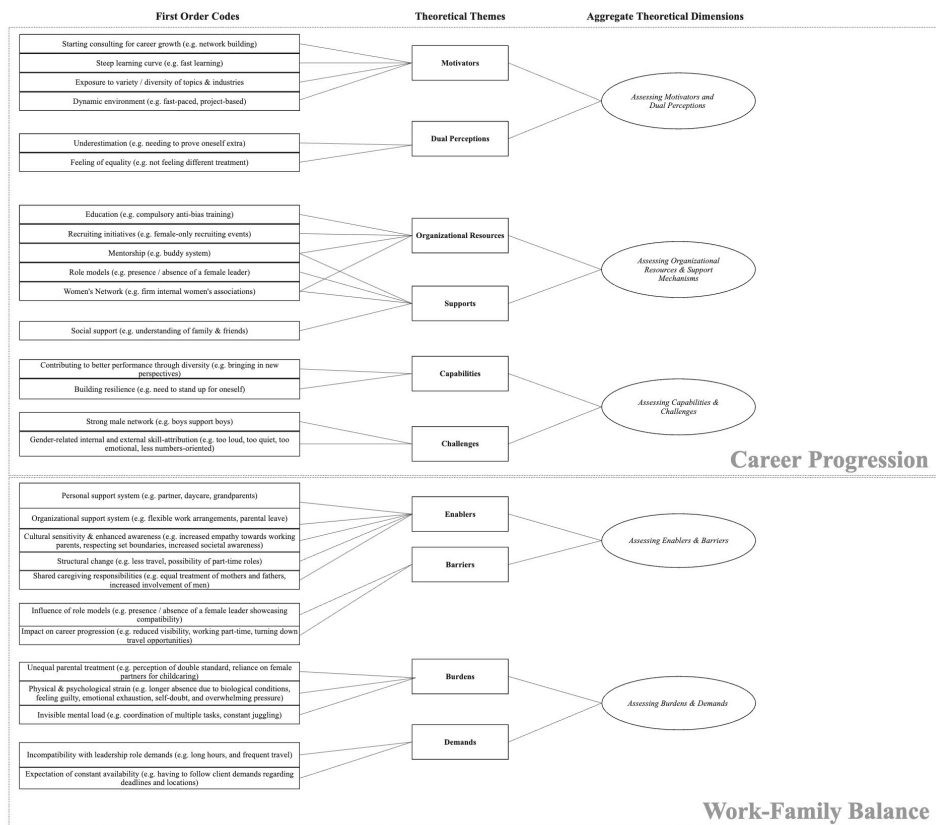
### **3.4. Data Analysis**

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 8**.

**Figure 1** Gioia Data Structure



## 4. Results

### 4.1. Career Progression (Individual Part – Emily Greiner)

The qualitative data obtained in the interviews present a holistic view of how female consultants navigate career progression. The themes identified through the participants' experiences and perspectives highlight both the challenges and strategies, with the analysis centering around three main areas: *Assessing motivators and dual perceptions*, examining women's expectations and challenges faced throughout their consulting career; *assessing organizational resources and support mechanisms*, analyzing the role of institutional and informal workplace support levers in facilitating or hindering growth; and *assessing capabilities and challenges*, addressing both personal skills and obstacles that individuals face on their career paths while navigating around gender biased and prejudices. These themes provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of female career progression in consulting.

#### 4.1.1. Assessing Motivators and Dual Perceptions

*Starting consulting for career growth.* Among the junior consultants in our study, entering consulting was not associated with doubts about capabilities or competence. Instead, the focus was on the opportunity to build skills in a challenging and dynamic field. Consulting was often viewed as a strategic choice and launching pad for career growth, offering the chance to enhance professional credibility, rapidly expand networks, and position oneself for long-term success.

*“But I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that I also saw consulting as a path to build credibility and a network quickly. It’s the kind of job that opens doors – people know consulting is tough, so it gives you a reputation for being resilient, adaptable, and capable.”*

[Transcript #11]

*Steep learning curve.* Junior consultants’ main goal is to learn rapidly by working on diverse, high-stakes projects that require the development of broad skill sets in a short amount of time. They aim for continuous growth by tackling new topics daily, quickly mastering unfamiliar areas, and improving their expertise through constant challenges in their professional setting.

*“You’re thrown into these high-stakes projects, and it’s all about learning things up quickly and improving every day.”*

[Transcript #19]

*Exposure to variety / diversity of topics and industries.* In our study, consultants are motivated by the opportunity to gain broad professional experience through exposure to various industries and challenges. The engagement with and in diverse fields emerges as a key motivator, both when starting the job and as a continuous motivation in the day-to-day business.

*“Consulting, on the other hand, is like this constantly evolving puzzle. You’re exposed to different industries, different challenges, and you’re constantly having to think on your feet.”*

[Transcript #20]

*Dynamic environment.* Consultants in this study highlighted the dynamic nature of consulting as they perceive it to be a setting where each day presents new learning opportunities and varied challenges, amplifying the learning opportunities. They aim to thrive in this ever-changing environment, solving problems and avoiding the monotony of repetitive tasks that they expect to encounter in other professional settings.

*“I also like the dynamic nature of consulting – it’s fast-paced, and you’re always learning something new.”*

[Transcript #7]

*Underestimation.* In this study, the female consultants conveyed a duality of insights on perceived gender-based treatment. On the one hand, they shared feelings of underestimation, a multifaceted challenge encompassing the heightened need to prove competence and to stand out. This largely stemmed from implicit perceptions of being scrutinized and the pressing need to establish credibility to earn trust and respect. Many women reported having to exceed expectations to achieve the same recognition and career advancement as their male counterparts.

*“And what I notice is that women often have the feeling that because there are fewer of them, they are under extreme scrutiny and that they have to prove themselves among the men.”*

[Transcript #8]

Similarly, others report a consistent need to demonstrate expertise to counter assumptions that male colleagues are the ‘default experts’.

*“For instance, in the finance sector, which is already very male-dominated, there have been moments where I felt I needed to prove myself a bit more to be taken seriously. It’s not that clients outright say anything discriminatory, but you pick up on the difference in tone or how they might direct certain questions to male colleagues instead.”*

[Transcript #14]

This struggle extends to making their voices heard in professional discussions, where women often feel dismissed or overlooked, leading them to perceive the need to actively assert their opinions to ensure they are recognized and valued.

*“I think this is the main challenge that you have to stand out.”*

[Transcript #3]

*“So in discussions, your opinion is dismissed, or you're not really listened to, or you're not trusted to do things.”*

[Transcript #18]

These perceptions of underestimation were reported as especially pronounced in interactions with clients from traditionally male-dominated industries such as banking, automotive, and insurance. Many female consultants noted that the inherent cultural dynamics in these sectors heightened the challenges of earning credibility and trust.

*“You're, sometimes, a little bit – depending on what industry you're in – viewed as worth less. It can be quite hard that the client does not take you as serious as your male colleagues.”*

[Transcript #9]

Taken together, this leads to perceptions of underestimation of female consultants’ skills and

value. They often face dismissive attitudes from both male colleagues and clients, resulting in an implicit attribution of lack of authority and competence.

*“So, I think it's a tendency to be underestimated still to some degree.”*

*[Transcript #5]*

*Feelings of equality.* The dual nature of emerged perceptions on gender-based treatments became apparent with reports on perceived equal treatment and suggestions that opportunities and fairness were influenced more by personal traits, company culture, and individual performance than by gender.

*“So personally, I was always treated similar, like, same as my male colleagues.”*

*[Transcript #6]*

These dual perceptions are illustrated by reports on access to opportunities. The female consultants acknowledged the theoretical existence of equality in accessing advancement chances, but noted practical disparities. Despite initiatives such as female recruitment programs, many reported facing additional hurdles and a steeper path to fully benefit from these opportunities, highlighting persistent challenges despite formal measures of equality.

*“So I do believe that women and men have the same opportunities.”*

*[Transcript #17]*

*“It's not that the opportunities aren't there, but it's definitely a steeper climb for women.”*

*[Transcript #20]*

#### **4.1.2. Assessing Organizational Resources and Support Mechanisms**

*Education.* Female consultants in this study mentioned education initiatives as important measures to promote gender equity and to provide organizational support. The topics covered in these trainings vary, range from bias awareness to communication, and aim to ensure a more inclusive and supportive environment for women in the consulting workplace.

*“There are many measures for female development, specific trainings for women, particularly in the area of communication and appearance.”*

*[Transcript #16]*

Some women also highlighted the importance of trainings that involve men, noting that these sessions help to raise awareness on gender biases and fostering greater understanding within the workplace.

*“We even also sometimes had events where also male colleagues could participate, just so that they know what we are talking about [...] in order for them to get a sense of how women are feeling or what challenges they are facing.”*

*[Transcript #9]*

*Recruiting initiatives.* In our study, female consultants highlighted the significant role of female-only recruiting initiatives in helping women to learn about and enter the consulting industry. Many interviewees shared that these events served as a key gateway for their careers, as they were directly recruited through such programs. They noted that most consulting firms actively organize these initiatives, providing women with tailored networking and entry-level opportunities to help them get a foot in the door.

*“There’s a lot of recruiting events that tailored to women. That’s how I first learned about [Company #4].”*

*[Transcript #4]*

*“At the entry level, I’d actually say women have a little bit of an advantage nowadays, at least when it comes to getting your foot in the door. There are all sorts of events, like networking and recruiting, that are aimed specifically at women.”*

*[Transcript #7]*

In addition to female-specific recruiting events, some interviewees pointed to the role of quotas in enhancing opportunities for women in consulting. Quotas were seen as a driving force behind these initiatives, ensuring that firms actively prioritize gender diversity in their hiring processes.

*“So I would actually say that women have better opportunities to get into consulting because [...] they have quotas to fill.”*

*[Transcript #9]*

*Mentorship.* In our study, mentorship emerged as a central theme, highlighting its role in the career progression of female consultants. Participants emphasized the value of mentors, particularly female mentors, for guidance, practical advice, and inspiration in addressing challenges unique to women in consulting. While some noted a lack of female role models in senior leadership, almost all stressed how mentorship is crucial for fostering confidence, envisioning long-term career paths, and navigating professional and personal challenges.

*“Another thing I’ve noticed is that women in consulting are sometimes underrepresented in senior leadership. We’re seeing more female leaders, which is fantastic, but there’s still a gap. I think it can be challenging to envision a long-term career in consulting when you don’t see as many women in the highest ranks. It makes you wonder about the sustainability and realisticness of this path [...].”*

*[Transcript #12]*

*“I think these mentorship programs are incredibly effective because they offer practical guidance, not just theoretical support.”*

*[Transcript #20]*

*Role models.* Along with mentorship, the female consultants in this study emphasized the importance of the mere presence of senior female role models, particularly as sources of motivation to address their personal career advancement and balance between work and personal life. However, the underrepresentation of women in senior positions creates a disconnect between the aspiration they inspire and the reality, potentially undermining junior consultants’ confidence in envisioning long-term success in the profession.

*“Of course, there aren't that many female role models yet, but sometimes I think people underestimate how important they are. [...] I understand this, because like this, you get to see and understand what's possible.”*

*[Transcript #13]*

*Women’s Network.* In the study, women's networks were highlighted as a valuable resource, offering structured opportunities for connection, exchange, and support. These platforms create spaces and occasions for women to share experiences, openly discuss challenges, and learn from one another through events, workshops, and discussions, fostering a sense of community and collective growth in a traditionally male-dominated industry.

*“It’s a platform where women can come together to network, share their experiences, and just learn from each other. I think it’s really good to have a space where you can talk openly about the challenges you’re facing and get advice from others who’ve been there. And it’s not just about talking – they organize events, workshops, and discussions that really make you feel part of a supportive community.”*

*[Transcript #7]*

*Social support.* Consultants highlighted that the support of family and friends who understand the demands implicit within the consulting profession can deeply affect their career choices and success. Conversely, a lack of understanding may make career navigation harder due to perceived feelings of isolation.

*“[...] if your family understands what consulting is about and what kind of skill you need to be successful in a career like that, that helps. If your background is different and [...] your parents are a bit intimidated by people in suits working long hours, I don’t know. Maybe they won’t support your decisions as much or nudge you not to go into that direction. But for me, my family has always been very supportive, and most of I mean my friends do the same job so they also understand.”*

*[Transcript #4]*

### 4.1.3. Assessing Capabilities and Challenges

*Contributing to better performance through diversity.* Female consultants in our study emphasized the crucial role diversity plays in enhancing team performance and project outcomes. They highlighted how they contribute by bringing differing perspectives, strengths, and approaches to the table. This fosters complementarity, enriches collaboration, and leads to better, more innovative solutions for the clients.

*“Different perspectives, whether from different genders or disciplines such as life sciences or business administration, enrich the projects immensely. You learn so much from each other because everyone has a different focus. This makes for better solutions and stronger team.”*

[Transcript #14]

*“Actually, I think the fact that sometimes women are a little more empathetic than men also helps. (...) I can say that from my own experience. You can also look at x scientific studies proving this. Diversity brings better results.”*

[Transcript #16]

Additionally, some noted that client expectations are shifting, with diverse teams increasingly being seen as essential for delivering quality results, further reinforcing the practical benefits of diversity in consulting.

*“Customers are actually demanding this today. In the past, it was more like, oh, how nice that you have a woman on the team. Today, if you only had a male team, the question would be, why don't you have a diverse team?”*

[Transcript #16]

*“It also helps to work with clients who value diversity and see the benefit of having different perspectives on their projects. The key, I think, is to show up confidently and back it up with quality work – that tends to speak louder than any initial bias.”*

[Transcript #14]

*Building resilience.* In our study, the experiences shared by female consultants underscored the importance of developing resilience and standing up for oneself in the workplace. They highlighted the need to set clear boundaries when confronted with unacceptable behavior while also acknowledging that, at times, choosing to let minor issues pass can be necessary to maintain focus and professionalism, striking a balance between self-advocacy and pragmatism.

*“You just loose acceptance like this and all the male colleagues just roll their eyes. In my opinion, sometimes, you just have to grit your teeth a little and swallow certain things – as long as it's within reason, of course. This is also an important point, to know when you then in contrary have to set very clear boundaries as to what is not acceptable. You can't keep quiet then.”*

[Transcript #16]

*Strong male network.* A common topic among the women in our study was the presence of informal male networks that can create barriers for women in consulting. While these networks are not openly exclusionary, they often lead to men supporting, prioritizing, and uplifting each other based on feelings of a homosocial connection to each other, leaving women feeling excluded from opportunities and lacking similar levels of support.

*“Men are a lot more connected with each other – it’s not, like, blatant exclusion, but there are these informal networks and connections that men seem to have that, as a woman, you just aren’t part of.”*

*[Transcript #11]*

*“Because in a male-dominated world as we have in the finance sector, men will always protect men and never will a man protect a woman.”*

*[Transcript #14]*

*Gender-related internal and external skill-attribution.* A prominent theme among the female consultants was the reinforcement of gender-based biases by male colleagues, who often attributed stereotypical traits to women, such as being overly emotional, less technical, or more self-conscious. This external attribution influenced how responsibilities were assigned and limited recognition of women’s abilities in technical or analytical roles.

*“I also felt like they were biased in the type of topics that they assigned to us women. It was all about topics like marketing and brand representation so on. So not nothing, nothing technical, which was fine for me, but still, it was very gender-related.”*

*[Transcript #9]*

Simultaneously, many women internalized these stereotypes, assigning similar traits to their own behavior. This internalization fostered self-doubt and compelled them to work harder to assert their competence and counteract these ingrained biases to gain equal recognition.

*“[...] we are still more programmed not to be quite so self-confident in our approach, but to demand a lower salary, not to apply for jobs where we perhaps don’t meet all ten requirements, where men actually still approach things with greater self-confidence, which is probably culturally influenced in some way and therefore distorts equal opportunities a little.”*

*[Transcript #13]*

*“[...]but as a woman, I think you deal with them more emotionally. So you take it to a more emotional level, and sometimes I just find it difficult, because I’m also very emotional, to really switch that off.”*

*[Transcript #18]*

## **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

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contexts and are reported to be especially pronounced in traditionally male-dominated client environments, such as the automotive or banking industries.

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 con-

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ceals 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 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

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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 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

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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.

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.

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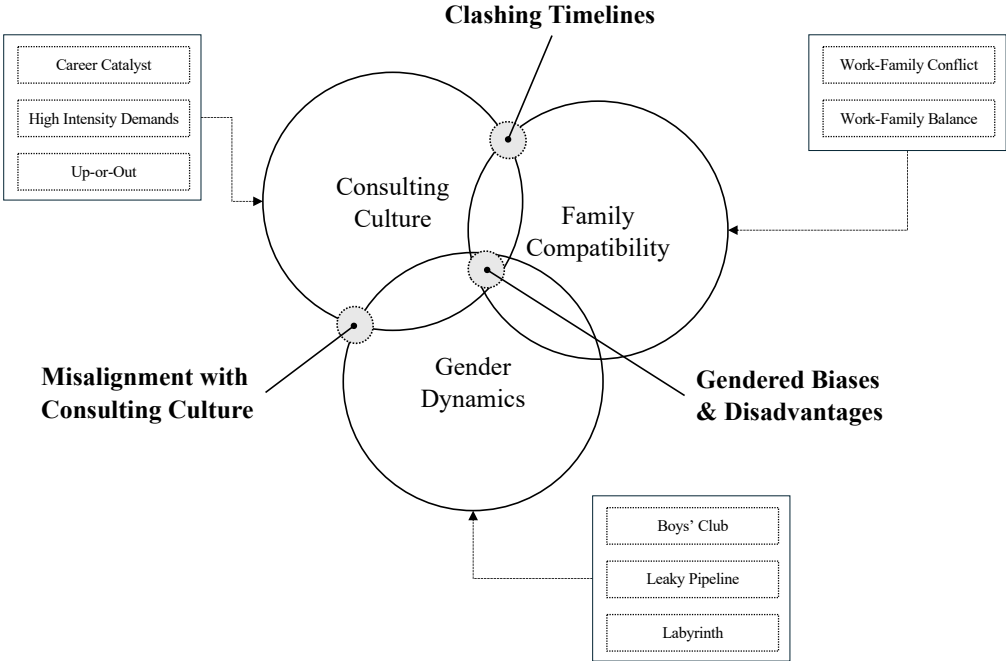
One particularly important point, which is not prominently discussed in the existing literature, is the misalignment between the flexibility required by working mothers and the timing of career advancement. The timing of family planning often clashes with critical career stages, and stepping away during 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 2** 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, exacerbating 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.

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**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 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, 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

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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 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

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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, 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

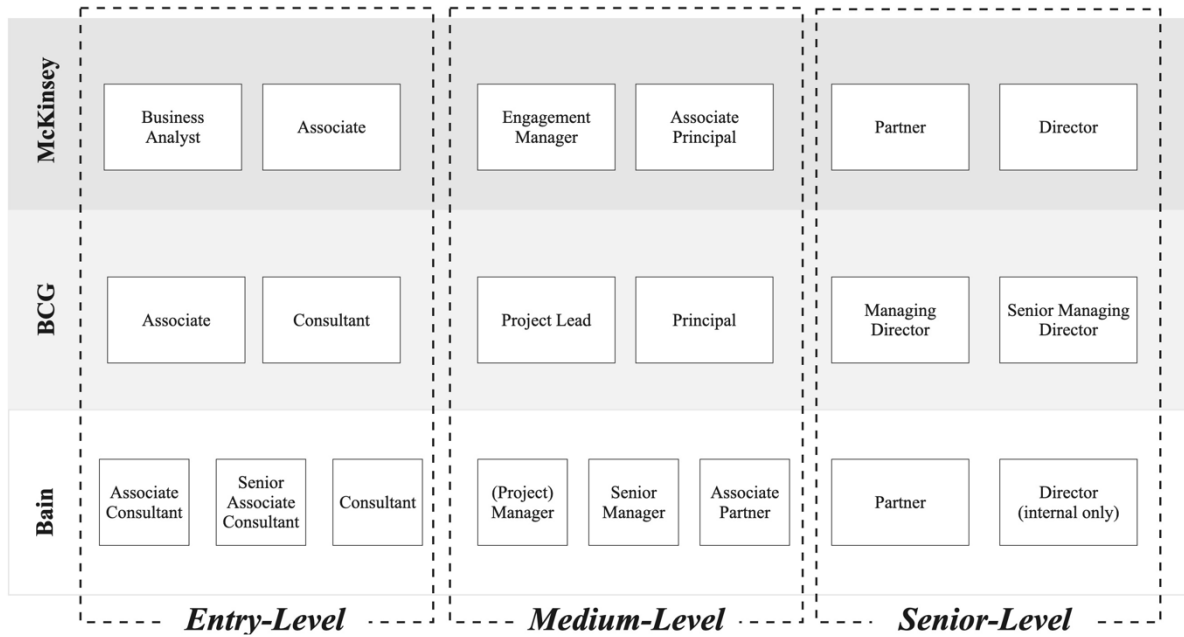
HR Human Resources

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

	2021	2023		2021	2023		2021	2023	
	<b>McKinsey</b>			<b>Bain</b>			<b>Boston Consulting Group</b>		
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** Career Stages in Consulting at McKinsey, BCG, and Bain



Source: StrategyU 2024

## Appendix 4 Best Practices by Leading Consulting Companies: Women Support Programs

Firm	Initiative name	Description	Programs
McKinsey	Women at McKinsey	"A global women's network" Community and mentorship	You Grow - Women Mentorship Programs
Bain	Women at Bain (WAB)	"A global community for Bain professionals who want to build connections around women's experiences, including women and non-binary individuals. Our programming focuses on building meaningful bonds and preparing for leadership by providing support to create pathways for success inside Bain."	True North Scholarship
BCG	Women@BCG	"The network offers best-in-class programs in career development, mentorship, and networking to help women in consulting and beyond excel personally and professionally."	Female Intensiveship Pygirls
Roland Berger	EmpowHER	No matter whether a woman is still looking for a job or is already an experienced consultant, EmpowHER is there to accompany and support her in all phases of her personal and professional development. Within this program, women are able to take part in events where female consultants report on their own experiences, alongside special events on topics such as self-marketing, presentation skills and case workshops.	European Female Talent Program
Kearney	Kearney Women	The network is dedicated to recruiting, supporting, and advancing women through initiatives and events that promote career progression, work-life balance, leadership development, and gender equality while fostering a women-friendly, inclusive environment.	BoostHER
Deloitte	Women in the Workplace	Initiatives fostering female leadership including networking formats, individualized development plans, development measures such as coaching and mentoring, as well as talent program	Her Way Forward
PwC Germany	women&business	Aims to fill key positions by women more frequently in the future. Through cross-industry events, keynote speeches, and experience sharing within our women's network, the personal and professional development of ambitious high achievers is promoted.	women&energy women&healthcare women&consumersmarkets

Source: McKinsey, n.d.; Bain & Company, n.d.; Boston Consulting Group, n.d.-b; Roland Berger, n.d.-a; Kearney, n.d.-b; Deloitte, n.d.; PwC, n.d.

## Appendix 5 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 6 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 7 Gioia Analysis

