

# ID Cover Page

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### NAVIGATING GENDER BARRIERS:

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES AND ORGANIZATIONAL  
ACTIONS IN CONSULTING

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NAVIGATING GENDER BARRIERS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WOMEN'S  
EXPERIENCES AND ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIONS IN CONSULTING

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### **Abstract**

This thesis examines barriers to women's advancement in consulting leadership, focusing on systemic practices and cultural norms. Using a grounded theory approach and 20 interviews with women and male leaders or HR professionals, it identifies structural barriers like biased promotions and exclusion from networks, reinforced by cultural biases and work-life challenges that hinder women's retention in leadership pipelines. While mentorship programs and flexible policies show promise, their impact is limited by cultural resistance and systemic inequities. The study offers actionable recommendations to address second-generation gender bias, emphasizing integrated structural and cultural reforms for sustainable gender equity in consulting leadership.

**Keywords:** Consulting, gender equity, career advancement, retention, organizational policies, organizational practices, grounded theory, women in consulting, barriers to advancement, gender bias

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## 1. Introduction

Gender diversity and the advancement of women into leadership positions are pivotal issues in both organizational and societal discourse. In recent years, global awareness of gender equality has driven efforts to create more inclusive workplaces, particularly in industries where structural and cultural barriers persist. Despite this, women continue to be severely under-represented in the most senior management positions.

Studies have shown that promoting women to leadership positions is not merely a matter of fairness; it also delivers societal, organizational, and economic advantages. For example, it enhances organizations' performance, particularly in sales (Hoobler et al. 2018; McKinsey and Company 2020). Organizations with greater gender diversity in executive roles tend to perform better financially. Companies in the top quartile for gender diversity within executive teams are 25% more likely to report profitability above the industry average (Dixon-Fyle et al. 2020). Furthermore, organizations with a higher proportion of women in senior management roles are less likely to be involved in legal disputes, to suffer reputational damage or to engage in unethical business practices (Perryman et al. 2016; Chamorro-Premuzic 2022). Finally, increasing the proportion of women in leadership roles fosters greater innovation within organizations (Chen et al. 2018).

The ethical and business rationale for advancing women into senior roles are compelling, yet gender imbalances persist, particularly in sectors such as consulting. In 2021, women occupied only 17% of top management roles in the consulting industry (Catalyst 2021). Broader corporate trends suggest a similar pattern: women constitute 48% of entry-level roles but only 29% of senior leadership and C-suite positions across industries (McKinsey and Company 2024).

Men and women typically have equal opportunities for entry-level positions; however, as their careers progress, women frequently encounter a “glass ceiling” that halts their

advancement. The glass ceiling phenomenon refers to the vertical segregation of men and women within organizations and is defined as “(...) the situation whereby opportunities for career progression for a particular gender within a company or sector are limited” (EurWORK 2017). The advancement from middle management to senior leadership is identified as a pivotal stage where women are disproportionately confronted with obstacles that impede their progress, leading to their underrepresentation in the most senior leadership roles within consulting firms (Advance HSG 2021; Catalyst 2021).

While first-generation gender bias refers to overt and intentional acts of discrimination against women in society or the workplace, second-generation bias is subtle, systemic, and rooted in male-oriented practices, values, and beliefs that hinder women's leadership opportunities and career advancement, effectively holding women back from the “upper echelons of power” (Grover 2015), i.e., the glass ceiling. Second-generation gender bias generates subtle obstacles to women's career progression, rooted in cultural gender norms, interaction patterns, and organizational systems and practices that disproportionately advantage men (Ely, Padavic and Kolb 2011; Ibarra et al. 2013). Examples include unequal pay, limited promotion opportunities, exclusion from informal networks, and the disproportionate burden on women to balance careers with caregiving responsibilities, such as childcare and eldercare (McKinsey and Company 2020; Catalyst 2021).

To address these persistent imbalances, many organizations have implemented initiatives aimed at promoting gender equity. Mentorship and sponsorship programs are commonly used to support women's career development, offering guidance and advocacy. However, these programs often fail to address the systemic biases embedded in promotion processes and networking opportunities, limiting their overall effectiveness (McKinsey and Company 2020). Flexible work policies, which are designed to help employees balance professional and personal responsibilities, frequently fall short as well, largely due to

workplace cultures that stigmatize their use and penalize those who prioritize work-life balance, particularly women (Catalyst 2021). Diversity training programs, while widely adopted, often lack measurable outcomes and do not create lasting changes in organizational behavior or culture (EurWORK 2017).

Although these efforts demonstrate a growing awareness of the problem, their impact remains limited because they fail to address the root causes of second-generation gender bias. As a result, systemic barriers continue to hinder women's advancement, especially in industries like consulting, where gender disparities are particularly pronounced (DeFrank-Cole and Tan 2022).

Given the persistence of these challenges, this research aims to examine the cultural, structural, and individual factors that contribute to gender imbalances in leadership, with a specific focus on the consulting industry. By exploring the ways in which stereotypes, organizational practices, and workplace cultures interact to create barriers for women, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the systemic issues at play. Furthermore, the research critically evaluates the effectiveness of current initiatives, such as mentorship programs, diversity strategies, and flexible work policies, in addressing these barriers.

This research identifies gaps between organizational intentions and women's lived experiences, offering actionable recommendations to dismantle second-generation gender bias. By addressing cultural and structural barriers, it aims to create equitable leadership pathways, fostering innovation and inclusivity in leadership. This is particularly crucial for consulting, where tackling gender imbalances is essential for fairness and long-term organizational success.

Therefore, this study addresses the following research question: *What are the perceived barriers women face in advancing to leadership positions in consulting firms, and how do organizational practices or policies contribute to both hindering and retaining female talent?*

The following sections will review the literature on barriers to women's career advancement and assess the effectiveness of existing practices and policies for promoting female talent. The research methodology will then be explained and justified. Findings will be presented and critically analyzed to develop a grounded theory, providing a practical framework for consulting firms to address challenges in achieving gender diversity in senior leadership.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Perceptual Barriers to Women's Advancement**

Stereotypes act as cognitive shortcuts, helping individuals simplify and categorize the world around them, including distinctions between men and women (Catalyst 2007). Gender stereotypes arise from the societal assignment of men and women to distinct roles, creating broad assumptions about their abilities and characteristics. These stereotypes reinforce traditional expectations and limit perceptions of each gender's potential and capabilities. (Eagly and Steffen 1984). Observations, such as women being more likely to occupy caregiving roles, are often rooted in historical physical differences and socialization practices that have reinforced traditional roles over time (Eagly et.al. 2012). These stereotypes not only influence societal expectations but are also identified as significant factors contributing to the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles (Catalyst 2007).

Stereotypes persist, even though, research shows that men and women share more similarities than differences, with greater individual variability within each gender than between the two genders (Catalyst 2007). Stereotypes lead to the perception that men are more agentic—exhibiting characteristics like authority, competence, and assertiveness—while women are viewed as communal, with traits such as warmth, helpfulness, and nurturing (Braun et al. 2017). These gendered traits also influence the types of roles and industries deemed appropriate for each gender, reinforcing occupational segregation (Cejka and Eagly 1999;

Horowitz, Igielnik, and Parker 2018a). For example, managers, regardless of their gender, are more likely to view men as inherently better suited to management roles due to presumed agency (Schein et al. 1996).

Gender stereotypes produce two kinds of expectations: descriptive norms and prescriptive norms (Heilman 2001). Role congruity theory posits that prejudice may arise when stereotypes about a social group conflict with the qualities perceived as necessary for success in specific social roles (Eagly and Karau 2002). In leadership contexts, the incongruity between the female gender role and the qualities associated with leadership often leads to the perception that women are less suitable for leadership roles (Eagly and Karau 2002), particularly in male-dominated industries (Garcia-Retamero and López-Zafra 2009). This perception of "lack of fit" fosters gender biases that result in the undervaluing of women's potential and abilities in leadership roles (Heilman, Manzi, and Braun 2015).

This incongruity also places women in a double bind, where they must exhibit agentic traits to be seen as competent leaders yet face criticism for failing to conform to traditional feminine norms. As Catalyst (2007) describes, women are "damned if they do, doomed if they don't" because they are seen as unfit for certain roles due to descriptive gender norms. When women attempt to adopt more masculine behaviors associated with leadership, they are often penalized for failing to adhere to prescriptive gender norms. This double bind not only impedes women's career progression but also influences perceptions of their competence. In order to be seen as a qualified leader, women need to demonstrate agency, while also demonstrating communal traits, in order to be seen as "appropriate women" (Carli 2015, 294).

Research has demonstrated that these biases have tangible impacts. Women are often held to higher standards than men and must outperform their male counterparts to be considered equally competent. The results of experiments have demonstrated that women are subjected to higher standards of evaluation than men, even when they perform at the same level as their

male counterparts (Foschi 1996). Furthermore, women often receive fewer rewards than men for comparable performance (Catalyst 2007). Female leaders who adopt traditionally masculine styles of leadership may be evaluated more negatively than male leaders, particularly in male-dominated fields (Eagly et al. 1992; Lopez and Ensari 2014). However, when women adopt more feminine leadership styles, they tend to receive more favorable evaluations, even if these styles are not traditionally associated with leadership effectiveness (Lopez and Ensari 2014). This creates a contradictory standard for women in leadership, further complicating their ability to gain acceptance and succeed in these roles.

Heilman (2001), argues that the misalignment between societal expectations of gender roles and the qualities associated with leadership generates a predisposition toward negative biases. This incongruity often shapes perceptions and judgments, leading to skepticism and resistance toward women's potential contributions in leadership positions. Such biases can prevent women from advancing, as leadership success partly depends on gaining social acceptance and approval (Heilman 2001). When women's actions conflict with prescriptive gender norms—by demonstrating assertiveness, for example—their competence may be devalued, and they may even face penalties for perceived overstepping (Heilman 2001).

Moreover, stereotypes affect not only how women are viewed by others but also how they view themselves. Gender stereotypes can lead women to internalize self-doubt, engage in self-limiting behaviors, and feel unfit for male-typed roles. This self-directed bias, shaped by societal norms, further hinders women's ambitions and professional confidence (Heilman 2012), leading to an increased desire to “opt out” of career advancement opportunities (Peters et al. 2012). This internalization of gender norms, compounded by the organizational structures that continue to favor male-dominated norms, can lead to a “cascading gender bias” that perpetuates inequality over generations (Catalyst 2009).

Though evolving gender roles have challenged some traditional stereotypes, recent studies indicate that many stereotypes, especially those related to communal characteristics, remain deeply embedded (Heilman, Manzi, and Braun 2015; Hentschel, Heilman, and Peus 2019). As a result, the perceived incongruity between women's gender roles and leadership roles remains a significant barrier to women's career advancement. Especially male-dominated industries, such as consulting, continue to promote leadership models that emphasize qualities such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and competitiveness – traits historically associated with men (Braun et al. 2017). Ultimately, consulting firms continue to establish and reinforce leadership norms and expectations that are implicitly gendered, reinforcing the belief that men are inherently better suited for leadership roles, creating gendered barriers that hinder women's career progression (Braun et al. 2017; Eagly et al. 2002).

## **2.2. Structural and Cultural Barriers to Women's Advancement**

The structural and cultural challenges women encounter when striving for leadership roles include restricted access to critical resources such as professional networks, mentorship, role models, and leadership training programs (Chanland and Murphy 2018). Additionally, women often face ongoing difficulties in managing the demands of both work and family life (De Simone and Priola 2015). Together, these factors contribute to systemic barriers that hinder women's career growth, job satisfaction, and representation at the highest organizational levels.

*Lack of Access to Key Networks, Mentors, Role Models, and Leadership Development:* Wynen, Op De Beeck, and Ruebens (2015) argue that women are frequently excluded from informal networking and bonding opportunities that occur outside of work hours, often in male-dominated spaces. The exclusion of women from these networking and bonding experiences is often a result of their time and place (Jones 2019). Consequently, one of the main barriers to women's advancement is their lack of social capital, which is the value that arises from the connections and relationships that an individual or group has within a social network (Bourdieu

1986). Therefore, the lack of women in leadership roles can be attributed to their limited access to informal networking and bonding opportunities, as well as mentors and role models, i.e., their lack of social capital (Schulz and Enslin 2014; Tariq and Syed 2017). This lack of exposure effectively hinders their ability to ascend to the upper echelons of their organizations (Chanland and Murphy 2018; Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb 2011). Informal networks contribute to the opacity often linked to career advancement by fostering connections and promotions that rely on personal relationships and biases (Jones 2019). Consequently, the absence of transparency in hiring and promotion practices perpetuates processes that disproportionately disadvantage women (Jones 2019).

Informal mentoring, in particular, has been shown to have a greater positive impact on career outcomes compared to formal mentoring. Ragins and Cotton (1999) found that informal mentors, who voluntarily invest in their protégés and provide career guidance unconstrained by organizational formalities, can significantly enhance career development and provide psychosocial support. However, women are less likely to access these informal mentoring relationships, partly due to the gender imbalance in executive roles, which leaves them with fewer potential mentors and role models (Ragins and Cotton 1999). This scarcity limits women's opportunities to build the networks and sponsorships often necessary for advancing into leadership positions, such as gaining seats on corporate boards (McDonald and Westphal 2013).

In addition, organizational structures tend to favor a culture of "social cloning," where those in positions of power tend to mentor and promote individuals similar to themselves, often disadvantaging women and other minority groups (Jones 2019). This phenomenon, also referred to as homosocial reproduction, reinforces a masculine managerial culture that marginalizes women and preserves traditional power dynamics within organizations (Holgersson 2013). As a result, women frequently face exclusion from informal networks and

developmental opportunities, with studies indicating that exclusion from these circles significantly hinders their advancement. Survey data show that 27% of Americans believe that a major barrier for women in achieving executive positions is their lack of access to the same personal connections and networking opportunities as men (Horowitz, Igielnik, and Parker 2018a; 2018b), corroborating the results of previous research which posited that developmental networks are a crucial conduit for career advancement (Chanland and Murphy 2018) and that women's exclusion from these networks perpetuates systemic inequities (Ibarra 1993). Research shows that while mentoring is essential for leadership development, it often falls short in propelling women to top-level positions. Sponsorship, characterized by influential advocates actively promoting high-performing individuals, is identified as a critical factor in advancing women's careers (Catalyst 2011). Due to women's lack of social capital, they also lack access to sponsorship opportunities.

Feelings of isolation within organizations often undermine women's confidence in their leadership capabilities and potential (Norman 2014). When women observe a lack of leaders who resemble them, their career aspirations and leadership beliefs are diminished (Blau and Kahn 2013). Conversely, exposure to successful female leaders who share similar characteristics helps reduce self-stereotyping and challenges traditional, stereotypical self-perceptions (Asgari, Dasgupta, and Stout 2012). Research suggests that marginalized groups are better positioned to contest societal norms and achieve change when they possess the necessary confidence and determination to act (Norman 2014). However, the erosion of confidence frequently drives women to "opt out" of pursuing senior leadership roles, further exacerbating their underrepresentation at the top (Norman 2014).

*Competing Responsibilities of Work and Family:* The burden of balancing work and family responsibilities is another critical structural barrier. In Western societies, women are often expected to fulfill the majority of caregiving and household duties, even when they are

employed in a full-time career (Hochschild and Machung 2012; OECD 2021), which can conflict with career aspirations and the demands of leadership roles (Craig and Mullan 2010; De Simone and Priola 2015). Consequently, women experience higher levels of work-life conflict than men, particularly in dual-career households where caregiving duties are rarely shared equally (Kremer 2007; Parker, Horowitz, and Rohal 2015). Due to their caregiving expectations, women are more likely than men to reduce working hours or forgo advancement opportunities to meet caregiving obligations (European Institute for Gender Equality. 2021; Kremer 2007), leading to cumulative career disadvantages over time (Craig and Mullan 2010; Goldin 2014). Consulting roles are defined by expectations of constant availability, high client responsiveness, and a performance-driven ethos that aligns with traits traditionally associated with masculinity (Hewlett et al. 2008; Eagly et al. 2002). Rigid work structures and organizational cultures, such as consulting, requiring continuous availability, often overlook the impact on women, who may need to take time off or seek flexible schedules, which are incompatible with caregiving demands (Jones 2019), causing women to “opt-out” or accept less demanding roles for flexibility (Goldin 2014; Jones 2019; LeanIn.Org and McKinsey and Company 2022). These constraints reinforce traditional roles, making it challenging for women to balance career and family and reducing their progression potential (Eagly and Carli 2007; Goldin 2014).

Women in consulting who pursue flexible work arrangements often face negative perceptions. Ely and Meyerson (2000) highlight that consulting cultures often regard those who seek flexibility as less committed, limiting their career progression. This cultural stigma attached to flexibility impedes women's leadership opportunities. Chamorro-Premuzic (2022) notes that despite increasing awareness of work-life balance, consulting firms continue to associate commitment with constant availability. As a result, women needing flexible schedules, often due to caregiving responsibilities, are frequently overlooked for promotions

and high-visibility projects, which restricts their leadership potential (Ely and Meyerson 2000; Chamorro-Premuzic 2022).

Assumptions about women's caregiving responsibilities and work-life conflict also negatively impact women's perceptions of job fit, commitment, and competence, reinforcing the "glass ceiling" effect by limiting women's access to promotions and leadership roles (Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick 2004; Hoobler, Wayne, and Lemmon 2009) and perpetuating gender disparities in senior roles (Goldin 2014; Kremer 2007).

Family responsibilities also contribute to women's underrepresentation in leadership by affecting their confidence and self-perception in professional settings. Women who struggle to balance work and caregiving often experience feelings of isolation within their organizations, which can negatively impact their leadership aspirations (Norman 2014). Moreover, these gendered expectations influence women's self-perceptions, leading many to internalize self-doubt or consider career compromises. For instance, (Peters et al. 2012) found that female surgical trainees expressed a desire to "opt-out" due to the disconnect between their career's high demands and societal caregiving expectations. This self-directed bias, shaped by societal norms, further hinders women's ambitions and professional confidence (Heilman 2012).

### **2.3. Effectiveness of Gender Equity Policies**

The effectiveness of gender equity policies lies in their ability to address systemic barriers and cultural biases. Initiatives such as mentorship programs, leadership development, and diversity training play a central role in promoting inclusivity (Ely, Ibarra and Kolb 2011; Chanland and Murphy 2018). Flexible working models, like remote or hybrid arrangements, further support work-life balance but must be complemented by efforts to prevent biases that may hinder career progression (Kossek and Lautsch 2018). This section explores the efficacy

of various diversity initiatives, highlighting their impact and considering potential unintended consequences (Dobbin and Kalev 2016).

*Diversity Initiatives:* Diversity initiatives, such as quotas, leadership training programs, and gender equity policies, are vital tools for addressing systemic barriers to women's career advancement in consultancies (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Kossek & Lautsch, 2018). Quotas can significantly increase female representation, demonstrating the effectiveness of structural measures (Bertrand et al., 2018). However, quotas often fail to address deeper organizational cultures that perpetuate gender biases, limiting their impact on lasting cultural change. Leadership training programs empower women by enhancing skills and confidence (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). These programs are most effective when integrated with broader organizational changes to address gender bias; otherwise, they risk being viewed as isolated efforts that do not fully address systemic issues. (Ely et al., 2011).

Despite their benefits, gender equity policies can lead to tokenism and backlash (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Catalyst (2007) highlights that women promoted solely to meet diversity targets may face perceptions of incompetence, undermining their authority and legitimacy as leaders (Ely et al., 2011). Backlash to such policies, often perceived as preferential treatment, can hinder their effectiveness (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Kossek & Lautsch, 2018). Poor communication and lack of inclusivity exacerbate these issues (Heilman, 2012). To ensure long-term success, organizations must communicate the benefits of diversity initiatives, foster inclusion, and use education to mitigate resistance (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Kossek & Lautsch, 2018).

*Mentorship and role models:* Mentorship and sponsorship programs are key strategies for advancing women's careers and fostering leadership diversity (Ibarra, 1993; Chanland & Murphy, 2018). Consulting firms and other organizations have implemented these programs to address gender disparities. Mentorship offers women guidance and career navigation tools,

while sponsorship goes further by advocating for women in decision-making spaces and ensuring their visibility for leadership opportunities. However, significant barriers persist despite these efforts (Chanland & Murphy, 2018). The effectiveness of mentorship and sponsorship initiatives often depends on their integration within organizational cultures. Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb (2011) argue that introducing these programs without embedding them into a broader inclusive strategy may yield limited results. For instance, while sponsorship theoretically promotes advocacy, it often remains inaccessible to women due to the dominance of male informal networks. This exclusivity limits women's exposure to senior leaders and reinforces traditional power dynamics favoring men (Adams, 2015).

Similarly, the presence of female role models, although impactful, remains insufficient in male-dominated industries like consulting (Asgari et al. 2012; Adams 2015). While female leaders can inspire confidence and challenge stereotypes, their underrepresentation reduces their potential influence on organizational culture (Asgari et al. 2012). Furthermore, mentorship and sponsorship programs sometimes fail to address systemic biases or are undermined by a lack of accountability in ensuring they are equitably distributed (Ibarra 1993; Chanland and Murphy 2018).

To create meaningful change, mentorship and sponsorship programs must go beyond tokenism and address structural barriers. This includes improving access for women to sponsors who actively advocate for their career progression and embedding these initiatives within a cultural shift that prioritizes diversity at all levels (Chanland and Murphy 2018). Without such measures, these programs risk reinforcing, rather than dismantling, the gender disparities they aim to address (Ibarra et al. 2010).

*Leadership Development Programs:* Formal leadership development programs are widely used to prepare women for senior positions through tailored training, workshops, and skill-building exercises (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). When implemented effectively, these programs

enhance women's confidence and leadership readiness. Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb (2011) stress that such initiatives are most impactful when paired with efforts to address organizational biases and drive cultural change, creating an environment supportive of diverse leadership. These programs can also counter stereotype threat—the fear of confirming negative stereotypes—that may hinder women's performance and aspirations. Catalyst (2007) highlights that programs emphasizing resilience, strategic thinking, and networking empower women to navigate leadership challenges effectively, building technical and interpersonal skills necessary for career advancement and balanced leadership (Catalyst, 2007; Ely et al., 2011).

However, their effectiveness is limited when treated as standalone solutions. Adams (2015) notes that without integration into broader strategies to reduce gender bias and promote inclusivity, these programs may fail to achieve lasting change. While individual participants may benefit, the organizational structure often continues to perpetuate barriers that restrict women's progression (Adams, 2015).

*Flexible Working Models:* Flexible working models, including part-time schedules, remote work, and job-sharing, are increasingly promoted as gender equality initiatives within organizations. These arrangements aim to support women's career progression by accommodating caregiving responsibilities, which women still predominantly bear (Craigand Mullan 2010; Eagly and Carli 2007). By reducing work-life conflicts, flexible working models can help retain women in leadership pipelines (Kossek and Lautsch 2018), yet research shows they are often accompanied by biases that may limit their effectiveness (Hoobler et al., 2009).

Part-time work is a widely utilized flexible model, particularly by women, to balance work and caregiving, providing relief from high-pressure roles (Kossek and Lautsch 2018), reducing burnout and turnover in male-dominated industries (Hewlett et al. 2008). However, these part-time roles come with career penalties, frequently being stigmatized as “lesser” due to the persistence of the “ideal worker” archetype, which prioritizes full-time availability as a marker

of commitment (Hewlett et al. 2008). This bias disproportionately impacts women, reinforcing stereotypes about their dedication and limiting access to critical advancement opportunities, high-visibility projects, and mentorship—key elements for career progression (Eagly and Carli 2007; McDonald 2011).

Furthermore, remote work has become increasingly accepted following the COVID-19 pandemic and is now recognized as a viable model for enhancing gender equity by reducing the necessity for on-site presence (OECD 2021). It offers women greater flexibility to balance work and family responsibilities without reducing hours, improving work-life balance and satisfaction (Goldin 2014). Additionally, remote work reduces commuting times and costs, supporting workforce participation during caregiving years (Kossek and Lautsch 2018). However, remote work poses unique challenges, particularly in career visibility and networking. Studies show that remote workers, especially women, often face an “invisibility penalty,” limiting access to informal networks, mentorship, and high-profile opportunities, which can hinder advancement into leadership roles, as remote employees may be overlooked for high-profile assignments or promotions (McDonald 2011; McKinsey and Company 2018). Therefore, organizations must implement policies ensuring equal access to career development and fair performance evaluations for remote employees (OECD 2021).

Job-sharing, where two employees share a single full-time role, has gained increased popularity and has shown promise for retaining women in leadership pipelines by enabling reduced working hours without losing engagement in high-responsibility roles (Chanland and Murphy 2018). This model is particularly beneficial for professionals balancing careers and caregiving, increasing job satisfaction and retention by providing a manageable balance between work and personal commitments (Kossek and Lautsch 2018). However, job-sharing remains underutilized, and its long-term effectiveness is not well-studied (Drury and Kaiser 2014). Women in such roles often face biases similar to those in part-time work, where non-

standard hours are perceived as reduced commitment (Cuddy et al. 2004). Ely, Ibarra and Kolb (2011) argue that without changes in how leadership potential is assessed, job-sharing may remain undervalued compared to traditional full-time roles, limiting its effectiveness as a leadership pathway.

*Male Allies:* The involvement of male allies is crucial for advancing gender diversity in leadership. By leveraging their positions in male-dominated networks, male allies can help dismantle structural barriers and promote inclusive policies (Prime and Moss-Racusin 2009; Flood 2011). Prime and Moss-Racusin (2009) emphasize that male advocates for gender equity significantly reshape workplace culture, lending legitimacy to diversity initiatives and fostering wider acceptance among colleagues.

Male allies are vital as mentors and sponsors, helping women access informal networks essential for career advancement (Drury and Kaiser 2014). McKinsey and Company (2018) highlights that male sponsors enhance women's visibility in leadership, advocating for their involvement in high-profile projects and opportunities. This support mitigates the challenges posed by male-dominated networks, improving women's chances of reaching senior roles. Male allies also play a key role in challenging biased norms and behaviors within organizations. Drury and Kaiser (2014) argue that men in leadership positions can shift dynamics by promoting gender equity, addressing sexist behaviors, and modeling inclusivity. Similarly, Flood (2011) notes that when male leaders publicly endorse diversity initiatives, they reduce resistance and foster a culture of inclusion and shared responsibility for equity, particularly in male-dominated industries. Beyond cultural influence, male allies actively address structural inequities. Catalyst (2009) emphasizes that allies advocating for work-life balance policies and transparent promotion criteria make leadership roles more accessible to women. By promoting flexible work arrangements, male allies challenge rigid expectations of availability and commitment, reducing disadvantages faced by women balancing professional and caregiving

responsibilities (Kossek and Lautsch 2018). These efforts collectively help dismantle systemic barriers and support greater gender diversity in leadership.

Despite the benefits of male allyship, certain challenges can hinder its effectiveness. Johnson and Smith (2017) note that male allies may face social or professional resistance when advocating for gender equity and risk unintentionally reinforcing traditional power dynamics if they lack sufficient understanding of gender issues. To address this, organizations must equip male allies with training and resources to navigate gender biases and foster a genuinely supportive environment for women. Male allies are integral to the success of gender diversity initiatives at leadership levels. By acting as mentors, advocating for policy reform, and modeling inclusive behaviors, male allies enhance the effectiveness of gender equity programs and help drive cultural change within consulting firms. Their involvement not only supports the advancement of women in leadership but also contributes to a more inclusive organizational culture that benefits all employees (Catalyst 2009; Johnson and Smith 2017).

As discussed, the obstacles to women's advancement in consulting firms, as well as the efficacy of policies and practices to support the retention and advancement of female talent, have been extensively researched over the past decades. While there is some understanding of the reasons behind this phenomenon, the existing literature has not yet identified a comprehensive and effective plan for organizations to overcome these barriers. Consequently, the objective of this study is to conduct a comparative analysis of key stakeholders' perceptions and experiences to develop an applicable grounded theory and framework.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative research design, chosen for its ability to explore the “how” and “why” behind specific phenomena within a given context, thereby generating hypotheses and theories grounded in the data (McLeod 2023). Qualitative research prioritizes

understanding the lived experiences and social realities of individuals, groups, and cultures by studying participants within their natural environments (McLeod 2023). This approach seeks to provide comprehensive insights into the phenomenon under investigation, offering an in-depth understanding of its various dimensions (Queirós, Faria, and Almeida 2017). Although it relies on smaller sample sizes and is more subjective than quantitative research, it excels in capturing nuances and complexities that quantitative methods often overlook (McLeod 2023).

A grounded theory approach was selected for this study to construct a theoretical framework that explains the barriers and enablers shaping women's experiences in consulting careers. Grounded theory is particularly suited for exploratory research as it generates theory directly from the data, emphasizing participants' lived experiences rather than relying on pre-existing frameworks (Charmaz 2012; Corbin and Strauss 2008). This approach allows for a detailed and iterative analysis of processes, interactions, and structural factors, making it ideal for understanding the interplay between gender equity challenges and organizational responses.

By incorporating insights from both women in consulting and HR professionals or male leaders responsible for policy implementation, the study leverages comparative perspectives to capture individual and systemic dynamics. Grounded theory not only identifies patterns across these groups but also facilitates the development of actionable recommendations grounded in the data.

The open-ended interview questions (Appendix A) aimed to explore participants' career pathways, perceptions of gender equity, barriers to advancement, and the effectiveness of organizational policies promoting female leadership. To capture the distinct perspectives of the two groups, separate interview guides were developed, ensuring questions were tailored to their unique roles and experiences. This study utilized semi-structured interviews, which offer a structured thematic framework while permitting flexibility in the phrasing and sequence of

questions (Tegan 2022). This approach enabled tailoring questions to participants' responses, yielding detailed insights into their lived experiences.

### **3.2. Participants**

The study involved two distinct groups of participants, selected for their significant experience in the consulting industry and their relevance to the research objectives. Group A (Participants B1), consisted of 10 women at different stages of their consulting careers, they represent those directly affected by the phenomena under study. The inclusion of women at different career levels allowed the study to capture a wide range of perspectives. Group B (Participants B2), consisted of 10 individuals in HR and leadership positions within consulting firms, while the leadership positions were held exclusively by men. These participants were responsible for recruitment and retention policies and practices, providing important insights into the systemic and organizational dynamics that influence career trajectories. Participants were recruited through personal networks and targeted outreach via LinkedIn. To maintain confidentiality and encourage honest responses, all participants are referred to by identifiers to avoid potential bias due to concerns about anonymity (American Psychological Association 2017; Creswell and Poth 2018, 53–55). A detailed overview of participants can be found in Appendix B.

The study followed a purposive sampling approach, a widely accepted method in qualitative research for selecting participants based on their relevance to the research questions (Patton 2015, 244–46). The number of interviews conducted - 10 in Group A and 10 in Group B - is in line with established research, which suggests that data saturation can often be achieved with fewer than 15 interviews per group if participants are well selected and the data are rich (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006; Hennink, Kaiser, and Marconi 2017).

### **3.3. Materials**

This study used semi-structured interviews to explore barriers to women's advancement and strategies employed by women in leadership roles. Two tailored interview guides (Appendix A) addressed the distinct perspectives of the participant groups, focusing on shared themes but adapting questions to their roles. Interviews, lasting approximately one hour, were recorded with participant consent and transcribed using AI tools like Microsoft Teams and Turbo Scribe, with manual checks for accuracy, resulting in 181 pages of transcriptions. The transcriptions were analyzed using MAXQDA 2024, employing the Gioia Method for a bottom-up coding process. This approach identified 164 first-order codes, refined them into 21 second-order themes, and consolidated them into 8 aggregate dimensions, resulting in the emergence of a Data Structure, as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

### **3.4. Procedure**

As mentioned in section 3.2, participants were chosen based on the criteria that 1) they have significant professional experience in the consulting industry, and 2) they are either women at different stages of their consulting careers (Group A) or professionals in HR and leadership positions (Group B). Therefore, the sampling procedure was criterion-based, targeting individuals whose roles and experiences aligned with the study's objectives.

Participants were approached via email or LinkedIn, where the purpose of the study was outlined, and they were invited to participate in one-hour interviews. These interviews were conducted using video conferencing platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

Prior to the interviews, an interview guide was prepared for each of the two participant groups to steer the discussions toward addressing the research question. The selection of the interview guide depended on the participant's pre-determined group affiliation. During the interviews, the phrasing and sequence of questions were adjusted flexibly, allowing

participants to shape the conversation based on their lived experiences and the context of their responses.

The interviews, which were transcribed using AI tools, were analyzed using the Gioia Method, a systematic approach to qualitative data analysis. This method involves breaking down the content of the interviews into first-order codes, using MAXQDA 2024, which represent participant-centric terms and insights, capturing their lived experiences in their own words. Recurring and related themes were grouped under second-order themes, allowing for the emergence of researcher-derived conceptual insights.

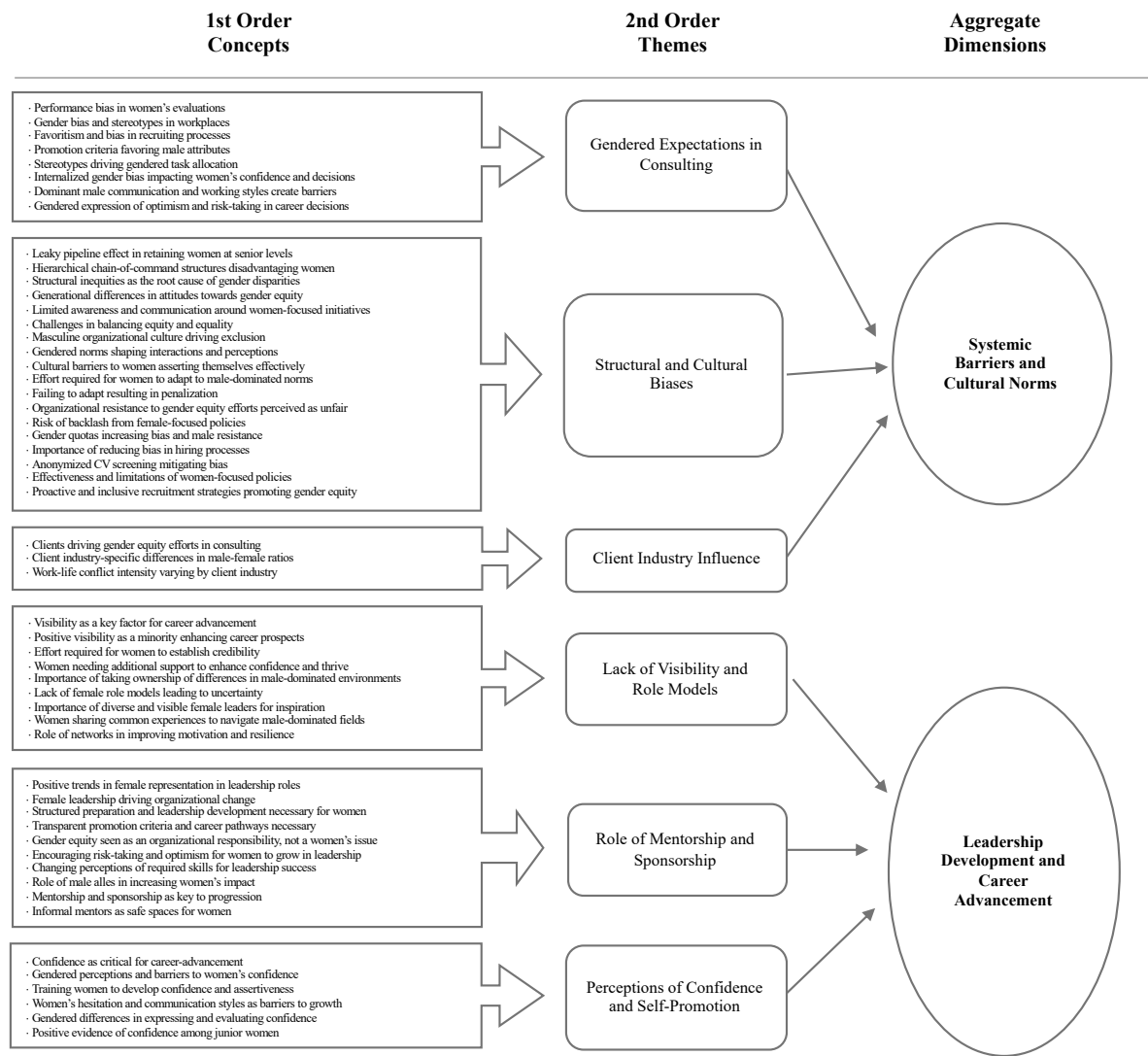
The Gioia Method was employed to analyze the data systematically. Representative quotes from participants, highlighting the second-order themes, are presented in Appendix C. The analysis involved coding interview segments to uncover patterns, similarities, and contrasts in participants' experiences. These second-order themes were then synthesized into aggregate dimensions, creating higher-level constructs. This process enabled the development of a theoretical framework that captures the relationship between barriers and enablers to women's advancement in consulting firms.

The findings were synthesized to construct a grounded theory that integrates the emergent insights into a cohesive model. The data structure diagrams, shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, visually depict the hierarchical progression from first-order codes to second-order themes and aggregate dimensions, offering a clear roadmap for the subsequent discussion.

After analyzing the findings for each group (Group A and Group B) separately, the insights from both groups were revisited and compared, to identify commonalities, contrasts, and key connections. This comparative process allowed the integration of the perspectives, enabling the development of unified recommendations that address both the individual experiences of women in consulting and the organizational policies and practices that influence their career advancement.

### 4. Findings Group A (Women)

The findings from Group A were analyzed using the Gioia Method. This approach systematically explored participants' experiences through a hierarchical data structure (Figure 1). 79 first-order codes captured raw insights, which were refined into eight second-order themes, revealing patterns across experiences. These themes were then synthesized into three aggregate dimensions, providing a comprehensive view of the systemic barriers, enablers, and workplace dynamics shaping women's retention and leadership progression in consulting.



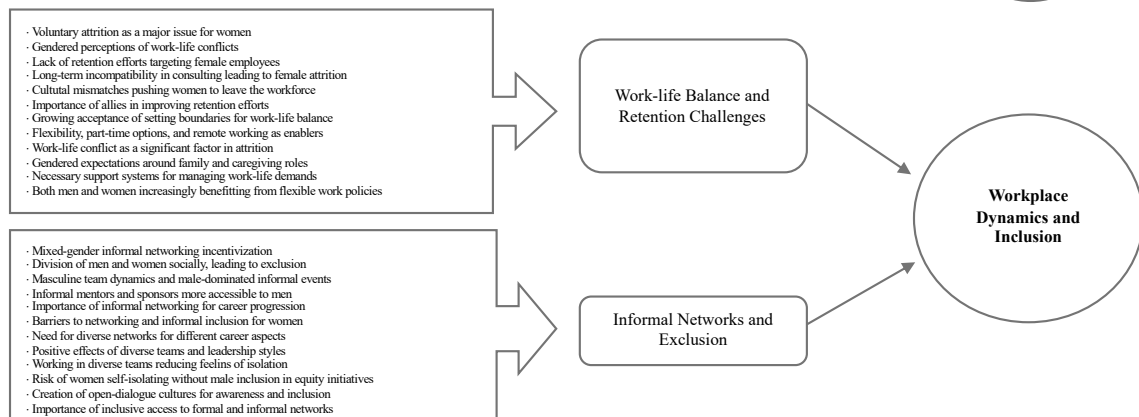


Figure 1: Data Structure Group A

#### 4.1. Systemic Barriers and Cultural Norms

*Gendered Expectations in Consulting:* Performance evaluations often underestimated women's expertise, with participants noting that they felt they were not recognized as capable due to their gender. As one participant shared:

*"I've definitely noticed that sometimes different expectations are placed on women at my level, like Consultant or Senior Consultant, compared to men, even if they have the same university degree. For example, I have a colleague who's also a Consultant, and she studied Data Science, so she's technically very skilled. My manager once said to her, 'I always have to remind myself not to underestimate you,' just because she doesn't fit the stereotypical image people might expect" (A3).*

These biases also extended to client interactions, particularly with older male clients, where women's contributions were less valued. One participant explained:

*"Especially if the customers tend to be older—which they typically are if they are senior—then they simply treat a young woman differently and often don't value her as equally as perhaps younger colleagues would" (A10).*

Furthermore, recruitment processes, despite aiming for gender parity, sometimes perpetuated biases. Perceived favoritism toward women in recruitment occasionally reinforced negative stereotypes, undermining their credibility.

Task allocation within teams often reflected traditional gender roles, with women frequently assigned undervalued responsibilities. One participant observed:

*"There is also a tendency to automatically push women into roles that are more in line with typical interpersonal HR roles... For example, we have so-called 'PTO facilitators'... It*

*often happens that a woman is pushed into the role of PTO facilitator after parental leave, which takes her out of the normal case context and visibility" (A1).*

Promotion criteria were also a key area of concern, often favoring traits traditionally associated with men, such as assertiveness and decisiveness, which disadvantaged women whose leadership styles did not align with these expectations. As one participant stated:

*"We have a very quantitative culture—that's our identity, so to speak, similar to McKinsey or BCG. I believe that this is often seen as a rather masculine attribute, i.e., this analytical aspect. All our reviews, in other words, the promotion criteria, are designed with this in mind" (A8).*

Gendered expressions of confidence and risk-taking further influenced career advancement. Women often felt pressured to be cautious and realistic, while men were celebrated for boldness and ambition. One participant explained:

*"Women, including myself, are often more realistic, maybe even a bit self-critical..." (...)  
"...a man might confidently say, 'I can do this; just give me the chance,' while a woman might say, 'I'd love to, but I haven't done it before,' which can sound less confident." (A2)*

*Client Industry Influence:* The dynamics of client industries significantly shaped women's experiences in consulting, influencing their ability to assert boundaries and navigate gender biases. Male-dominated sectors such as finance often created challenges. One participant noted:

*"Our customers are predominantly male, and I'm often the only woman in the room, especially in the more senior positions. This is also due to the fact that I work in the financial services sector, where the proportion of women is extremely low" (A10).*

In contrast, sectors with greater female representation, such as healthcare, were perceived as more inclusive and equitable. As one participant explained:

*"For example, in areas like health consulting, agile work, organizational consulting, and process consulting, there are generally more women, and those sectors are often further along in terms of inclusivity" (A5).*

Work-life balance challenges were heavily influenced by the client's industry. Male-dominated fields demanded relentless schedules, disproportionately impacting women who were juggling personal and professional responsibilities. One participant shared:

*"In consulting, particularly with private equity clients, the demands are relentless—weekends and evenings are not sacred" (A2).*

Conversely, industries with higher female representation, such as HR consulting, offered more flexibility, reducing work-life conflicts. A participant observed:

*"In contrast, sectors like People Consulting or HR often have more women and tend to be more flexible, creating less intense work-life conflicts" (A4).*

*Structural and Cultural Biases:* Structural and cultural barriers within consulting firms were identified as significant impediments to achieving gender equity. Recruitment and promotion systems often reinforced traditional hierarchies and male-dominated norms.

Promotion systems frequently prioritized traits such as assertiveness and decisiveness over collaboration and relational leadership, disadvantaging women whose strengths often lay in undervalued areas. As one participant stated:

*"When all-male committees use these classic clichés—which you see time and time again—then as a woman in a meeting who perhaps stands up to them, you are immediately perceived as the 'rebellious one,' while the man in the same situation is perceived as 'assertive.' Unfortunately, such things are often reflected in performance appraisals" (A9).*

Diversity initiatives, while present, were often perceived as stigmatized or met with resistance. One participant explained:

*"There is a risk with policies that target only women; if not implemented properly, they could backfire. Men might start to feel that women are being given undue advantages, which wouldn't be positive for either gender" (A9).*

Cultural norms within consulting further shaped women's experiences, from overt male dominance in meetings to subtler forms of exclusion. One participant highlighted:

*"In meetings where male colleagues dominate the discussion, women often feel sidelined. Even when women speak up, they sometimes struggle to be taken as seriously as their male counterparts" (A5).*

Additionally, women felt the burden of balancing gender equity initiatives with their regular workloads, reinforcing systemic inequities. One participant shared:

*"It takes an incredible amount of energy to constantly fight for these boundaries and personal freedoms and to have to explain them again and again—especially in a job that already requires a lot of energy" (A10).*

## 4.2. Leadership Development and Career Advancement

*Lack of Visibility and Role Models:* Participants consistently highlighted the absence of visible female leaders and role models as a critical barrier to women's advancement in consulting. This lack of representation reinforced stereotypes about leadership and created uncertainty regarding career trajectories and the feasibility of balancing personal and professional aspirations. One participant noted:

*"At the higher levels, the gender split becomes increasingly male-dominated. I personally have never had the experience of working with a female supervisor in a leadership role above me, as there hasn't been a woman in those roles. It's not that women can't reach these levels, but the higher you go, the more male-dominated it becomes" (A5).*

Visibility within organizations was described as crucial for career progression. Women emphasized the importance of promoting their achievements to be considered for promotions and high-profile projects.

However, this visibility often came with additional pressure to meet higher expectations. Participants frequently felt the burden of having to repeatedly "prove" their competence in male-dominated environments. One participant shared:

*"In meetings, women have to work harder to be taken seriously because dominant male styles are the norm. You constantly feel like you're proving yourself, even when you've already earned your place" (A7).*

The absence of diverse role models further exacerbated these challenges, leaving many women uncertain about the compatibility of consulting with long-term personal goals. One participant observed:

*"For me, another barrier is the lack of role models. When you look up and don't see people who have made it, or if you notice a pattern where everyone seems to stop at a certain level, you start to question things." (A2).*

Participants emphasized the importance of increasing the representation of diverse female leaders to inspire confidence and provide guidance. They identified such representation as a key driver of systemic change. As one participant stated:

*"For me, if I had to sum it up, the real change will come simply from having more women at the top. When more women are at senior levels, things will just start to change on their own." (A2).*

Additionally, shared experiences and networks played an important role in overcoming these barriers. Women highlighted the value of support networks and confidants in navigating challenges and creating a sense of community in male-dominated environments. One participant reflected:

*"Having such confidants has helped me enormously. (...) Discussing such issues with both the career advisor and my mentor and hearing their experiences is super helpful." (A7).*

*Perceptions of Confidence and Self-Promotion:* Participants frequently identified confidence and self-promotion as pivotal for career advancement but noted the unique challenges women faced in navigating these traits due to societal expectations, gendered perceptions, and systemic biases. Confidence was viewed as essential for networking and accessing opportunities, as it conveyed trustworthiness and capability. One participant explained:

*"Confidence is critical to career advancement, especially in our industry. If you have confidence, people trust you more—both clients and colleagues. Internally, if someone tells me with certainty that they can handle something, I'm more likely to give them the chance. But if someone hesitates or seems unsure, even if they're capable, it makes you question whether they're the right fit for the role" (A2).*

Women often reported expending greater effort to sustain confidence in environments where their contributions were undervalued.

Societal norms further complicated this issue, framing women as less assertive or hesitant compared to their male peers. This perception, rooted in internalized biases, often led women to second-guess their abilities. As one participant shared:

*"Women's assertive behavior is often seen as aggressive or emotional, while men are considered confident and determined. This difference doesn't exist for men—they're just seen as strong." (A4).*

Male-dominated communication styles in consulting amplified these disparities, making it harder for women to assert themselves. One participant noted:

*" Dominant men who sell themselves confidently sometimes create a difficult dynamic " (A7)*

Women who hesitated to speak up in meetings were often perceived as lacking substance, further reinforcing stereotypes.

To address these challenges, participants emphasized the importance of targeted leadership training and mentorship programs. These initiatives provided women with tools to navigate male-dominated environments and assert themselves effectively. One participant described the impact of such programs:

*"Training programs and measures that can help—like feedback sessions, having someone hold up a mirror to show how you come across, or filming yourself during presentations—can help you evaluate your presence and refine it." (A4).*

Despite these challenges, participants noted a positive shift among younger women entering the field, who were seen as more confident and outspoken. One participant remarked:

*"When I look at my more junior female colleagues, they are all confident. They're young, ambitious, capable, and outspoken. None of them is shy, which is fantastic." (A2).*

While these trends reflect progress, participants emphasized the importance of sustained efforts to dismantle systemic biases and foster environments where women can assert themselves equally.

*Role of Mentorship and Sponsorship:* Mentorship and sponsorship were identified as critical enablers for women's career advancement in consulting. These relationships provided guidance, advocacy, and confidence, helping women navigate structural barriers and male-dominated environments. However, participants emphasized the importance of formalized and targeted approaches to ensure equitable access to these opportunities.

Mentorship offered women a space to seek advice, build skills, and receive encouragement. Participants highlighted the value of both formal and informal mentorship. One participant shared:

*"I was very lucky to find an informal mentor. It was a principal at our company who called me after a meeting and asked if he could give me feedback. He then gave me tips. He became my informal mentor, and we exchange ideas every four weeks. As he is independent of*

*me in the hierarchy and doesn't influence my promotion, I can talk to him really openly about everything, which helps me enormously" (A8).*

Informal mentorship often filled gaps left by formal programs, providing personalized advice and fostering professional growth. As one participant described:

*"Informal mentorships are crucial because they provide the kind of overarching support we need, often without hesitation or the feeling that we have to fight for it." (A10).*

Sponsorship, in particular, was highlighted as a critical mechanism for promoting women into high-visibility roles. By actively advocating for women, sponsors helped bridge the gap between potential and recognition, addressing systemic biases in decision-making processes. One participant explained:

*"Mentorship is more beneficial in the earlier stages of your career. As you become more senior, sponsorship becomes more important. It's about whether you have someone at the top who will put you forward, push you, and give you opportunities" (A2).*

Sponsorship initiatives were described as vital for advancing women's careers by ensuring access to leadership opportunities and visibility within the organization. As one participant noted:

Participants also emphasized the importance of structured leadership development programs to complement mentorship and sponsorship efforts. These programs were seen as essential for equipping women with the skills needed to overcome barriers and thrive in senior roles. One participant explained:

*"Leadership development programs help identify challenges and explore solutions, empowering women to overcome barriers and reach their goals" (A4).*

Participants called for organizations to take systemic responsibility for addressing gender inequities rather than placing the burden solely on women. While mentorship and sponsorship programs were considered essential, they needed to be paired with broader cultural and structural changes to ensure their long-term impact. One participant remarked:

*"The principle of 'Don't fix the women; fix the system' is very important. It starts with awareness and includes bias training to raise consciousness" (A4).*

### 4.3. Workplace Dynamics and Inclusion

*Informal Networks and Exclusion:* Informal networks were consistently highlighted as a critical factor for career advancement in consulting, yet participants described how these networks often excluded women. Such exclusion hindered relationship-building and limited access to key opportunities. Participants explained that informal gatherings, such as after-work drinks or casual social events, frequently catered to male colleagues, either unintentionally or due to cultural norms. One participant shared:

*"Let's be honest, this happens a lot. Sometimes guys just spontaneously say, 'Let's go for drinks,' without thinking about inviting everyone in the office" (A2).*

Activities organized by project teams often reflected male-dominated preferences, such as sports events or bar outings, making it challenging for women to participate. As one participant remarked:

*"A lot of the informal networking happens around sports or going to bars, which isn't always something I can join. It's not that I'm unwelcome, but the whole setup just doesn't feel inclusive" (A8).*

The male-centric nature of these interactions limited women's access to mentors and sponsors, which were often facilitated through informal channels. As one participant explained:

*"For me as a junior, it started with the fact that my male colleagues somehow had contact with more senior people such as principals and managers more quickly and were more likely to develop 'bromances' with them. Informal mentorships formed very quickly, which somehow happened by itself. And I didn't have that kind of access and didn't really know how to go about it." (A10).*

Participants also noted that cultural assumptions about women's interests and suitability for these networks perpetuated their exclusion. This created a cycle where women were perceived as less engaged, further isolating them. One participant observed:

*"There's this perception that women aren't as interested in the social side of consulting, like grabbing drinks after work, which isn't true at all. But because of this assumption, we're often left out" (A5).*

Additionally, male-dominated communication styles during informal discussions sometimes made collaboration difficult for women. As one participant described:

*"Sometimes the dynamic in informal meetings or discussions is just very male-oriented. It's hard to even insert yourself into the conversation because the topics or jokes aren't inclusive, and that puts you at a disadvantage" (A7).*

To address these barriers, participants emphasized the importance of fostering diverse and inclusive networks tailored to women's needs. Dedicated women's networking groups were recognized as instrumental in connecting women with mentors, sponsors, and peers.

Participants also highlighted the benefits of fostering diverse teams, which encouraged collaboration and enhanced innovation. As one participant remarked:

*"I've experienced firsthand how being part of a diverse team can reduce the feeling of being the odd one out." (A10).*

Participants also highlighted the risk of self-isolating women, if men are not included in equity initiatives, creating an "us versus them dynamic" (A4)

Lastly, participants stressed the importance of open and transparent dialogue about diversity to dismantle biases and promote equitable networking practices. One participant explained:

*"We need to have open discussions about diversity and how to make networking more inclusive. Without transparency, these issues just get swept under the rug" (A9).*

*Work-Life Balance and Retention Challenges:* Work-life balance emerged as a critical factor influencing retention rates among women in consulting. Participants highlighted structural and cultural barriers that made it challenging to reconcile personal responsibilities with professional demands, often leading women to leave the industry. Voluntary attrition was frequently attributed to the long-term incompatibility of consulting with personal goals, particularly family planning. One participant shared:

*" We realised that a big part of the "funnel" is that we lose too many women at Associate level. After just two or three years in consulting, many female colleagues say: "That was nice, but I just can't see myself doing it in the long term with family planning or something similar." (A10)*

Others noted that attempting to balance career progression and personal responsibilities often led to stalled careers or a decision to leave the profession entirely.

These challenges disproportionately impacted women due to societal norms that positioned caregiving as primarily a female responsibility. As one participant explained:

*"Women are still seen as the primary caregivers and as the ones responsible for family and caregiving responsibilities, regardless of their workload." (A1).*

Not only were women subject to expectations about their caregiving duties, but also about their level of work-life conflict, regardless of what they reported.

Cultural norms within consulting further exacerbated these conflicts, with flexibility often stigmatized as a lack of ambition. One participant described this dynamic:

*"Flexibility is still seen as a compromise, like you're not serious about your career if you ask for it. That makes it really hard to advocate for what you need without worrying about how it'll be perceived" (A4).*

Flexible work policies, such as part-time options and remote work, were praised as essential tools for managing work-life conflicts. Participants appreciated these initiatives for enabling women to tailor their schedules and remain in the profession. One participant shared:

*"Part-time options and the ability to work remotely have made a huge difference. Without those policies, I don't think I'd still be here" (A7).*

However, cultural resistance often undermined the effectiveness of such policies, as they were perceived as exceptions rather than normalized practices. As one participant observed:

*"Even with flexible policies in place, there's still this underlying feeling that if you use them, you're taking a step back or not pulling your weight" (A10).*

Interestingly, participants noted a positive shift as flexible policies began benefiting men as well, helping to normalize their use and reduce associated stigma. Equal access to parental leave and reduced workloads encouraged more equitable balance for both genders.

One participant remarked:

*"When men started using flexible policies more often, it made a big difference. It's less stigmatized now, and it shows that these policies aren't just for women—they're for everyone" (A1).*

Participants emphasized the importance of robust support systems, such as childcare programs and institutionalized flexibility, as critical for retaining women in consulting. While participants noted that there is a growing acceptance of setting boundaries, even in client-centered industries, such as consulting, further structural changes are necessary, otherwise participants warned that attrition among women would remain disproportionately high.

### 5. Findings Group B (Male Leadership and HR)

The findings from Group B were analyzed using the Gioia Method. This approach systematically explored their perspectives through a hierarchical data structure (Figure 2). 86 first-order codes captured raw insights from participants, which were refined into thirteen second-order themes to reveal common patterns and concepts. These themes were then synthesized into five aggregate dimensions, providing a comprehensive view of the systemic barriers, gendered professional norms, networking disparities, and work-life challenges impacting women's advancement.

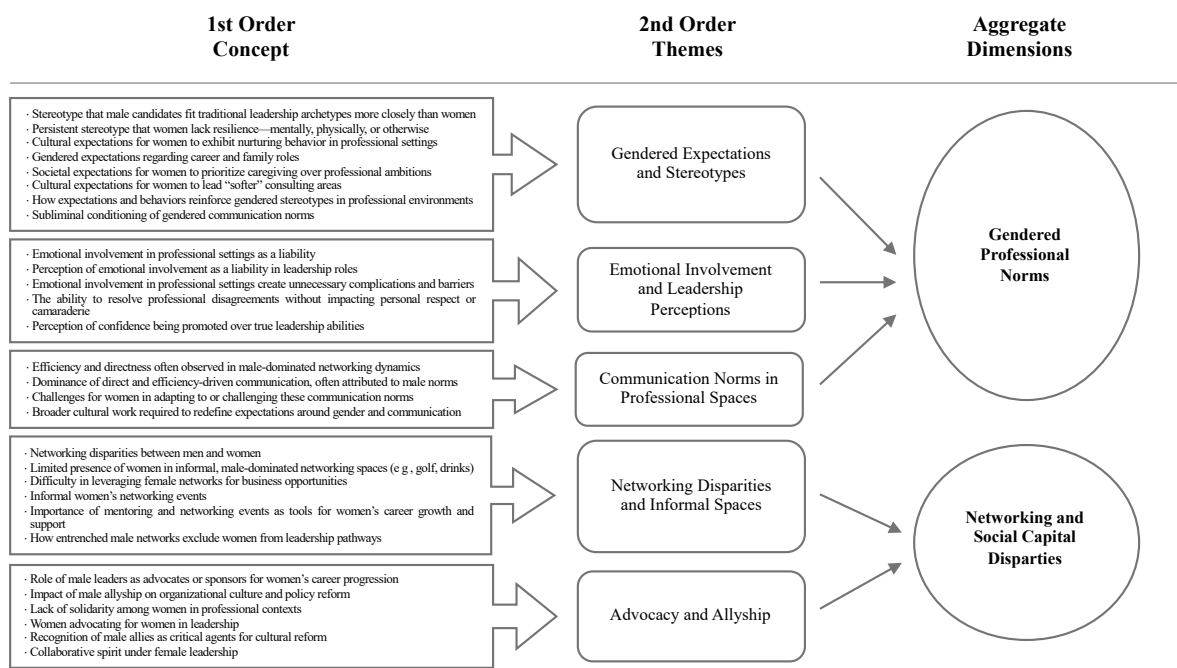




Figure 2: Data Structure Group B

### 5.1. Barriers to Leadership and Representation

*Leadership Development and Visibility:* The underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions was identified as a critical barrier to equitable visibility and professional advancement. All Participants emphasized that the scarcity of female role models in consulting perpetuates the perception of leadership as a predominantly male domain. Leadership development programs were seen as vital in addressing these gaps, with participants advocating for targeted initiatives to build confidence, enhance networking skills, and empower women to succeed in male-dominated environments. B7 highlighted:

*“What’s crucial for women, in my opinion, is to find allies and to network effectively. Consulting is all about networking and leveraging those networks to advance together.”*

However, a significant challenge cited was women's hesitance to self-promote. Unlike men, who are more likely to advocate for themselves, women often wait to meet higher qualifications before seeking advancement. As B2 remarked:

*"Women often greatly underestimate themselves. They position and market themselves far too rationally and soberly and tend to withdraw more quickly."*

An effective solution discussed was the active promotion of female success stories to normalize women in leadership roles. B4 suggested:

*"For example, having more testimonials and best practices from women who successfully work a four-day week and say, 'I have Fridays off, and it works perfectly for me and my family.' Showing more examples of how this can work in practice would be helpful."*

*Retention Issues for Women in Leadership:* Participants observed that consulting environments continues to fall short in accommodating the unique challenges faced by women. Caregiving responsibilities were frequently cited as a key factor driving women to leave the industry before attaining senior leadership roles. B9 remarked:

*"Still, the reality is that not many women stay in consulting long enough to reach the Partner level. They often find that the working conditions are difficult to reconcile with family life, and there isn't enough support in that regard."*

Maternity leave presented particular operational challenges, with participants describing difficulties in reassigning responsibilities during absences and reintegrating women upon their return (B3, B1, B6). Additionally, the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles, coupled with lingering perceptions of limited trust in women's leadership capabilities, further exacerbated retention challenges (B6, B9). To address these issues, participants emphasized the need for stronger organizational commitments to supportive policies, including flexible work arrangements, tailored incentives, and cultural shifts that normalize work-life integration for both men and women. B3 states:

*"One example is promoting part-time programs for both men and women to balance family duties and ensure retention of senior female talent, which ultimately helps in maintaining long-term diversity goals."*

*Quotas and Representation Challenges:* Participants expressed diverse perspectives on gender quotas as a tool to promote systemic change. A recurring theme was the imbalance in the recruitment funnel, particularly in male-dominated sectors, where the pool of qualified female candidates is limited (B3, B1). Participants argued that prioritizing gender balance could make hiring decisions perceived as unfair, particularly by male colleagues (B2, B7, B5). This perception extends to women themselves, who may fear being labeled as "quota hires," potentially undermining their confidence and credibility. B6 shared:

*"However, it comes with a bit of a bitter aftertaste because you sometimes wonder whether it's truly based on your performance or if it's more about fulfilling a quota."*

Furthermore as B8 observed, male evaluators sometimes adjust performance standards for women, reinforcing inequities and perpetuating stereotypes about women's capabilities:

*"For example, during recruiting discussions, I've heard male colleagues say things like, 'When I interview a woman, I'm not as strict as I would be with a man because we need more women to meet our quota.'"*

Nevertheless, proponents of quotas framed them as a necessary starting point for long-term reform. They emphasized the role of quotas in signaling institutional commitment to diversity and accelerating the normalization of women in leadership roles. B8 explained:

*"I used to be against quotas, thinking that competence would naturally prevail. But over time, I've come to see that quotas can have their merits."*

However, many participants stressed that quotas alone are insufficient. Broader cultural and structural changes, such as addressing career breaks for caregiving, are essential for sustained progress (B5, B3, B2).

## **5.2. Gendered Professional Norms**

*Gendered Expectations and Stereotypes:* Participants identified deeply ingrained societal and organizational expectations as one of the primary barriers to gender equity in consulting. Male candidates were often seen as fitting traditional leadership archetypes more closely, a bias significantly impacting promotion decisions. B5 explained:

*"Female candidates for partner weren't being put forward; they were being held back because of a possible implicit bias that male candidate looked more like leaders."*

Interviewees noted that women were assumed to lack the resilience necessary for senior roles (B2, B6, B8). These stereotypes, create systemic disadvantages for women aspiring to leadership roles. Organizational processes often fail to counteract these biases, instead reflecting societal norms. Societal expectations surrounding caregiving responsibilities further exacerbated these challenges. (B1, B4, B9). Participants described how these biases influenced organizational decision-making, where women's long-term commitment was often questioned.

B9 observing:

*"There are fewer women at senior levels because organizations often make assumptions about their priorities, especially regarding family, instead of offering pathways to balance both."*

Additionally, participants observed that women were frequently steered toward "softer" consulting areas, such as human resources or employee engagement, while valuable, are often undervalued compared to traditionally male-dominated strategic fields (B6, B9).

*Emotional Involvement and Leadership Perceptions:* Participants observed that emotional involvement in professional settings is often perceived as a liability for women. (B6, B8). Women's tendency to bring empathy and collaboration to their work was sometimes misconstrued as overthinking or excessive emotionality, traits that were seen as incongruent with senior leadership roles. B8 explained:

*"Women, however, often overthink and get too emotionally involved in these interactions. They bring unnecessary emotions into a professional context."*

Male colleagues were more likely to be perceived as objective and pragmatic, qualities often linked to effective leadership (B2, B5). This dichotomy resulted in the undervaluing of women's relational strengths, which participants argued are essential in modern leadership contexts (B4, B6). Women's collaborative and inclusive approaches were often overlooked in favor of more traditionally assertive or dominant leadership styles (B2, B3, B5). However, the

disconnect between perceived confidence and actual leadership ability was another recurring theme. Participants noted that men who displayed overconfidence, even when lacking substantive qualifications, were more likely to be promoted. B5 highlighted:

*"I've seen incompetent men promoted simply because they have a loud voice and sound confident. It's frustrating when you realize leadership roles are often about perception over substance."*

In contrast, women with strong leadership capabilities were often overlooked due to their failure to conform to stereotypical images of confident leaders (B6, B9).

*Communication Norms in Professional Spaces:* Participants emphasized that professional communication norms in consulting often align with traits associated with male behaviors, such as directness, and transactional interactions (B2, B5, B8). Women's more inclusive and relational communication styles were sometimes interpreted as a lack of confidence or decisiveness, creating additional hurdles in networking and professional interactions (B3, B6, B9). B3 noted:

*"I mean, I think there are a lot of conversations around how women express themselves and the fact that they tend to say things almost as a question, much more often than men. It sounds like she's less confident, whereas usually men tend to be more assertive."*

Participants noted that diversity initiatives, often amplify these differences by focusing excessively on how men and women communicate differently (B4, B8). This emphasis risks perpetuating stereotypes rather than challenging them. However, several interviewees shared examples of women redefining these norms, illustrating the potential for organizations to embrace diverse communication styles. B6 shared:

*"I've seen women who succeed: they bring a whole different dynamic to the table, more collaborative and inclusive, which colleagues, both men and women, find refreshing."*

### **5.3. Networking and Social Capital Disparities**

*Networking Disparities and Informal Spaces:* Interviewees identified notable gender disparities in networking, particularly in informal settings. Male employees were seen to benefit from established networks and mentoring relationships that enhance their visibility and

career prospects (B5, B7, B8). Participants observed that men often recommend one another for opportunities and naturally integrate into social spaces where critical career decisions are informally made. B7 noted:

*"I'd say there are still these 'boys' clubs,' where you see maybe 15 to 20 men at the very top who just help each other up the ladder."*

In contrast, women's networking styles were described as more relational and less transactional (B6, B8). While this approach has its strengths, it sometimes clashes with the efficiency-driven nature of consulting, making it harder for women to cultivate influential networks (B3, B7). Additionally, perceptions of overthinking interactions or being overly cautious were highlighted as further obstacles (B6, B8). Team bonding and client events were also noted as favoring male preferences, with activities like go-karting or football unintentionally excluding women (B3, B5, B8). To address these disparities, some organizations have introduced informal women-specific networking initiatives, such as roundtables, mentoring dinners, and dedicated communication channels. B8 remarked:

*"On the more informal side, we organize women's networking events, like women's roundtables that we hold once a month. We also have our own dedicated Zoom channels, not necessarily to exclude men but just to create a space for women."*

Participants emphasized the importance of balancing inclusive events with women-specific programs to prevent alienating male colleagues and to promote cultural change across the organization (B3, B8, B9).

*Advocacy and Allyship:* Many participants emphasized the critical role male sponsors play in helping women navigate hierarchies and attain leadership positions. B5 remarked:

*"Since there are generally more men than women in most consulting companies, it would be much more effective if men felt as responsible for these initiatives as women do."*

Several women credited male mentors or colleagues with advancing their careers, showcasing the impact of male allyship in breaking organizational barriers. Male leaders' involvement in recruiting, mentoring, and diversity discussions was seen as vital for addressing

systemic gender gaps, particularly in male-dominated organizations where women often lack mentors or champions in leadership (B2, B3, B6, B9). The effectiveness of allyship varied across organizations. In firms with structured mentoring programs and sponsorship initiatives, women gained access to senior leaders and support to navigate hierarchies (B4, B5, B7). In contrast, in organizations without formalized structures, advocacy often depended on informal or ad-hoc efforts, limiting its impact. Participants stressed the importance of institutionalizing allyship to ensure consistency and equitable access for all women, regardless of their proximity to influential advocates (B2, B5). B2 commented:

*"Mentoring programs should not just depend on individuals stepping up—they need to be part of the organizational structure to ensure every woman gets the same opportunity."*

However, some participants noted a lack of solidarity among women in leadership. The perception of limited opportunities at the top sometimes fostered competition instead of collaboration, described by one participant as the "Highlander principle." (B6,B8). However, examples of successful women-led mentorship and advocacy initiatives were highlighted as effective in fostering support and building inclusive networks (B4, B6, B9).

#### **5.4. Systemic Work-Life Challenges**

*Post-COVID Flexibility and Caregiving Expectations:* Many interviewees highlighted that post-COVID flexibility, particularly through virtual consulting and remote work, has improved career progression for women, enabling better work-life balance (B3, B5, B9). Reduced on-site requirements and flexible structures, such as trust-based working hours, were seen as pivotal in retaining talent and fostering inclusivity. B8 shared:

*"Providing four days of remote work and only one day on-site allows leaders to manage family life alongside their career, making the consulting field more accessible."*

Societal shifts toward dual-career families and increased male participation in caregiving were also noted, though participants emphasized that true parity in domestic responsibilities remains limited (B4, B7). Flexibility is now a universal expectation, requiring

firms to adapt policies to attract and retain top talent in a post-pandemic world (B1, B5). Despite these advancements, several participants suggested that structural flexibility alone is not sufficient and needs to be coupled with cultural changes to ensure its consistent implementation and long-term impact (B3, B6, B8). B6 emphasized:

*"The challenge is not just about policies; it's about shifting mindsets so that flexibility becomes part of the culture and isn't seen as an exception."*

*Gendered Impact of Work-Life Policies:* Participants highlighted that work-life policies, while ostensibly gender-neutral, often have a disproportionately negative impact on women. B7 observed:

*"Many women who take parental leave feel like they come back and their career has been pushed back a few steps. It's not formal discrimination, but there's an underlying sense that they've lost momentum."*

While organizational policies, such as extended maternity leave and childcare support, were acknowledged as helpful, participants emphasized that these measures have limited scope and impact (B3, B5, B7). A gradual generational shift toward shared caregiving was noted, with younger couples increasingly adopting collaborative approaches. B9 explained:

*"More men are now asking about parental leave options during recruitment, which is a positive sign of shifting attitudes."*

However, such cases remain exceptions rather than the norm, reinforcing the stereotype that caregiving is primarily a female responsibility (B4, B7). Women who take extended leaves to fulfill caregiving roles face challenges in reentering the workforce, including reduced access to high-profile projects and slower career progression (B6, B8). The cultural framing of flexible policies was also identified as a critical factor. Interviewees questioned such policies when they are framed as accommodations for women rather than organizational norms, as this risks stigmatizing female employees (B3, B8, B9). This framing often leads to a subtle exclusion from leadership pipelines, as women are perceived as less ambitious or invested. B5 concluded:

*"If these policies aren't normalized for everyone, women will always face an uphill battle to prove they're equally dedicated to their careers."*

*Structural Barriers to Work-Life Integration:* Participants also noted that systemic structural barriers within consulting firms exacerbate work-life challenges. The consulting industry's demanding schedules, high travel requirements, and emphasis on face-time were cited as significant obstacles to achieving work-life integration (B2, B4, B6). Women, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities, are often left with limited pathways to meet these expectations without compromising their personal lives (B3, B8, B9). B6 stated:

*"The expectation to always be present—either physically or virtually—makes it nearly impossible for consultants to maintain any real work-life balance, especially for women who have additional caregiving duties."*

While some firms have implemented measures like reduced travel requirements or part-time leadership roles, these initiatives remain inconsistently applied (B5, B7). Participants stressed the importance of normalizing these accommodations across genders and roles to create a truly inclusive work culture (B3, B6). This requires a shift from viewing work-life policies as special exceptions to integrating them as standard practices that benefit all employees (B4, B8, B9). B8 concluded:

*"Unless these accommodations are normalized across the board, they'll continue to be seen as concessions for women rather than necessary adjustments for everyone."*

## **5.5. Organizational Transformation and Cultural Change**

*Cultural Reform and Long-Term Solutions:* Participants emphasized the necessity of cultural reform to achieve genuine and lasting gender equity (B2, B4, B6). A recurring theme was the need to redefine traditional leadership expectations, shifting from valuing assertive, dominant behaviors to embracing collaborative and empathetic approaches, thereby broadening the leadership archetype (B3, B5, B9). Interviewees highlighted that long-term cultural change requires more than policy implementation; it demands shifts in mindset at all organizational levels. B1 reflected:

*"You can have the best policies in the world, but if senior leaders aren't actively modeling inclusive behavior, nothing changes."*

Participants noted that while younger generations are more open to these reforms, older colleagues often resist change (B2, B5). Structural reforms, such as flexible work arrangements, must also be supported by cultural normalization to eliminate stigma (B4, B6, B9). Participants described instances where senior leaders openly embraced flexibility, creating a trickle-down effect that encouraged widespread adoption (B5, B8). B1 shared:

*"I saw a Partner take a parental leave, and the message it sent to the rest of the team was huge—it showed that it's not just OK, but encouraged, to prioritize family life."*

Embedding inclusive practices into daily operations and leadership decisions was repeatedly identified as essential for sustaining progress. B3 explained:

*"Real change happens when inclusivity becomes part of the decision-making process—not just something you talk about in HR initiatives."*

*Organizational Policies and Initiatives:* Participants emphasized the critical role of organizational policies in advancing women's careers, citing tools such as flexible working models, quotas, diversity metrics, and structured programs (B2, B6, B7). The effectiveness of these policies was seen as dependent on leadership commitment and widespread acceptance (B4, B6). Flexible working arrangements were highlighted as essential for inclusivity, particularly for women managing professional and personal responsibilities, but their success hinges on leaders modeling these practices to reduce stigma (B3, B5, B8). Quotas and gender targets were noted as useful in countering unconscious bias and ensuring representation in hiring and promotions (B2, B7). However, some participants voiced concerns about potential team tensions and scrutiny faced by women hired through such measures. B6 commented:

*"There's always the question: Did she get the role because she deserved it, or because of the quota? It's a difficult balance to strike."*

Reporting diversity metrics, including retention and promotion data, was seen as an effective way to maintain accountability and track progress. B5 stated:

*"Tracking retention and promotion data is crucial for holding leadership accountable and making meaningful progress."*

Mentorship and sponsorship initiatives were praised for fostering pipelines of female talent. B2 shared:

*"Mentorship is critical, but sponsorship takes it one step further by ensuring women have advocates who actively promote them for key roles."*

Confidence-building and leadership skill programs, such as roundtables and coaching for high-potential women, were also acknowledged as impactful (B3, B8). However, generic initiatives were criticized for failing to address specific barriers, such as systemic biases or work-life integration challenges (B1, B5). Tailored interventions, such as mentorship programs for women returning from parental leave, were highlighted as more effective in addressing nuanced challenges like career reintegration and visibility (B4, B9).

## **6. Discussion**

The grounded theory synthesized from this study integrates the lived experiences of women in consulting (Group A) and the organizational perspectives of male leaders and HR professionals (Group B). It reveals systemic, cultural, and individual factors that create barriers to women's advancement, as well as the mechanisms that can enable progress toward gender equity.

### **6.1. Systemic Barriers and Work-Life Balance Challenges**

Systemic barriers emerged as critical impediments to women's advancement in consulting. Participants from Group A described how recruitment and promotion practices often prioritize traditionally male-oriented traits, such as assertiveness and decisiveness, while undervaluing collaborative and relational leadership styles more commonly associated with women. These biases align with Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory, which explains how societal stereotypes about gender roles lead to prejudice against women in leadership. Such biases reinforce the perception that women are less suitable for senior roles, limiting their access to advancement opportunities.

Work-life balance challenges further compound these structural inequities. Group A participants frequently highlighted the long-term incompatibility of consulting's demanding schedules with caregiving responsibilities, leading to career stagnation or attrition. Women described the lack of institutionalized flexibility as a major barrier, noting that caregiving responsibilities—framed as primarily female duties by societal norms—disproportionately impacted their career progression. These findings reflect De Simone and Priola's (2015) research on how rigid work structures and caregiving expectations perpetuate gender disparities in male-dominated professions.

Flexible work policies, such as remote work and part-time arrangements, were identified by both groups as potential enablers for managing work-life conflicts. However, Group A participants noted that these policies were often stigmatized, perceived as indicating a lack of ambition, which undermined their effectiveness. This mirrors findings on the glass ceiling phenomenon (Advance HSG, 2021), where cultural stigmas limit the success of structural reforms. Group B acknowledged the importance of flexible policies but tended to frame attrition as a result of individual choices rather than systemic issues, revealing a disconnect between women's lived experiences and organizational perspectives.

## **6.2. Cultural Norms and Informal Exclusion**

Cultural dynamics within consulting firms further reinforce systemic barriers. Group A participants described how male-dominated informal networks exclude women from critical relationship-building opportunities, such as after-work drinks or sports events, where mentorship, sponsorship, and career advancement discussions often occur. This aligns with research on informal networks, which emphasizes the role of social capital in career progression and highlights how women's exclusion from these spaces limits their opportunities for visibility and advancement (Ibarra 1993).

Stereotypes about women's leadership capabilities further undermine their career progression. Group A participants frequently reported facing stereotypes that cast them as less competent leaders, requiring them to repeatedly prove their qualifications. These dynamics reflect Heilman's (2001) lack-of-fit model, which explains how the mismatch between stereotypical female traits and traditional leadership expectations creates barriers to women's credibility and visibility. Group B acknowledged these biases and emphasized the role of male allyship in challenging stereotypes. Senior male leaders who actively advocate for women's advancement were identified as critical drivers of systemic and cultural change.

Both groups recognized the need to dismantle exclusionary practices and create structured opportunities for women to access mentorship, sponsorship, and other informal career-building mechanisms. These findings align with Blau and Kahn's (2013) work, which highlights the systemic undervaluation of women's contributions due to entrenched cultural norms. The emphasis on inclusive networking practices reflects the broader necessity of fostering equitable access to relationship-building opportunities within organizations.

### **6.3. Individual and Organizational Enablers**

Despite these barriers, both groups identified key enablers for advancing gender equity. Mentorship and sponsorship emerged as pivotal mechanisms for supporting women's career development. Group A emphasized how mentorship provided guidance, confidence, and support, while sponsorship played a critical role in advocating for women's advancement into high-visibility roles. This is consistent with findings, which highlight the transformative potential of sponsorship in bridging the gap between women's potential and recognition (Catalyst 2011).

Group B stressed the importance of formalized sponsorship programs to ensure equitable access to opportunities. Male leaders acknowledged their responsibility to advocate for women and normalize inclusive practices. This reflects research by Chanland and Murphy

(2018), who emphasized the dual importance of mentors and sponsors in addressing gender disparities.

Leadership development programs were also seen as essential for equipping women with the skills needed to navigate male-dominated environments. Group A highlighted the value of confidence-building and advocacy training, while Group B emphasized integrating these programs with broader structural reforms. These findings align with Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb (2011), who argue that effective leadership development must address both individual empowerment and systemic barriers.

#### **6.4. Outcomes and Feedback Loops**

The grounded theory identifies several critical outcomes that emerge from effectively addressing systemic and cultural barriers while implementing enabling mechanisms. One significant outcome is increased representation of women in leadership roles, which not only promotes equity but also dismantles persistent stereotypes about gender and leadership. This shift reinforces cultural change, creating an environment where diverse leadership styles are normalized and valued. Another important outcome is improved retention rates for women, as supportive organizational policies and inclusive workplace cultures reduce attrition and encourage long-term career engagement. Additionally, gender diversity in leadership contributes to enhanced organizational innovation, fostering greater creativity, collaboration, and more effective decision-making processes that benefit overall performance.

A defining feature of the grounded theory is its emphasis on feedback loops, which highlight the dynamic and interconnected nature of barriers, enablers, and outcomes. For instance, increasing the representation of women in leadership not only addresses immediate inequities but also reduces gender-based stereotypes, further fostering equity and inclusivity. These positive changes create momentum for additional reforms and cultural shifts. However, the theory also underscores that cultural resistance, such as stigmatizing flexibility or diverse

leadership styles, can undermine structural reforms, reinforcing the need for sustained and intentional cultural transformation to ensure the effectiveness of these changes.

### **6.5. Integrated Framework for Gender Equity**

This grounded theory integrates insights from both Group A and Group B into a holistic framework for achieving gender equity in consulting. Structural reforms, such as transparent promotion criteria, flexible work policies, and sponsorship programs, must be paired with cultural shifts that normalize diverse leadership styles and challenge stereotypes. Male allyship and visible leadership commitment are essential for driving these changes and ensuring accountability.

By addressing systemic barriers, fostering inclusive cultures, and empowering women through mentorship and leadership development, consulting firms can create environments where diverse talent is recognized, valued, and supported. This approach aligns with the broader discourse on gender equity and emphasizes the importance of integrating structural reforms with cultural shifts to achieve sustainable change.

## **7. Recommendations**

### **7.1. Practical Implications for Consulting Firms**

Flexible work arrangements, including remote working, part-time options, and extended parental leave, should be both institutionalized and normalized for all employees, not solely women. To achieve this, leadership must actively model and endorse these policies, reducing stigma and signaling that work-life integration is a priority across all organizational levels. Additionally, tailored initiatives such as mentorship programs specifically designed for women returning from parental leave can play a critical role in reintegrating them into leadership pipelines and ensuring sustained career progression.

In parallel, organizations must proactively address exclusionary networking dynamics by fostering structured and inclusive networking opportunities. These could take the form of

mixed-gender mentorship programs, roundtables, and informal events that appeal to diverse preferences, rather than defaulting to male-dominated activities. Senior leaders, particularly male allies, should take an active role in sponsoring and advocating for women to close gaps in informal networks and enhance visibility.

To further promote equity, firms should implement transparent hiring, evaluation, and promotion criteria aimed at countering unconscious biases. Practical measures could include blind resume screening and standardized performance reviews, which emphasize collaboration, relational leadership, and other attributes women contribute to teams. Regular reporting of diversity metrics, such as retention and promotion rates disaggregated by gender, can help reinforce accountability and track progress.

Targeted leadership development programs are essential to address challenges related to self-promotion and to build women's confidence. Initiatives such as high-potential coaching, public-speaking workshops, and success story showcases can empower women to advocate for themselves while normalizing diverse leadership styles. Highlighting female success stories not only inspires junior women but also challenges entrenched stereotypes about leadership.

Finally, it is imperative for firms to confront and dismantle deep-seated cultural biases that perpetuate gender stereotypes. This can be achieved through ongoing education and awareness initiatives, including unconscious bias training for employees, both male and female, at all levels. Open dialogue forums can further support these efforts by fostering inclusive cultures, where employees feel empowered to voice concerns and collaboratively develop solutions. These interconnected strategies aim to create an environment where women can thrive and progress in their careers, contributing to more equitable and effective leadership structures.

## **7.2. Broader Implications for the Consulting Industry and Society**

Industry associations and professional bodies within the consulting sector should lead the way in establishing benchmarks for gender equity, encouraging firms to adopt best practices while transparently reporting progress. Recognizing firms that excel in diversity initiatives through public accolades or awards can act as a strong incentive for broader industry-wide adoption of equitable practices.

At the societal level, policy reforms are indispensable in advancing gender equity. Governments and regulators should champion family-friendly policies, such as subsidized childcare and flexible parental leave programs, to mitigate the dual burden many women face when balancing career and caregiving responsibilities. Such measures provide a critical foundation for fostering equity both in consulting and across other sectors.

The consulting industry itself must actively challenge traditional perceptions of leadership by expanding the traits considered essential for success. Empathetic, collaborative, and relational leadership styles should be valued alongside assertiveness and decisiveness. This paradigm shift requires ongoing efforts to highlight diverse leadership models, with firms playing a key role in educating clients about the benefits of gender-diverse teams in driving innovation and better outcomes.

Cross-sector collaborations between consulting firms, academic institutions, and advocacy organizations are vital for generating creative solutions to persistent challenges. These partnerships can facilitate research on gender equity, develop practical tools for evaluating organizational inclusivity, and create platforms for sharing effective practices. By pooling resources and expertise, such collaborations can accelerate progress and produce actionable insights.

Together, these recommendations highlight the necessity of a multifaceted approach to achieving gender equity. Structural reforms and cultural transformation within consulting firms

must be complemented by broader industry-wide efforts to normalize inclusivity and redefine leadership paradigms. By embracing these strategies, consulting firms can create empowering environments that support women's advancement, foster diversity, and drive innovation, setting a powerful precedent for broader societal change.

## **8. Limitations and Further Research**

This study provides valuable insights into the barriers and enablers for women's retention and leadership advancement in consulting, informed by the perspectives of women professionals and HR and leadership representatives. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size of 20, while including women at different career stages and professionals from HR and leadership roles, was relatively small, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences within the consulting industry. Furthermore, the study primarily focused on consulting firms within specific regions (Europe), limiting the generalizability of the findings to other cultural and organizational contexts. Consulting practices and gender equity efforts may differ significantly between countries with varying labor laws, cultural norms, and diversity initiatives.

The qualitative nature of this research relies heavily on participants' self-reported experiences and perceptions, which may be influenced by personal biases or social desirability. The study also emphasized organizational barriers and enablers, potentially underrepresenting broader systemic factors such as societal norms and governmental policies, which play a significant role in shaping organizational dynamics.

Longitudinal research would provide a deeper understanding of how organizational barriers and enablers evolve and sustain progress over time. Cross-cultural comparisons could further illuminate how varying cultural norms and legal frameworks influence gender equity within the consulting sector. Future studies might also examine the relevance of these findings

in other industries, particularly those that are male-dominated, such as finance, technology, or engineering, to determine whether similar barriers and enablers exist.

To gain a more nuanced understanding of equity challenges, future research should also consider the intersection of gender with other identities, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, or disability. Quantitative methods could be employed to validate the findings of this study, enabling a broader understanding of the prevalence and impact of specific barriers and enablers across larger populations. Additionally, while this study highlights the importance of male allyship, further exploration is needed to understand its dynamics, effectiveness, and limitations.

Emerging trends in the consulting industry, such as technological advancements, remote work, and shifting workforce expectations, present another avenue for exploration. Future research could investigate how these trends create new challenges or opportunities for women's retention and leadership advancement. Moreover, the role of government policies, industry regulations, and societal norms in shaping gender equity could be examined to provide a broader systemic perspective. Addressing these areas in future research will deepen understanding and contribute to developing more effective and inclusive interventions for advancing women in leadership roles.

## **9. Conclusion**

This study offers a comprehensive exploration of the barriers to women's advancement in consulting leadership, focusing on the intersection of systemic organizational practices and cultural norms. By employing a grounded theory approach and incorporating insights from women professionals and male leaders or HR professionals, the research identifies persistent obstacles such as biased promotion criteria, exclusion from informal networks, and the cultural stigma attached to flexible work arrangements. Additionally, work-life balance challenges and

the underrepresentation of women in leadership exacerbate these barriers, perpetuating gender inequities within consulting firms.

A key contribution of this study lies in its grounded theory, which illustrates how structural and cultural barriers intersect to hinder women's progression while limiting the effectiveness of existing diversity initiatives. For example, mentorship and flexible work policies, while promising, are often undermined by systemic inequities and cultural resistance. This research highlights the necessity of integrated solutions that combine structural reforms, such as transparent promotion processes and equitable networking opportunities, with cultural shifts to challenge gendered leadership stereotypes and normalize inclusive practices.

The actionable recommendations provided aim to dismantle second-generation gender bias by fostering equitable leadership pathways and creating an environment where diverse leadership styles are valued. By addressing both the systemic and cultural dimensions of these challenges, the study contributes to advancing sustainable gender equity in consulting, offering a model for broader application in other industries seeking to promote inclusivity and innovation.

In conclusion, this thesis highlights the urgent need for consulting firms to align structural reforms with cultural transformations to address the systemic and cultural barriers that hinder women's advancement to leadership. Achieving gender equity is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity, as diverse leadership enhances organizational innovation, performance, and sustainability. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this study, consulting firms can create equitable leadership pathways that enable women to advance and thrive, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and effective consulting industry.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Guide**

### **Interview Guide A1: Female Employees/Leaders (Group A)**

1. Can you describe your current role and your journey within the consulting industry?  
How has your career evolved over time?
2. What specific barriers or obstacles have you encountered when it comes to advancing in your career?
  - a. How do the challenges or barriers you've mentioned change as you progress through different levels of leadership (e.g., middle management vs. senior leadership)?
3. How do you think the fast-paced, client-driven nature of the consulting industry affects women's career progression and experiences, particularly in relation to work-life balance or leadership opportunities?
4. Have societal or organizational gender expectations ever influenced your career path or leadership opportunities?
5. Are there any unwritten norms, expectations, or informal practices that you feel have impacted women's ability to advance within your organization?
6. What organizational policies or initiatives have you found most helpful in supporting your career progression or that of other women in consulting? (Networks, mentoring, female role models, leadership development programs)
7. How effective do you think current gender equity policies are in promoting women to leadership roles? Can you elaborate on why they do or don't work as intended?
8. In your opinion, what organizational practices or policies should be introduced or adapted to better support women's career advancement?
9. Could you describe any mentoring or leadership development programs you've participated in, and how they have impacted your career development?

10. How do you perceive the availability of support networks for women aiming for leadership roles in your organization? Are they sufficient?
11. How do you perceive individual factors, such as self-confidence, influencing women's leadership progression? Could any of these be linked to broader systemic challenges?
12. Do you feel that men and women in your organization have equal access to informal networks that are crucial for leadership opportunities?
13. What role do you think male allies can play in advancing gender diversity in leadership, and how can organizations encourage their involvement?

## **Interview Guide A2: HR and Male Leadership (Group B)**

1. Can you describe your current role and your responsibilities within the organization?
2. Based on your experience, how would you describe the state of gender diversity in the consulting industry, particularly at leadership levels?
3. From your perspective, what do you believe are the most significant barriers women face when advancing to leadership positions in this firm or the consulting industry more broadly?
  - a. How do you think the fast-paced, client-driven culture of consulting firms impacts women's experiences and progression in leadership roles, especially concerning work-life balance?
4. What organizational policies, programs, or initiatives are currently in place to retain and promote female talent in leadership positions? (Formal/informal networks, leadership development programs, mentorship programs etc.)
5. Are there any informal norms or unwritten rules within the organization that might influence women's career advancement, either positively or negatively?
6. How effective do you think the current gender equity policies are in addressing the challenges women face in leadership advancement?
7. What challenges has the organization encountered in implementing gender equity policies? Are there specific areas of resistance or obstacles that have hindered efforts to promote gender diversity in leadership roles?
8. What has been the feedback from male employees regarding gender equity initiatives, and how does this feedback shape or hinder policy implementation?
9. Do you notice any differences in the way men and women self-nominate or are nominated for leadership roles? If so, what do you believe contributes to those differences?

10. In your opinion, what changes to existing policies or new initiatives would help better support the career advancement of women? For example, networks, mentorship opportunities, and leadership development programs?

## Appendix B: Participants

### Participants B1: Group A (Women)

Identifier	Stakeholder Group	Position	Company
A1	Women	Managing Director and Partner	Boston Consulting Group
A2	Women	Senior Managing Director	FTI Consulting
A3	Women	Consultant	Capgemini Invent
A4	Women	Senior Consultant	Ernst & Young
A5	Women	Senior Manager	PriceWaterhouseCoopers
A6	Women	Consultant	Simon Kucher & Partners
A7	Women	Associate	Oliver Wyman
A8	Women	Associate	Oliver Wyman
A9	Women	Partner	Oliver Wyman
A	Women	Principal	Oliver Wyman

**Participants B2: Group B (Male leadership and HR)**

<b>Identifier</b>	<b>Stakeholder group</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Company</b>
B1	Male Leadership Position	Partner	EY-Parthenon
B2	Male Leadership Position	Principal	Boston Consulting Group
B3	Human Research Professional	Manager	McKinsey & Company
B4	Human Resource Professional	Senior Consultant	Deloitte
B5	Male Leadership Position	Managing Director and Partner	Alix Partners
B6	Human Resource Professional	Senior Consultant	Simon Kucher & partners
B7	Male Leadership Position	Senior Manager	KPMG
B8	Human Resource Professional	Managing Director	KPMG
B9	Male Leadership Position	Partner	SSC Consulting

## Appendix C: Quotes

### Quotes C1: Quotes Underlying Second-Order Themes Group A (Women)

Representative Quotes Underlying Second-Order Themes	
Gendered Expectations in Consulting	
Performance bias in women's evaluations	A3: I've definitely noticed that sometimes different expectations are placed on women at my level, like Consultant or Senior Consultant, compared to men, even if they have the same university degree. For example, I have a colleague who's also a Consultant, and she studied Data Science, so she's technically very skilled. My manager once said to her, "I always have to remind myself not to underestimate you," just because she doesn't fit the stereotypical image people might expect.
Gender bias and stereotypes in workplaces	<p>A10: But overall, especially if the customers tend to be older - which they typically are if they are senior - then they simply treat a young woman differently and often don't value her as equally as perhaps younger colleagues would.</p> <p>A10: I definitely had some hurdles in my work in terms of being heard and taken seriously.</p> <p>A5: A negative example I frequently experience is when I visit a client with my team, and I am asked if I'm there to take notes, rather than assuming that I'm leading the team. These roles are deeply ingrained.</p> <p>A2: But on the other hand, because there aren't many women in leadership roles, there's an underlying bias. I think even I have that bias at times. If I see a group with both men and a woman, I might naturally assume that one of the men is the boss, without anyone even speaking up. It's almost instinctive, based on what we've seen in movies, the media, our own experiences, and so on.</p> <p>A2: So I think there's this first-impression bias, this perception that doesn't necessarily prevent women from getting leadership positions but does create an ingrained image that's hard to shake. I don't know if that makes sense, but it's something that's difficult to completely ignore.</p> <p>A4: I believe that children today are raised quite differently in schools. I had teachers who would say things like, "Women can't do math," and when you hear that as a ten-year-old girl, it can make you doubt yourself and think that you simply can't do it. It's shocking when you look back on it now.</p>
Favoritism and bias in recruiting processes	A8: You can still hire the man, but the challenges in recruiting are often tougher for men and more supportive for women. I find that difficult because it creates a bias.
Promotion criteria favoring male attributes	<p>A8: We have a very quantitative culture - that's our identity, so to speak, similar to McKinsey or BCG. I believe that this is often seen as a rather masculine attribute, i.e. this analytical aspect. All our reviews, in other words the promotion criteria, are designed with this in mind.</p> <p>A8: At the lower levels - even though I was promoted quickly - I realised that I had difficulties with these typical male strengths.</p>

A3: For me, my strengths are more on the creative and networking side. I'm good at connecting people. I'm not the most technical person, so I honestly didn't expect that I'd be promoted because I wasn't seeing my profile in the same way. I thought, "Okay, I can moderate or facilitate well, but I don't provide the same technical value as some of my colleagues who know all the technical details."

Stereotypes driving gendered task allocation

A1: There is also a tendency to automatically push women into roles that are more in line with typical interpersonal HR roles. For example, we have so-called 'PTO facilitators', i.e. those who ensure that the case teams keep their hours. It often happens that a woman is pushed into the role of PTO facilitator after parental leave, which takes her out of the normal case context and visibility.

Internalized gender bias impacting women's confidence and decisions

A4: I believe that children today are raised quite differently in schools. I had teachers who would say things like, "Women can't do math," and when you hear that as a ten-year-old girl, it can make you doubt yourself and think that you simply can't do it. It's shocking when you look back on it now.

Dominant male communication and working styles create barriers

A10: Especially in consulting, when there is a lot of time pressure and stress, the way of dealing with people is often very male-dominated. It's more of a 'male business culture' than a 'female business culture.' This style often comes across as more competent or 'rad,' while more collaborative approaches are sometimes seen as weak

A7: Dominant men who sell themselves confidently sometimes create a difficult dynamic. That's why I always tell my 'girls' in mentoring: 'Make yourselves a win folder.' It's important to document your successes to combat the perception gap

A5: What I've observed is that women are often naturally more reserved and quieter, which can lead to a perception in meetings with mostly men that they don't have much to contribute. Women can quickly be pigeonholed as not being ready or as lacking substance, without their potential being recognized.

Gendered expression of optimism and risk-taking in career decisions

A6: Meanwhile, my colleague seemed really uncertain, thinking a lot about how to act before the dinner and what topics would be appropriate to discuss. So, I can imagine it being harder if you don't have that self-confidence or assertiveness, especially as a woman. That might hold you back from speaking up or taking on responsibilities, like saying, 'Hey, can I lead this project?' or 'Let me handle the client call.'

A2: If confidence is defined this way, then, yes, women may sometimes be at a disadvantage. In our internal market, where projects and opportunities are competitive, a man might confidently say, 'I can do this; just give me the chance,' while a woman might say, 'I'd love to, but I haven't done it before,' which can sound less confident.

A7: Self-promotion is ultimately the key lever. Once you get past the first year or two, it's all about how well you sell yourself and how openly you talk about your successes. Sometimes I feel stupid

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when I send a screenshot of positive customer feedback to my manager, for example, but in the end, it totally counts.

A9: Women often simply work hard and then say: 'It'll be fine,' and they are often more reserved, less courageous and don't necessarily put themselves in the foreground. If you consciously recognise something like this, you can coach against it. This is actually part of a development.

A2: Women, including myself, are often more realistic, maybe even a bit self-critical. From an early age, we're often brought up differently from boys. If you observe how mothers and fathers raise boys and girls, boys are usually encouraged to take risks and not worry about getting muddy or injured. Girls, on the other hand, are often told to be careful, to avoid getting hurt. This might lead us to be slightly more cautious, not necessarily because we lack confidence, but because we've been conditioned to be more careful.

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## 2. Structural and Cultural Biases

Leaky pipeline effect in retaining women at senior levels

A7: Well, I know that we have always tried - and sometimes we have managed - to have around 50% women at SC level, i.e. in the first two years. After that, however, it decreases significantly, and I think at manager, principal and partner level the proportion drops rapidly to, I don't know exactly, maybe 10% or so. I think there are three female partners in Germany out of a total of about 60, but you'd have to look that up again - in any case, the decline is massive.

A5: The good thing is that at the junior levels, the gender split is roughly 50/50. However, unfortunately, the numbers drop significantly from the manager level upwards. For example, at my level as a Senior Manager, the representation is still quite uneven. Above that, in higher leadership roles, I personally have never had the experience of working with a female supervisor, as there hasn't been a woman in a leadership role above me.

A4: I can tell you that at the Consultant level, the distribution is still relatively equal. This year, we have 45% women and 54% men, so almost 50/50. This, of course, varies by department, sometimes skewing more one way or the other, but generally, it's more or less balanced. At the Senior level, it's also still quite equal. However, at the Manager level, it starts to drop a bit. By the time we reach the Senior Manager level, the numbers decrease significantly, and at the Partner level, we have about 17% women and 83% men. This is where we see a significant gap.

A3: I do think it's still possible for women to reach high levels in our company, but the higher you go, the more male-dominated it becomes.

A6: One thing I do know is that we definitely have more men than women, especially in leadership roles. We have some women in partner and director positions, but there are clearly more men.

Hierarchical chain-of-command structures disadvantaging women

A10: A consultancy is ultimately... People always say that we have flat hierarchies because everyone can get involved and contribute ideas, but we are actually very hierarchical. If it has to be done

quickly and the principal or partner says "so and so", then that's how it's done. And that makes sense somewhere, so that we can work the way we work. But it's very classic, a "chain of command", I would say.

A10: If a male colleague has the style of simply saying "this is how it is" because he's learnt it from above.

Structural inequities as the root cause of gender disparities  
Generational differences in attitudes towards gender equity

A2: It's not like we're the only ones with issues; it's a structural issue that needs to be addressed.

A4: I also believe it's a generational matter. Our generation, which is gradually moving into higher positions in companies, has a different awareness compared to previous generations.

Limited awareness and communication around women-focused initiatives

A2: Other than that, I haven't come across any other policies that are specific to supporting women. Companies are certainly doing more than before, with things like maternity leave, paternity leave, and so on, which is balanced. But I'm not aware of any specific policies aimed at helping women with career progression.

A6: But as for something specific that I could sign up for or someone I could directly approach about these issues, I don't know of anything like that right now. I'm sure there's something, and if I really looked, I'd probably find it somewhere—it might've been implemented by HR at some point—but it doesn't feel like it's actively maintained or talked about, so no one really uses it.

Challenges in balancing equity and equality

A10: A consultancy is ultimately... People always say that we have flat hierarchies because everyone can get involved and contribute ideas, but we are actually very hierarchical. If it has to be done quickly and the principal or partner says

A5: Yes, especially with specific programs tailored for women. There has been feedback like, "There are already plenty of programs for women; doesn't that disadvantage men?" This type of argument has come up. I acknowledge that it's a valid concern, but it's also important to recognize that not all men feel that way. We can't generalize and assume one perspective fits all. There are also women who advocate more strongly for their causes than others.  
A3: "Tomorrow we have a Women's Net meeting." Then one of the guys kind of unmuted himself and asked, "Why isn't there a Men's Net?" And the women responded by saying, "Well, if you want one, you'll need to organize it. This was organized by us, for us, because we find it valuable. If you want the same thing, you're welcome to make it happen."

Masculine organizational culture driving exclusion

A7: Senior colleagues—mostly men—still hold onto this idea that everyone should go through what they did. It creates a work culture that feels inflexible and rooted in old, masculine norms, which can be very alienating for women trying to navigate it.

A5: In meetings where male colleagues dominate the discussion, women often feel sidelined. Even when women speak up, they sometimes struggle to be taken as seriously as their male counterparts.

Gendered norms shaping interactions and perceptions

A2: I understand, though, that it might feel awkward for a guy to ask me alone, as it might raise questions. And if I ask him, it might feel a bit strange too—like, ‘Why is she asking me for a drink?’ There’s a hesitation there, shaped by social norms. It’s not his fault, and it’s not mine either. I can’t change the fact that I’m a woman. If I ask a man for drinks, it might be seen differently than if a guy asked another guy, or if a woman asked another woman. When it’s just one-on-one, there seems to be more hesitation.

A9: It's not necessarily just about systematic networking, but it can seem strange if you're a woman going to dinner alone with a male client. There's often a certain strangeness to it - something that wouldn't be the case with a man. Men can meet at the bar in the evening; you wouldn't do that as a woman.

Cultural barriers to women asserting themselves effectively

A10: Among the women in consulting, I also have the feeling that such qualities make a difference. A colleague with whom I had informal mentoring recently left. She's super intelligent, extremely committed, but she's not the extroverted, loud, self-confident person who cracks jokes. So she often had the feeling that she didn't really fit in and that she wasn't really given the space she needed. Especially in informal interactions, where some people are louder and more likely to speak up, quieter people quickly get lost

A9: When all-male committees use these classic clichés—which you see time and time again—then as a woman in a meeting who perhaps stands up to them, you are immediately perceived as the 'rebellious one,' while the man in the same situation is perceived as 'assertive.' Unfortunately, such things are often reflected in performance appraisals.

Effort required for women to adapt to male-dominated norms

A10: In other words, many women who come into counselling are used to being in such a male environment anyway, and they are often more able to cope with it because they have adapted to this male culture to a certain extent or are able to adapt well. Women who are not so good at this or who do not assimilate classic 'male-coded' behaviours well or cannot implement them so easily fall through the cracks even more. To be fair, such women often fall through the cracks as early as the recruitment process, which is certainly a disadvantage for diversity and the different perspectives that these women could bring to the table.

A10: It takes an incredible amount of energy to constantly fight for these boundaries and personal freedoms and to have to explain them again and again—especially in a job that already requires a lot of energy. If you also have a family, it's like having a second job. This can only be changed if all colleagues really understand and support it."

Failing to adapt resulting in penalization

A10: Women who are not so good at this or who do not assimilate classic 'male-coded' behaviours well or cannot implement them so easily fall through the cracks even more. To be fair, such women often fall through the cracks as early as the recruitment process, which is certainly a disadvantage for diversity and the different perspectives that these women could bring to the table.

Organizational resistance to gender equity efforts perceived as unfair

A3: I remember one comment in particular. There was a call where they announced, 'Tomorrow we have a Women's Net meeting.' Then one of the guys kind of unmuted himself and asked, 'Why isn't there a Men's Net?' And the women responded by saying, 'Well, if you want one, you'll need to organize it. This was organized by us, for us, because we find it valuable. If you want the same thing, you're welcome to make it happen.'

A5: When we launched the female sponsorship program, there was some pushback with questions like, 'Why do we need this? Aren't there already enough formats available?' I noticed that some people felt there were already sufficient resources, but I believe more targeted support is necessary because advancing women in leadership requires a different type of assistance.

A6: In some of the big consulting firms, where strict gender quotas are enforced, there have been times when only women were hired, and I think that's led to stronger resistance from the men in those companies. I'd say that at Simon Kucher, this has never been such a big issue, possibly because we have a lot of women here, or maybe because we don't have the same 'ego-driven' men that you sometimes find in larger firms.

Risk of backlash from female-focused policies

A2: risk with policies that target only women; if not implemented properly, they could backfire. Men might start to feel that women are being given undue advantages, which wouldn't be positive for either gender.

Gender quotas increasing bias and male resistance

A6: I'd say that at Simon Kucher, it's not as intense as it can be in larger consulting firms. I don't think the men here feel restricted when women are hired. In some of the big consulting firms, where strict gender quotas are enforced, there have been times when only women were hired, and I think that's led to stronger resistance from the men in those companies. I'd say that at Simon Kucher, this has never been such a big issue, possibly because we have a lot of women here, or maybe because we don't have the same "ego-driven" men that you sometimes find in larger firms.

A3: Men tend to go in one of two directions—they either support and promote women's empowerment or they lean towards doubting it, saying things like, "You only got that because you're a woman." That kind of attitude just takes us back to square one, you know?

A6: However, it sometimes feels like quotas make things harder for everyone. Men might feel like they aren't hired because of the quota, and at the same time, they might think women are only hired because of it. So, as women, we often feel the need to prove that we're here because we're just as capable, not because of a quota saying that four or five of the ten new hires must be women.

Importance of reducing bias in hiring processes

A3: That's something I've heard a lot, and it's so frustrating. It's just not true. And if there ever are cases where it could seem true, that needs to be addressed transparently. We need clarity on things like how many leadership positions were available, how many people applied, and what the criteria were. There shouldn't be rumors circulating, and there needs to be openness to prevent that.

Anonymized CV screening mitigating bias	<p>A3: And that's why they play such a huge role here. We don't want those kinds of rumors going around; it's demotivating. It makes you think, "Why would I want to go for that position if people will just assume it's only because I'm a woman?"</p> <p>A2: they've started screening CVs without names. This way, people can't tell whether the candidate is from the UK, from a minority background, or if they're male or female. To me, that's a good policy because it reduces bias, avoiding that natural reaction to a woman's name, or a name that might trigger assumptions. I think it's fairer that way. We haven't adopted this across the entire company, but it's a good start in that one department.</p>
Performance evaluations designed to reduce gender bias	<p>A1: In contrast, I think we have a strong performance management system at our consultancy compared to most companies. It is very objective and is based on clear dimensions and processes.</p> <p>A1: Yes, I think one of the exciting things about us is - as you said - you go through the classic career path in the organisation. I think we have extremely strict guidelines here and there that you often don't even realise.</p> <p>A9: Unfortunately, such things are often reflected in performance appraisals. That's why we focus a lot on training, on quality reviews, and make sure in discussions that we don't systematically penalise women. I don't want to rule out the possibility that this still happens from time to time, but we really try to focus on it.</p> <p>A3: Well, when it comes to promotions, yes, that's always based on performance and what people accomplish, but ultimately someone has to decide who performed better.</p>
Effectiveness and limitations of women-focused policies	<p>A2: To be honest, I haven't really found anything particularly useful in addressing these issues. I don't think there are any specific policies that make a significant difference. HR and policies are generally aimed at being balanced, which is how it should be—it's not about prioritizing women; it should be equal.</p>
Proactive and inclusive recruitment strategies promoting gender equity	<p>A2: In our department's recruitment process, for instance, whenever we have a new position, we ask our internal recruitment team to provide an equal number of CVs for men and women. In the past, we'd often receive mostly men's CVs, or even exclusively men's, but we pushed back. I insisted, saying, 'You can't tell me there aren't enough women; it should be 50/50.' It might be harder to find, but I want the best talent, and that includes the best women. So, we pushed them, and now we get an equal number of CVs, which allows us to choose from a balanced pool.</p> <p>A5: Since I have led recruiting for our public sector team for the past five years, I've always paid attention to ensuring we hire diversely.</p> <p>A5: For example, during the CV screening phase, if there's a woman with equal qualifications, but there's uncertainty about her CV, I push for her to be included for an interview anyway, to break down biases and create opportunities. We make an effort to adjust these levers.</p>

### 3. Client Industry Influence

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Clients driving gender equity efforts in consulting

A7: In many areas, if the clients are women, there is often the unwritten rule that there should also be a woman on the project team. This means that I often have the feeling that women are favored when it comes to filling projects, which is of course an advantage for their career.

A9: It really was a turning point when the topic was taken seriously. I mean, it's like sustainability so often was ten years ago. Today it's a serious issue. Back then, it was just a pretty green façade with a marketing brochure. And it's similar now. It became really relevant to the business when the first pitches were lost with the client's feedback: 'Yes, there was this middle-age white male group sitting in the pitch, and we didn't see ourselves there.'

Client industry-specific differences in male-female ratios

A6: I've only worked on projects in the Software, Internet, and Media practice, and the clients there tend to be quite relaxed—nobody wears a suit, for example, so they also have more modern views. Because of that, I haven't really noticed anything like that myself. But I can imagine that it might be different in other practices. If you were to go to VW in Wolfsburg, for example, it might be a different story.

A10: Our customers are predominantly male, and I'm often the only woman in the room, especially in the more senior positions. This is also due to the fact that I work in the financial services sector, where the proportion of women is extremely low.

A5: For example, in areas like health consulting, agile work, organizational consulting, and process consulting, there are generally more women, and those sectors are often further along in terms of inclusivity. When I started in the defense sector eight years ago, working in the Ministry of Defense, things were different. It has improved, but there is still much room for growth.

Work-life conflict intensity varying by client industry

A7: the extent of this challenge varies across different industries and practices

A10: In consulting, especially with clients from industries like Automotive or Energy, where senior circles are more traditionally male-dominated, it's harder to set boundaries. It depends heavily on the client's expectations and their own work culture. Some industries are far more demanding, with long working hours and a lack of consideration for consultants' work-life balance.

A4: Some clients, particularly in IT or finance, expect constant availability, which puts more pressure on consultants. In contrast, sectors like People Consulting or HR often have more women and tend to be more flexible, creating less intense work-life conflicts.

A2: In consulting, particularly with private equity clients, the demands are relentless—weekends and evenings are not sacred. This is less the case in industries with structured working hours, which makes a big difference in managing work-life balance.

Broader cultural work required to redefine expectations around gender and communication.

"I read about some research, which showed they constructed a meeting, a business meeting, a fake business meeting, at which men and women spoke in exactly equal proportions in terms of minutes. But at the end of it, both the men and the women thought the women had spoken too much. So in other words, it's

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subliminal. The women have been conditioned to expect women to speak less, so when they speak an equal amount, even the women think they've spoken too much."-Tim Roberts

#### 4. Lack of Visibility and Role Models

<p>Visibility as a key factor for career advancement</p>	<p>A1: It becomes more and more important to have a good position internally in order to be called upon for the right topics and to be involved in the right projects. A bit of internal 'selling' simply becomes more important over the years.</p>
<p>Positive visibility as a minority enhancing career prospects Effort required for women to establish credibility</p>	<p>A3: It's not enough just to do good work—you have to make sure it's visible. That means sharing it with others, maybe presenting it on a call or even just discussing it over coffee with the right people. So, it's essential to share your achievements.</p> <p>A2: It's like being the only person in a dress when everyone else is in black suits—you stand out. That's a positive.</p> <p>A2: It wasn't easy to enter the consulting industry because people tend to focus on your previous role. If your prior role was 'X,' it's easier to get an 'X' role in a new firm. But if your background is 'Y' and you're moving into 'X,' people may assume it won't work, even though you might bring great value.</p> <p>A5: As a woman, I often notice that it takes more effort to establish credibility and maintain standing. This challenge becomes even more noticeable as you progress to higher levels, where the expectations and competition increase.</p> <p>A4: Among clients, it's often the case that senior circles are dominated by men, making it harder for women to assert themselves, depending on the type of company you're dealing with.</p>
<p>Women needing additional support to enhance confidence and thrive</p>	<p>A6i: I feel like I have to prove myself two or three times over, especially these days when many companies are implementing gender quotas with good intentions.</p> <p>A5: As a mentor, I notice that my male mentees frequently ask questions about promotions or salary increases. I have to encourage my female mentees to do the same, as they tend to hold back.</p> <p>A10: What I perhaps perceived as the biggest hurdle was...many male colleagues had [informal mentorships] early on, and I had to work out a lot of things for myself. I was also lucky that the company realised at some point that there was a problem here, emphasizing formal mentorships for women to counteract this problem.</p>
<p>Importance of taking ownership of differences in male-dominated environments</p>	<p>A4: Among clients, it's often the case that senior circles are dominated by men, making it harder for women to assert themselves... However, it's important to step into these environments and normalize them for yourself and for others.</p>
<p>Lack of female role models leading to uncertainty</p>	<p>A2: For me, another barrier is the lack of role models. When you look up and don't see people who have made it, or if you notice a pattern where everyone seems to stop at a certain level, you start to question things. Is it because of gender? Is it because of my background? Is it due to systemic issues within the firm or the industry?</p>

A9: For me, that was missing somewhere. There were definitely role models, but not the female role model, especially not a female role model with different life models. You often immediately think of mothers and how it works with families. Yes, that's a huge topic, but it's not the only one. There are so many different lifestyles, and I find it difficult to reduce it to just children. The whole spectrum is important.

A8: I hardly ever see this classic model of husband, wife and two children here. There are therefore very few role models, and I personally don't yet know whether consulting is really family-friendly. That's a question that concerns me, especially now that I've been promoted to manager. I'm thinking about whether I should leave, and that plays a role in my considerations.

A1: If you work in a practice group where 95 percent are men and you lack role models, and if you have certain questions or need exchange and experience and a community, then a network like this can be a good catalyst to make those connections and create a space for exchange.

A2: For me, if I had to sum it up, the real change will come simply from having more women at the top. When more women are at senior levels, things will just start to change on their own.

Everything else—a mentor, a sponsor, a network, policies—it's all good, but the real answer is to just appoint more women at the top.

A9: It's valuable to share experiences like this and talk about how it feels because communication often works differently. Men often can't understand this because they are not typically in these situations. It helps to reflect on experiences, from stupid comments to situations where you want to hear another woman's opinion in order to understand how she might perceive it.

A6i: I think it would be great if each office had a designated female contact person in a higher position—someone you know you could reach out to. Having someone in a senior role who has already walked the path we're on would be far more relatable and helpful.

A7: Having such confidants has helped me enormously. From a certain level, the jump to EM is decisive in knowing whether to stay in counselling or not. Discussing such issues with both the career advisor and my mentor and hearing their experiences is super helpful.

A9: So of course, a lot is done via networks so that you have the feeling that you are part of the whole and not alone... Over time, you realise the value of such networks, and the feedback is correspondingly very positive. If only to have women for informal dialogue... It's valuable to share experiences like this and talk about how it feels.

Importance of diverse and visible female leaders for inspiration

Women sharing common experiences to navigate male-dominated fields

Role of networks in improving motivation and resilience

## 5. Role of Mentorship and Sponsorship

Positive trends in female representation in leadership roles

A4: In the consulting field overall, it's now 40.7% female, up from 36.3%. It's a small step, but movement is there. Progress is being made, but as I said, it takes time. The principle of 'Don't fix the women; fix the system' is very important. It starts with awareness and includes bias training to raise consciousness.

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A5: The good thing is that at the junior levels, the gender split is roughly 50/50. However, unfortunately, the numbers drop significantly from the manager level upwards. Still, the representation at lower levels is a positive starting point to build upon.

A3: At Capgemini Germany, we have male and female co-leaders, which is a significant step forward, and my manager's superior is female, which is also inspiring. But in general, as you look higher up the ladder, it still feels somewhat unrelatable. Initiatives like fostering open conversations and emphasizing leadership values help

Female leadership driving organizational change

A5: The more you foster and promote women, the better the outcomes will be. It's important to expand networking opportunities and increase the number of women in leadership roles. Women who have been through the process can provide insights and understanding that others might not have.

A4: We actually have the first female CEO among the Big Four, Janet Kelly, who started as an intern or working student and worked her way up to CEO over the past 20–25 years. I think that's really cool and sets a strong example

A6: Seeing women who have been with Simon Kucher for years—not just since 'Women in Consulting' was introduced—was a big reason why I wanted to return. They paved their way just like anyone else, and that's the example I try to follow as well.

Structured preparation and leadership development necessary for women

A5: We recently launched a Leadership Program. There is indeed a difference in what it takes to be a woman in consulting, so it's important to have sponsors and supporters who understand how nonverbal communication works and can guide you through it. We're developing this program because we realized there was a gap, particularly in female sponsorship and leadership support.

A7: The last thing I would like to mention is our 'Female Mentorship Programme.' From a certain level, such as Principal or Partner, you can choose a mentor and then meet quarterly or monthly. It's all very informal but primarily about targeted career development. This has helped me enormously—both for personal development and for career advancement.

A10: We realized that a big part of the 'funnel' is that we lose too many women at Associate level. After just two or three years in consulting, many female colleagues say: 'That was nice, but I just can't see myself doing it in the long term with family planning or something similar.' The initiative 'Path-to-Partner' aims to inspire women early on by offering tangible perspectives and utilizing role models to make the path more relatable.

A4: Leadership development programs help identify challenges and explore solutions, empowering women to overcome barriers and reach their goals.

Transparent promotion criteria and career pathways necessary

A7: I think the interesting thing is that I don't know anything about this. There is a lack of transparency about what happens at the higher levels when it comes to promoting women. We also rarely

hire female partners from outside, but rely a lot on home-grown women who come up from below.

A8: All our reviews, in other words the promotion criteria, are designed with this in mind. That's changing now, a lot is being done. I also realize that the higher I get, the easier it is for me because the natural strengths of women... come into their own much better at higher levels.

Gender equity seen as an organizational responsibility, not a women-only issue

A4: The principle of 'Don't fix the women; fix the system' is very important. It starts with awareness and includes bias training to raise consciousness. It's not about labeling someone as a feminist in a negative way, which some people can react allergically to. It's simply about creating understanding and making gaps visible

A4: Men play an active role, especially because they still form the majority in many professional contexts. According to statistics, in many fields, progress simply cannot be made without involving them... It's not about pitting one group against the other; it's about working together.

A2: Rather than every time there's an issue, men asking women, 'What's the problem?,' it shouldn't feel like we need a women's group to 'solve' problems... For me, if I had to sum it up, the real change will come simply from having more women at the top. When more women are at senior levels, things will just start to change on their own

A3: Allies are critical, and I'm talking about men who support women. This is a topic that affects everyone, and a shift needs to happen with transparency in all directions. There should be no doubt or rumors as to why someone has a certain position—whether it's because of talent or, as some might say, filling a gender quota

A5: It's a debate that needs to include everyone, not just women in an isolated group. That's why I think it's essential to approach this holistically at the company level, ensuring that these considerations are integrated across all areas.

Encouraging risk-taking and optimism for women to grow in leadership

A6: When you move into higher positions, your role is more about being the face to the client, the face to the team. Your expertise is in demand, and it's not just about sitting in front of your laptop, working on Excel or slides. The higher up you go, the more important your presence and demeanor become. I can definitely see how that might hold women back from even pursuing such roles.

A7: I think self-promotion is ultimately the key lever as soon as you've mastered your basic tools... Then you make your career through self-promotion and how you sell yourself. This means you become good at both your job and career management, which is crucial for growing into leadership roles.

A3: Over time, my manager gave me that confidence, and I received feedback that helped me understand my strengths. I think it takes courage to develop and stand behind your profile and to be proud of it

Changing perceptions of required skills for leadership success

A8: At Oliver Wyman, we have a very quantitative culture—that's our identity, similar to McKinsey or BCG. I believe this is often seen as a rather masculine attribute, i.e., this analytical aspect. All our reviews, in other words, the promotion criteria, are designed with this in mind. That's changing now, a lot is being done. I also realise that the higher I get, the easier it is for me because the natural strengths of women, such as communication, a good feel for dealing with customers, and political sensitivity, come into their own much better at higher levels.

A3: Changing this perception is, of course, no easy task, and while branding and company messaging help, there's a limit to their impact. I think fostering open conversations and greater transparency could really help. Not just transparency around the current stats, but more about what exactly we value in a leadership role here at Capgemini.

Role of male allies in increasing women's impact

A1: If only women stood up for women, I would be very worried that we would isolate ourselves. I think we are all already working hard to increase the proportion of women. But if men then felt that they no longer had equal rights because only women were supporting women, that would create rifts and that would be problematic.

A1: Men often have a different view of the system than women. Men see some things differently, and that has a completely different impact when a man also addresses or supports the issue than if only women were to do so.

A9: Managers, especially male managers, who now have daughters who are starting university suddenly realise: 'Wait a minute, I don't really want my daughter to work in an environment where she isn't taken seriously or has no development opportunities.' And suddenly these men start to take an interest in such issues and to campaign for them. That brings with it a very special dynamic.

A6i: Male engagement definitely helps... For example, if my partner tells other partners that 'Sophia is fantastic; I want to promote her,' they're likely to respond, 'Oh, okay, great.' But if a female partner were to say it, they might respond differently—maybe thinking, 'Oh, is there some kind of power-women network forming here?' So, I can imagine that having male support sometimes makes things easier.

Mentorship and sponsorship as key to progression

A2: Mentorship is more beneficial in the earlier stages of your career, when you're just starting out... But as you become more senior, I think mentorship becomes less crucial in terms of career advancement. At this stage, sponsorship becomes more important. Sponsorship is about whether you have someone at the top who will put you forward, push you, and give you opportunities.

A7: The last thing I would like to mention is our 'Female Mentorship Programme.' From a certain level, such as Principal or Partner, you can choose a mentor... It's primarily about targeted career development... Discussing such issues with both the career advisor and my mentor and hearing their experiences is super helpful.

A8: I find mentorship incredibly helpful... I was very lucky to find an informal mentor. It was a principal at our company who gave me feedback and tips... We also have formal mentors, known as career advisors, who are jointly responsible for our promotion.

A5: When we launched the female sponsorship program, there was some pushback... But I believe more targeted support is necessary because advancing women in leadership requires a different type of assistance... Having backing and knowing there are people who support and protect you becomes crucial as you move up the ladder

A3: Connecting is beneficial because people get to know you and understand what you're working on... Mentorship programs could be introduced or adapted to better support the career progression of women, ensuring that the numbers at the top start to reflect a more balanced representation

Informal mentors as safe spaces for women

A9: So there were formal programmes, but I have to say that I got most of my guidance from mentors who were more informal mentors. A formal leadership programme is all well and good, but I would argue that I have had at least a handful of informal mentors who have guided me along the way—and some of them still do. One of these mentors has been with me since my first day in counselling, although he was never officially my mentor.

A10: Informal mentorships are crucial because they provide the kind of overarching support we need, often without hesitation or the feeling that we have to fight for it.

A8: I was very lucky to find an informal mentor. It was a principal at our company who called me after a meeting and asked if he could give me feedback. He then gave me tips... He became my informal mentor, and we exchange ideas every four weeks. As he is independent of me in the hierarchy and doesn't influence my promotion, I can talk to him really openly about everything, which helps me enormously.

A2: Having a mentor gives you access to insights that you wouldn't normally have, simply because a senior person has seen more, experienced more, and been involved in more important decisions. While they may not share everything, you get a better sense of how the organization works—its internal politics, procedures, and so on.

## 6. Perceptions of Confidence and Self-Promotion

Confidence as critical for networking and career advancement

A2: Confidence is critical to career advancement, especially in our industry. If you have confidence, people trust you more—both clients and colleagues. As advisors, we rely on confidence. Even internally, if someone tells me with certainty that they can handle something, I'm more likely to give them the chance. But if someone hesitates or seems unsure, even if they're capable, it makes you question whether they're the right fit for the role.

A8: Self-confidence is extremely important, especially when networking. I have learned that your network is crucial for quick promotions. Of course, the performance on projects has to be right, but without self-confidence, you're more likely to be put off. So it definitely has organizational implications.

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Gendered perceptions and barriers to women's confidence

A7: I think self-promotion is ultimately the key lever as soon as you've mastered your basic tools... Then you make your career through self-promotion and how you sell yourself. If you can sell yourself well, you can also present yourself well to the customer—this often goes hand in hand. This means you become good at both your job and career management.

A1: Greater self-confidence, having a 'bigger mouth,' being the one who wants to be the centre of attention more often and making that point helps a lot with internal visibility and 'selling' yourself for projects.

A3: If you want to rise to a leadership position or advance, you need a strong personal profile, where you say, 'This is who I am, and these are my strengths.' Confidence is definitely part of that because confidence comes from certainty, and people want to see that you're secure in what you're doing.

A2: Women, including myself, are often more realistic, maybe even a bit self-critical... This might lead us to be slightly more cautious, not necessarily because we lack confidence, but because we've been conditioned to be more careful. In a professional setting, if my female colleagues aren't entirely familiar with a topic, they'll openly say so. I don't think this is a bad thing, but others might interpret it as a lack of confidence, which can lead to hesitancy about putting them on a project. Meanwhile, a man might say, 'I'll give it a go,' or 'I can make it work,' even if he's not entirely certain.

A8: Men are just so much more self-confident. They go into a project and claim they can do everything, and then it turns out that they can't. For example, I once had an intern who was really outstanding—she outperformed all the consultants but had such strong self-doubt... Women need a lot of encouragement from managers and colleagues to build that self-confidence.

A7: Dominant men who sell themselves confidently sometimes create a difficult dynamic. That's why I always tell my 'girls' in mentoring: 'Make yourselves a win folder'... It's a great way to boost your own self-confidence. At the end of the day, reflect: 'What have I done today? Can I share this with my manager in a positive, non-intrusive way?'

A4: Women's assertive behavior is often seen as aggressive or emotional, while men are considered confident and determined. This difference doesn't exist for men—they're just seen as strong. It's important to address these biases through feedback and training to help women evaluate their presence and refine it.

A1: Most of the women I know here are on average a little more reserved when it comes to taking the offensive. They often feel less of an urge to make the extra cool, clever comment in order to look good... Greater self-confidence, having a 'bigger mouth,' and being the one who wants to be the center of attention more often helps a lot with internal visibility and career advancement.

Training women to develop confidence and assertiveness

A8: Yes, I think perhaps through training—well, I think that training could be offered, which we haven't actually done so far,

Women's hesitation and communication styles as barriers to growth

but I think that would be good. And then through mentorship. I realize that they learn when you tell them and explain it to them, or when I say to them: 'Look, you're really strong compared to the other consultants.' I think women need a lot of encouragement—encouragement from the manager, encouragement from colleagues. I think if we do that, they will also become more self-confident.

A7: That's why I always tell my 'girls' in mentoring: 'Make yourselves a win folder.' I don't know if you've heard this before, but I have a folder like this in which I collect compliments and positive feedback. On difficult days, I just look in there. If my manager gives me good feedback, I take a screenshot and put it in the folder—or I save a nice email from my partner with a thank you. It's a great way to boost your own self-confidence.

A4: Training programs and measures that can help—like feedback sessions, having someone hold up a mirror to show how you come across, or filming yourself during presentations—can help you evaluate your presence and refine it.

A2: Women, including myself, are often more realistic, maybe even a bit self-critical... This might lead us to be slightly more cautious, not necessarily because we lack confidence, but because we've been conditioned to be more careful. In a professional setting, if my female colleagues aren't entirely familiar with a topic, they'll openly say so. I don't think this is a bad thing, but others might interpret it as a lack of confidence, which can lead to hesitancy about putting them on a project.

A7: I believe that clear communication is often less pronounced among women than among men, especially when it comes to career aspirations, goals, etc. - in other words, presenting yourself and your needs.

A5: Women can quickly be pigeonholed as not being ready or as lacking substance, without their potential being recognized. It helps if someone steps in and actively engages the woman in the conversation, asking for her opinion or input. Without that, it can be difficult to showcase your expertise.

A6i: For example, I'm currently on a project with a female colleague... She seemed really uncertain, thinking a lot about how to act before the dinner and what topics would be appropriate to discuss. So, I can imagine it being harder if you don't have that self-confidence or assertiveness, especially as a woman

Gendered differences in expressing and evaluating confidence

A8: Women may be rated lower because they play themselves down, even though they are actually better than their colleagues. I've experienced that a thousand times. I was also told that I should lower my voice and come across as too junior. That's feedback that a man would probably never have received.

A2: Confidence in women might look a bit different from confidence in men. Women are often more realistic, maybe even a bit self-critical... A man might say, 'I'll give it a go,' even if he's not entirely certain. Meanwhile, a woman might openly admit uncertainty, which others might interpret as a lack of confidence.

A4: Women's assertive behavior is often seen as aggressive or emotional, while men are considered confident and determined. This difference doesn't exist for men—they're just seen as strong. Training programs can help women evaluate and refine their presence to overcome these biases.

A10: Some women who don't assimilate to male-coded behaviors or can't implement them easily fall through the cracks. They may not be as extroverted or loud, which often leads to being overlooked in informal interactions where louder voices dominate.

Positive evidence of confidence among junior women

A2: When I look at my more junior female colleagues, they are all confident. They're young, ambitious, capable, and outspoken. None of them is shy, which is fantastic.

## 6. Work-Life Balance and Retention Challenges

Voluntary attrition as a major issue for women

A1: But I think that's a smaller factor than people voluntarily saying: 'I'm leaving'.

A1: If you then say that you have certain obligations or wishes, such as being with your family at certain times or perhaps working part-time and wanting to be off at these times, then such practices really bring you to the brink of despair and destroy you. [...] It's not so much that someone is actively penalised in terms of promotion, but rather that the voluntary resignation rate is higher because people simply don't feel like it anymore.

A10: But after a few years, this has a much greater impact on women - either because they can't imagine how this can be reconciled with their life priorities in the long term, or because they actually try it. There aren't that many of them, but some try it and then realise that it's not really compatible with other life priorities or especially with children.

A10: We realised that a big part of the "funnel" is that we lose too many women at Associate level. After just two or three years in consulting, many female colleagues say: "That was nice, but I just can't see myself doing it in the long term with family planning or something similar."

Gendered perceptions of work-life conflicts

A7: I've noticed that women are much more vocal about work-life balance, while male colleagues often don't communicate it at all. There's this perception that men don't face these challenges or simply don't prioritize them, which puts women in a position where speaking up about it might be seen negatively.

A10: After a few years, this has a much greater impact on women—either because they can't imagine how this can be reconciled with their life priorities in the long term, or because they actually try it. There aren't that many of them, but some try it and then realize that it's not really compatible with other life priorities or especially with children.

A7: The male colleagues I've worked with don't communicate [work-life balance] at all. The issue of work-life balance doesn't seem to be a problem for them. However, when it comes to career and communication, for example with career advisors or talent management, I have noticed that men are often more direct compared to many women in the company. But when it comes to

work-life balance, I've mostly experienced women who communicate this openly—which may not be so good for their career in the end.

Lack of retention efforts targeting female employees

A6: Looking forward, I think women especially tend to think more about how they would manage it if they were to have a family, get married, or take on additional responsibilities. I'm not sure how I'd handle that or if I'd stay in consulting for the long term because of the constant availability and fast pace.

Long-term incompatibility in consulting leading to female attrition

A8: But they do far too little to ensure that women stay at my level, i.e. at this middle EM level. I think that's a real shame, because that's where most of them drop out.

A10: But after a few years, this has a much greater impact on women - either because they can't imagine how this can be reconciled with their life priorities in the long term, or because they actually try it. There aren't that many of them, but some try it and then realise that it's not really compatible with other life priorities or especially with children.

Cultural mismatches pushing women to leave the workforce

A10: I shared my experiences and also my thoughts on whether I really wanted to stay in consulting in the long term, etc. We realised that a big part of the "funnel" is that we lose too many women at Associate level. After just two or three years in consulting, many female colleagues say: "That was nice, but I just can't see myself doing it in the long term with family planning or something similar."

A10: Women who are not so good at this or who do not assimilate classic "male-coded" behaviours well or cannot implement them so easily fall through the cracks even more.

A10: Rather, I have the impression that assimilation is sometimes rewarded too easily, even in subordinate situations.

A10: I gave the example at the very beginning about a male manager and myself. In moments like that, I deliberately chose a behaviour that might not have suited me personally, but that I showed because I knew: that's how the boys do it and it goes down well, even with the juniors. And it actually always worked, because that's what's expected.

Importance of allies in improving retention efforts

A4: Yes, there are regular events where men are invited. For instance, there was a talk last year that discussed what men can do to contribute to this conversation. There was even an image compilation shared from that talk where a man said, "I'm here because I hope that my daughter never has to know the word 'male ally.'" I thought that was really powerful, as it highlighted the essence of the topic—he wanted it to be normal for his daughter to grow up in a balanced environment, approximately 50/50, where she wouldn't feel discriminated against.

A9: So, communicate very openly about it and offer it again and again. I can actually see that a lot has changed compared to over 20 years ago when I started - it's also a generational change.

Managers, especially male managers, who now have daughters who are starting university suddenly realise: 'Wait a minute, I don't really want my daughter to work in an environment where she isn't

taken seriously or has no development opportunities. And suddenly these men start to take an interest in such issues and to campaign for them. That brings with it a very special dynamic. Many of them are also genuinely interested and open to change. They can also see where the advantage lies. There are still few women in my industry, but in other sectors - consumer goods, telecommunications, media - there are now many women on the client side. It really helps if I have a mix in my team because it fits together better and just clicks. So there is also a certain amount of self-interest behind it. That's why I hope that part of the problem, for example the male chauvinism that still exists, will simply grow out over time and become obsolete.

A1: the topic of women is very, very, very high on the agenda. This means that there is a relatively high focus on it, and there is also simply measurability. We say quite clearly that we want to have more women at the upper levels, more women as partners and as managing director partners.

A6: Hmm, well, I think male engagement definitely helps, right? Yes, it definitely helps because then no one questions it, if you know what I mean. For example, if my partner tells other partners that "Sophia is fantastic; I want to promote her," they're likely to respond, "Oh, okay, great." But if a female partner were to say it, they might respond differently—maybe thinking, "Oh, is there some kind of power-women network forming here?" So, I can imagine that having male support sometimes makes things easier.

Growing acceptance of setting boundaries for work-life balance

A10: Personally, I do the same because it's very, very important to me. As soon as I became a manager and had more control over it, I started to manage the work-life balance very actively—also for my team—and made it clear to the customer where our priorities lie and what is really necessary.

A7: In terms of work-life balance: I actually think that... a successful day is when the whole team can finish at 6 p.m. and the customer is still happy. For me, a successful day does not mean who is the best at working until 3:00 am.

A8: I actually want to stay in consulting for the long term, hopefully. It doesn't work without this balance. These boundaries are now better accepted. Whenever I've said it, it's worked

Flexibility, part-time options, and remote working as enablers

A7: We have work-life balance programs, such as additional leave days. You can buy extra days of holiday or take unpaid leave... You can also reduce to 60% or 80% at the touch of a button. For instance, a Principle worked at 60% last month and then increased it to 80%—it was super easy for us. These solutions are critical for long-term work-life integration, especially for consulting roles

A1: Covid was a huge help because it suddenly went from 'It's normal to be at the customer's four days a week' to 'We are flexible.' Everyone learned to work digitally, which increased flexibility enormously and made many things easier. I think it showed how flexibility could work effectively in consulting

A4: Our flexible policies have allowed me to switch teams and adjust my workload according to my needs. We also have

Work-life conflict as a significant factor in attrition

mentorship programs and structures where flexibility and part-time options are discussed openly, encouraging their use without penalty  
A10: After a few years, [work-life balance] has a much greater impact on women—either because they can't imagine how this can be reconciled with their life priorities in the long term, or because they actually try it and realise that it's not really compatible with other life priorities or especially with children. Ultimately, that's the core problem.

A6i: Looking forward, I think women especially tend to think more about how they would manage it if they were to have a family, get married, or take on additional responsibilities. I'm not sure how I'd handle that or if I'd stay in consulting for the long term because of the constant availability and fast pace.

A2: In consulting, the demands make it challenging for anyone with a life outside of work—family commitments, hobbies, or other interests—to keep up. Consulting is all-consuming; you're constantly meeting clients, managing internal responsibilities, and staying fully engaged. Compared to banking, consulting is far worse in terms of gender support and diversity.

Gendered expectations around family caregiving roles

A2: Many of my male colleagues have stay-at-home wives, so they may not fully understand that dynamic from a woman's perspective. They might advise their protégés to make sure they have a nanny or that their wife is on board with the arrangement. But for women, there are fewer role models at the senior level to pass on that advice—to say, 'Don't worry, you can still make it work.' This leads to an imbalance. Because there aren't enough senior women with families in leadership roles, the assumption persists that women with families won't be as ambitious.

A1: Women are still seen as the primary caregivers and as the ones responsible for family and caregiving responsibilities, regardless of their workload.

A10: In any case, I believe that the entire gender equality problem would be solved in principle if we had a cultural change in Germany in which men took parental leave for just as long and just as intensively as women. This would eliminate the discrimination against women from the outset, because men would then take parental leave in the same way. Within a partnership, there would be equality in terms of family responsibility.

A1: Many of the things that we struggle with as women are issues that many modern men who are fathers and who also see their family role differently than before also struggle with. They also want their boundaries, they want to be able to pick up a child from daycare and be at home with equal rights and be able to say no. And sometimes it's almost even more difficult for them to say, 'I'm taking the right out now.'

Necessary support systems for managing work-life demands

A1: In the first few weeks, I usually worked on something internally so that I could really be at home and flexible. When I had the feeling that the systems were working, we looked for a case that was a good fit from all sides. I then went up to 80 percent and it usually went well and settled in. Another point was the selection

of cases, meaning it had to be okay to say no if someone came with a case where it was clear from the outset that the scope was too big, the team too small, or the client said: 'I want you here on site five days a week.'

A10: If a woman has a family or children, it would be important for her to feel that she is being offered support. This would also send a positive signal to women who do not yet have children. There is too little concrete support here, such as childcare—daycare places, for example. Although this would be a measure that could be very effective, it is also expensive and therefore difficult to implement.

A7: Perfectly fair, I would say. With us, men have the same opportunity as women to take longer parental leave. This has been adapted and even goes beyond the legal requirements. We also have a really good reintegration procedure where you receive full pay when you return, even though you only work 80% initially—for a certain transitional period. This model applies equally to men and women, which is really strong. More and more people are using this option, and as it is project-based, it is often very easy to implement.

Both men and women increasingly benefiting from flexible work policies

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A1: Covid was a huge help because it suddenly went from 'It's normal to be at the customer's four days a week' to 'We are flexible.' It was already common for me to say, 'No, I'm not with the customer four days a week, but rather two to sometimes three days a week.' And suddenly it was also completely okay not to be on site sometimes. Everyone has learned to work digitally, which has increased flexibility enormously on all sides and made many things easier.

A4: Working part-time is very feasible, and we have a structured, flexible system that can be adjusted even at short notice. I've also noticed an increasing trend of men taking parental leave or sabbaticals, although it's not entirely equal yet—not by a long shot.

## 7. Informal Networks and Exclusion

Mixed-gender informal networking incentivization

A8: It would be good if it were also normal in the corporate culture for a Principal to have a cocktail at the bar with a female Senior Consultant without others looking at it the wrong way or being surprised. It should be just as acceptable as with two male colleagues. So there is still a lot of change needed.

A8: I think it would be helpful to offer mandatory, formalised training for everyone... This could also include informal settings such as drinks together. For example, every project manager, whether male or female, could be given a voucher to have a drink

Division of men and women socially, leading to exclusion	<p>with every senior consultant in the project and have a personal chat.</p> <p>A2: It's often just because of the natural divide between men and women in certain situations.</p> <p>A2: Let's be honest, this happens a lot. Sometimes guys just spontaneously say, 'Let's go for drinks,' without thinking about inviting everyone in the office. I've seen it with my colleagues here and in previous firms. [...] These informal barriers can deprive women of bonding experiences that are important for building networks and trust. I think there's a lot that goes on in informal networks that I'm not fully aware of, and while I don't know how it could be solved, it's definitely something that affects women's experiences in the workplace.</p>
Masculine team dynamics and male-dominated informal events	<p>A8: Two years ago, I was on a big project with around 20 to 25 consultants, maybe even 30. We also had an offsite event together in Mallorca. But then the guys organised themselves and went on a wine tour without inviting a woman. All the guys were there, no women. There were only about five women and twenty men on the project for more than a year, and that was noticeable.</p> <p>A8: It's not always easy when only male topics are discussed around the table and you can't have a say in them.</p> <p>A2: In my previous firm, we had a few flagship team events every year—not huge company events, but smaller team activities—and they were always things like racing or driving. Everything felt geared toward one type of interest. Even some of my male colleagues in financial services weren't into it. Not every man loves football, after all. The events were often planned around one group's interests, creating a divide within the team based on those preferences.</p>
Informal mentors and sponsors more accessible to men	<p>A8: Two years ago, I was on a big project with around 20 to 25 consultants, maybe even 30. We also had an offsite event together in Mallorca. But then the guys organised themselves and went on a wine tour without inviting a woman. All the guys were there, no women. There were only about five women and twenty men on the project for more than a year, and that was noticeable.</p> <p>A10: For me as a junior, it started with the fact that my male colleagues somehow had contact with more senior people such as principals and managers more quickly and were more likely to develop 'bromances' with them. Informal mentorships formed very quickly, which somehow happened by itself. And I didn't have that kind of access and didn't really know how to go about it.</p>
Importance of informal networking for career progression	<p>A9: At the beginning of my career, I didn't realise how important informal networks or networks in general are. There are many networks that you don't necessarily have direct access to as a woman... Men can meet at the bar in the evening; you wouldn't do that as a woman. It's often a certain strangeness—something that wouldn't be the case with a man.</p> <p>A9: At the beginning of my career, I didn't realise how important informal networks or networks in general are. There are many networks that you don't necessarily have direct access to as a</p>

woman... I had my aha moment as a principal through the Bertelsmann Foundation, which offers such women's advancement networks. That was my first 'official' networking event, and since then I've been trying to organise networking—both large and small—more systematically.

A10: What I perceived as the biggest hurdle was...male colleagues somehow had contact with more senior people such as principals and managers more quickly and were more likely to develop 'bromances' with them. Informal mentorships formed very quickly... I had to work out a lot of things for myself and figure out how to position myself correctly for promotions.

A6i: Naturally, if you connect personally with senior colleagues and managers, your chances of advancing increase because you're more visible to them as a person. They know you, they've seen your personality fit, and you're working with them.

A1: You need a network around you that supports you, communicates your achievements, and backs you up. And you don't just need one person; you need several people who understand and support you

A2: With informal networks, I'd say you don't know what you don't know—you don't know what you might be missing. Now that I'm more senior, I've noticed this more. I don't necessarily think it's discrimination; it's just that guys tend to talk about certain things... So when the guys talk about football every week or plan to watch a game together, I'm often not included.

A2: There's a hesitation there, shaped by social norms. It's not his fault, and it's not mine either. I can't change the fact that I'm a woman... These informal barriers can deprive women of bonding experiences that are important for building networks and trust.

A9: There are many networks that you don't necessarily have direct access to as a woman. It's not necessarily just about systematic networking, but it can seem strange if you're a woman going to dinner alone with a male client... Men can meet at the bar in the evening; you wouldn't do that as a woman

A8: The men often don't even realise that we women are outnumbered and could feel excluded. If we then bring up topics where we can't have a say, they usually take it as a joke and say things like: 'Oh, we're not allowed to talk about that now.'

A5: Expanding networking opportunities, especially cross-functional ones, is crucial. It shouldn't just be limited to individual teams but should be company-wide or even within government bodies if applicable. This allows women to support and uplift each other more effectively.

A2: For me, it's valuable from an internal networking perspective. The group organizes good events, similar to what I see in other companies my friends work for. It could be networking, topical discussions, lunch-and-learns, or networking with other firms. From a business development and career development perspective, it's always good to make more connections within the firm.

Barriers to networking and informal inclusion for women

Need for diverse networks for different career aspects

A4: We actually have three women's networks in our consulting division... The Women in Tech network is more elastic and specific to Germany. We have quite a few measures in place; they regularly organize events and invite guest speakers."

A1: I think if you work in a practice group where 95 percent are men and you lack role models, and if you have certain questions or need exchange and experience and a community, then a network like this can be a good catalyst to make those connections and create a space for exchange.

A3: We do have a large network; the biggest one is probably the 'Women's Net.' They organize regular networking events at the office, sometimes in person, and sometimes they host info sessions over calls. They even bring in external speakers.

Positive effects of diverse teams and leadership styles

A4: Numerous studies, independent of gender, have shown that the more diverse a team is, the more innovative the results are. This is crucial. We need to move away from focusing solely on discrimination as an issue and instead highlight the advantages of diversity. It's important to show the benefits of broadening perspectives and not just looking inward.

A8: At the higher levels, I've been able to use other strengths, like communication and dealing with customers, which are often considered more 'female' traits. These qualities contribute to building a stronger team dynamic and ensuring the client is happy with the project outcomes.

Iris Hermann: Having diverse perspectives and leadership styles helps with team cohesion and project success

Working in diverse teams reducing feelings of isolation

A1: If you work in a practice group where 95% are men and you lack role models, and if you have certain questions or need exchange and experience, a community like this can be a good catalyst to make those connections and create a space for exchange.

A10: I've experienced firsthand how being part of a diverse team can reduce the feeling of being the odd one out. When there are other women or individuals from different backgrounds, it naturally creates a more welcoming and balanced dynamic.

A8: I've had an all-female team—that was really great. A colleague looked at me and asked: 'Lissy, why aren't you feeling well today?' I was totally surprised that anyone even noticed. Men often don't even notice things like that.

Risk of women self-isolating without male inclusion in equity initiatives

A5: So, while these programs are good, the challenge is that they can sometimes feel limited when only women participate in them. It's a debate that needs to include everyone, not just women in an isolated group. That's why I think it's essential to approach this holistically at the company level, ensuring that these considerations are integrated across all areas.

A7: We have had a few initiatives where you realised that there were only men in the room, which didn't always lead to the best results. That's why I believe that men at a certain seniority level should take the stage and talk about these issues, but also allow those who are directly affected to have their say.

A4: Setting up an 'us versus them' dynamic between women and men won't get us anywhere. It's not about pitting one group against the other; it's about working together. A collaborative approach can only happen when both sides contribute, so it's essential for men to participate.

Importance of inclusive access to formal and informal networks

A10: At the beginning, you're told: 'Yes, you have to talk to Staffing and they'll sort it out.' But the truth is, you have to talk to the partners, the managers, the principals—you have to network yourself in order to get the right projects. That's also something you understand directly when someone explains it to you, whereas if you don't have that connection at the top, you don't really understand it until a few months later.

A3: Naturally, if you connect personally with senior colleagues and managers, your chances of advancing increase because you're more visible to them as a person. They know you, they've seen your personality fit, and you're working with them. I do think that everyone has the opportunity to put themselves out there, though, so I wouldn't say there's a big difference.

Creation of open-dialogue cultures for awareness and inclusion

A9: And as I said, the other thing is to create a corporate culture in which such issues can be discussed very openly and transparently.

A3: Changing this perception is, of course, no easy task, and while branding and company messaging help, there's a limit to their impact. I think fostering open conversations and greater transparency could really help. Not just transparency around the current stats, but more about what exactly we value in a leadership role here at Capgemini.

A10: You need managers and principals who make sure that everyone in a team has their say and that everyone gets their space at team dinners. It's about making sure that people aren't being trained to behave in the same way. Consultants are often accused of being the same after a few years, of acting the same and going to customers in the same way. This requires a sensitive, interpersonal approach in our work culture.

**Quotes C2: Quotes Underlying Second-Order Themes Group B (Male Leadership and HR)**

Representative Quotes Underlying Second-Order Themes	
<b>1. Second Order Theme: Gendered Expectations and Stereotypes</b>	
Stereotype that male candidates fit traditional leadership archetypes more closely than women:	“in some countries female candidates for partner weren't being put forward, they were being held back because of a possible implicit bias that male candidates somehow looked more like leaders. Whether it's, well, whether it was overt or subliminal, they female candidates weren't being put forward at the same rate they should be”- Tim Roberts
Persistent stereotype that women lack resilience—mentally, physically, or otherwise	“Yes, yes. So I have to use stereotypes again. I think as a woman you might not sound too resilient. That in turn means both nervously and physically, as well as whatever else. That could be the case. And that's why it could be that women are simply not in the relevant set for any partner assessments, application processes, etc.” – Frank Hohenleitner “My former partner would always say, “I’m bringing you in here because I know you’ll finish the project.” That’s a quality many women possess, and in my view, the quality of a project increases when women are involved, especially in leadership roles.” - Sevilay Huesman-Koecke
Cultural expectations for women to exhibit nurturing behavior in professional settings	"There’s still a sense in some industries that women are expected to take on a caregiving or supportive role even within teams, which can undermine their leadership potential when compared to more traditionally assertive traits."-Giovanna Roma "Women are seen as better at engaging with employees on a personal level, which is considered an advantage in leadership roles. But the expectation to always act as a nurturer can limit how they are perceived in more competitive or decisive situations."- Sevilay Huesman-Koecke
Gendered expectations regarding career and family roles	“I think the issue also has to do with the fact that, historically, it is often expected that the woman will leave the consulting job at some point because it might become too strenuous or require too much travelling, leaving less time for the family.” -Frank Hohenleitner
Societal expectations for women to prioritize caregiving over professional ambitions	“By the way, if we want to speak wider, this is not a consulting paradigm. The real question is, okay, but why does this colleague have to take her children to school and it is not her husband? “- Fabio Piccinini “This creates a huge inner conflict between family and career, and I believe that’s extremely unhealthy. It’s an issue rooted in the culture rather than the organizational framework.” - Conrad Weiss

Cultural expectations for women to lead “softer” consulting areas	“I see that these softer themes are often better addressed by women, especially given the current labor market situation where employee engagement is key.” - Michael Schmidt
How expectations and behaviors reinforce gendered stereotypes in professional environments.	“Some examples from recent training sessions: When men arrive at a meeting, they engage in small talk first. Women tend to want to get straight to the point because time is limited. In meetings, women tend to look at everyone around the table when speaking, while men focus solely on the person leading the meeting. Men may even sit with their backs to some attendees, but their attention remains entirely on the boss. These “male” and “female” traits or behaviors—whatever you want to call them—affect how people are perceived. “Sevilay Huesman-Koecke
Subliminal conditioning of gendered communication norms:	“research, which showed they constructed a meeting, a business meeting, a fake business meeting, at which men and women spoke in exactly equal proportions in terms of minutes. But at the end of it, both the men and the women thought the women had spoken too much. So in other words, it's subliminal. The women have been conditioned to expect women to speak less, so when they speak an equal amount, even the women think they've spoken too much. I thought that was very interesting. So it's quite ingrained these behavioural expectations”- Tim Roberts

## 2. Emotional Involvement and Leadership Perception

Emotional involvement in professional settings as a liability	“He might ask if it’s important or meaningful before making the connection, but it’s straightforward. Women, however, often overthink and get too emotionally involved in these interactions. They bring unnecessary emotions into a professional context, which can complicate things.” - Sevilay Huesman-Koecke
Perception of emotional involvement as a liability in leadership roles.	"I’ve seen research saying women’s leadership styles often emphasize collaboration and empathy, but the perception in some industries is that these traits are weaknesses rather than strengths in high-stakes leadership positions."-Giovanna Roma
Emotional involvement in professional settings can create unnecessary complications and barriers.	“Many women are more driven by emotion, rather than thinking, “The five of us could really advance our careers together. We don’t always have to agree, but we do need to stick together.” That kind of mindset is more common among men. I’ve worked with various types of teams—male, female, and mixed teams, with diverse genders and nationalities. The women who could set their egos aside and move past arguments were the ones who succeeded and who would come back ready to tackle challenges together the next day.” - Axel Vollmar
The ability to resolve professional disagreements without impacting personal respect or camaraderie.	“That’s the big difference. Men can forgive, saying, “Forget it; we had a professional disagreement, which was actually beneficial. Now, let’s go grab a beer.” Women, in my experience, tend to hold onto things longer. “-Axel Vollmar

Perceptions of confidence being promoted over true leadership abilities.

“It's a great Harvard Business School article. I don't know if you've seen it called, “Why do so many incompetent men get promoted?”. And I've definitely seen that. I've seen, particularly in very large organisations, you see incompetent men and you think “Other than the fact that they have a loud voice and they sound confident, why are they in a leadership position? They don't have any of the other attributes of a leadership role”. And that that I think is one of the issues.”-Tim Roberts

### 3. Communication Norms in Professional Spaces

Efficiency and directness often observed in male-dominated networking dynamics.

“For example, I can call a male colleague and say, “Hey, I need this or that. Can you connect me with someone?” And his response will usually be, “Sure, when do you need it? Tomorrow or today? What’s the purpose of the meeting?” He might ask if it’s important or meaningful before making the connection, but it’s straightforward.” - Sevilay Huesman-Koecke

Dominance of direct and efficiency-driven communication, often attributed to male norms.

“Men often think they are the greatest, appear self-confident, make their statements, and enter the meeting room where one woman and nine men are sitting, and the men immediately start talking about football, cars, and other 'men's topics.'”-Frank Hohenleitner  
“In terms of communication, men tend to be more assertive”-  
Giovanna Roma

“I mean, I think there are a lot of conversations around how women express themselves and the fact that they tend to say things almost as a question, much more often than men. So usually men are more assertive and say, 'I think this is this way,' and a woman would say, 'Yeah, I think it could be this way.' It's the same type of information. But somehow when a woman says it, putting it as a question, it sounds like she's not sure about it, and like she's less confident, whereas usually... men tend to be more assertive." -  
Giovanna Roma

Challenges for women in adapting to or challenging these communication norms.

“What I find challenging, however, is the excessive focus on diversity discussions in companies. Sometimes, I find them more limiting than empowering. The emphasis on how we're all “different” ends up drawing even more attention to those differences. Things that previously went unnoticed are now becoming major talking points”- Sevilay Huesman-Koecke  
“She was the interim CEO of a business that was being turned around. And I couldn't believe she would tell such a vulnerable story. I don't think many male leaders would have done that. Certainly not many of our male leaders would have done that. They might have told that story in private but not in front of the entire firm. I think it took an incredible amount of bravery and confidence to tell the story because people are going to learn from it and if one or two people in the audience think less of you, who cares?” – Tim Roberts

“What’s crucial for women, in my opinion, is to find allies and to network effectively. Consulting is all about networking and leveraging those networks to advance together. I’ve had female

colleagues who tried to come across as "tough" in a way that might be perceived as overly masculine, and that didn't always resonate well with their male colleagues" - Axel Vollmar

Broader cultural work required to redefine expectations around gender and communication.

"I read about some research, which showed they constructed a meeting, a business meeting, a fake business meeting, at which men and women spoke in exactly equal proportions in terms of minutes. But at the end of it, both the men and the women thought the women had spoken too much. So in other words, it's subliminal. The women have been conditioned to expect women to speak less, so when they speak an equal amount, even the women think they've spoken too much."-Tim Roberts

#### 4. Networking Disparities and Informal Spaces

Networking disparities between men and women

"One of the things we observed is that men form networks and they form, you know, a senior mentor who will sort of say, "Oh, you need to involve Tim in that. Tim's great. You should use Tim.". You need someone doing that for the female colleagues who may not have the same internal social network who may not be going out for a drink after work or playing golf on the weekend or whatever it might be." -Tim Roberts

Limited presence of women in informal, male-dominated networking spaces (e.g., golf, drinks

"I mean, I guess it depends on the location, the type of team, and so on. But I think one of the issues could be that many of the ways teams bond still tend to be skewed towards male preferences. For example, if the team plans to go out and get drinks, play golf, or tennis—some of these activities might align more with what men prefer." -Giovanna Roma

"Traditionally, we've hosted social events that tend to appeal more to our male colleagues—like shooting, go-karting, motor racing, or football. It's not that women can't or don't enjoy these activities, but statistically, they're less likely to be effective bonding events for women." - Tim Roberts

"This shift extends to the client events we host as well. For example, if we run a client event that involves a shooting weekend, we risk alienating part of the audience who might otherwise have attended. So we're working to create a wider variety of social events—both for internal team building and for external client networking—so that senior women don't feel excluded. We want them to feel comfortable participating, rather than attending events that make them uncomfortable or force them into activities they may have little interest in, like firing a shotgun or racing on a track. To be clear, there are certainly women who enjoy shooting or motor racing, but these activities are statistically less likely to appeal to a broad audience." - Tim Roberts

Difficulty in leveraging female networks for business opportunities

"He might ask if it's important or meaningful before making the connection, but it's straightforward. Women, however, often overthink and get too emotionally involved in these interactions.

They bring unnecessary emotions into a professional context, which can complicate things “- Sevilay Huesman-Koecke

Informal women’s networking events.

“On the more informal side, we organize women’s networking events, like women’s roundtables that we hold once a month. We also have our own dedicated Zoom channels, not necessarily to exclude men but just to create a space for women. It’s important to strike a balance because we don’t want to alienate men by having only female-specific events. “-Marlene Knöbig

Importance of mentoring and networking events as tools for women’s career growth and support.

“So, I think it’s incredibly important to have mentoring programs, dinners, or other events that are exclusively for women to create a sense of security and show, “Hey, we value you and specifically want to support you as women.” - Conrad Weiss

How entrenched male networks exclude women from leadership pathways.

“I’d say there are still these “boys’ clubs,” where you see maybe 15 to 20 men at the very top who just help each other up the ladder. I do sense that these old, outdated structures still exist, and it’s possible that this extends to client relationships as well “ - Conrad Weiss

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## 5. Advocacy and Allyship

Role of male leaders as advocates or sponsors for women’s career progression

“As a Partner, you’re also a stakeholder in the company, which adds another layer of responsibility. I do feel there’s a kind of

“glass ceiling” at this level, where perhaps leadership could make an extra effort to extend a helping hand and say, “Let’s take this step together.” Hypothetically speaking, I could imagine that women may be less proactive about making the jump from Manager to Director compared to men.” - Conrad Weiss

“In my career, it has always been men who supported me and propelled me to the next level. I’ve never had a woman push me to the next career step—it was always men. That’s why I’ve come to the conclusion that success isn’t possible without male allies.”- Sevilay Huesman-Koecke

Impact of male allyship on organizational culture and policy reform

“Since there are generally more men than women in most consulting companies, it would be much more effective if men felt as responsible for these initiatives as women do. For example, in my case, when we had one of the large, global women’s recruiting events, I suggested for the first time to have male leaders join the sessions. On one hand, it’s also their responsibility to encourage women to apply and grow within the company, and on the other hand, their participation helps engage them further with the topic. It bridges the gap between both sides”- Giovanna Roma

Lack of solidarity among women in professional contexts

“One thing I find notable is that much of the push for gender diversity initiatives has come from men. That’s something I feel strongly about. I once wrote a piece about how many women seem to operate under a “Highlander principle”—as in, “There can only

be one.” Once they’ve reached the top, they don’t pave the way for others. “-Sevilay Huesman-Koecke

“For instance, if I’m working on the consulting side and know many female clients, it can be hard to win projects or generate business from those clients. Female clients often avoid awarding projects to a woman or her network because they’re afraid it might look suspicious.” -Sevilay Huesman-Koecke

“One thing I noticed in the past was that women didn't always support each other effectively in leadership roles”-Axel Vollmar

Women advocating for women in leadership

“the most crucial factor is for women to support one another in their careers. Among men, this collaborative networking is more established. That’s something I’ve consistently observed over the years.” -Axel Vollmar

“especially at the Partner level—we have a few very strong women who actively work to empower younger women, helping them plan their careers with an eye toward reaching that level and consciously supporting their growth.” -Conrad Weiss

Recognition of male allies as critical agents for cultural reform

“For instance, it would be powerful if male leaders were also involved, like a male partner speaking about the benefits of working with women. That would have a much greater effect than if women were just talking to other women.”- Marlene Knöbig

Collaborative spirit under female leadership

“On the positive side, there are colleagues who actively appreciate working on projects with women because they feel it changes the dynamic for the better. They’ve said they prefer working with a female project leader over a male one because the competitive, elbow-out culture is less pronounced, and there’s more of a collaborative spirit”- Marlene Knöbig

“There has been a lot of progress, and I expect even more in the future. Some female leaders have clearly communicated their ambition to become partners, and I believe their quality of work will get them there. So, I’d say there are plenty of initiatives in place to support this. In my previous company, we also had many similar programs, and I think, in general, things have shifted.”- Axel Vollmar

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## 6. Quotas and Representation

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Difficulty of achieving gender parity in hiring when the applicant pool is imbalanced

“I think one is definitely what I already mentioned regarding the just in general, the availability of female candidates in a specific pool. So in a specific field, because again if you go for instance to oil and gas, it's just unreasonable to think that you will hire 5050

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Short-term challenges posed by gender quotas, particularly in relation to fairness and meritocracy	<p>candidates from oil and gas professionals and that's because at the top of funnels or at the source maybe. “ -Giovanna Roma</p> <p>“Actually, if you're looking at the population of people aged 35 plus working in technology, that's not a 50/50 male-to-female ratio. Yes, there is lots of female talent out there, but the numbers are not equal the same way they are if you're looking at, you know, science graduates”. -Tim Roberts</p> <p>“OK, now that you go a little bit, to be honest, and this is a problem in the short term, you go a little bit against meritocracy because you impose, you oblige to hire 50-50. This is honestly a problem now because if you get 80 or 70 CV from men and 30 from women and you have to hire the 10 and 10, one is one out of seven. The other is one out of three. But in the short term, it might be a compromise that helps because it's the only way you have to force this also impacting on the real meritocracy, because then once you have created a context where you have 50-50, maybe the applications instead of 80-20 becomes 70-30, 60-40 and then 50-50 and then you restore the meritocracy.” -Fabio Piccinini</p>
Quotas as a tool for systemic change	<p>“I used to be against quotas, thinking that competence would naturally prevail. But over time, I’ve come to see that quotas can have their merits. That was an experience from my previous company. In my current company, I see more of a desire among my male colleagues to have even more women in leadership positions.”- Sevilya Huesman-Koecke</p>
Concerns over being a quota hire or promotion	<p>“I don't want to be part of a women's sponsorship programme. I want to be promoted on my own merits.”, they took it as meaning somehow they were going to get positive discrimination. And they didn't want positive discrimination. They said, “Look, I'm good enough to be made a partner anyway. I don't want your sponsors.”, so I think you can't force this on people. “-Tim Roberts</p> <p>“However, it comes with a bit of a bitter aftertaste because you sometimes wonder whether it's truly based on your own performance or if it's more about fulfilling a quota. “- Marlene Knöbig</p>
Male colleagues admitting leniency in interviewing women to meet quotas	<p>“For example, during recruiting discussions, I’ve heard male colleagues say things like, “When I interview a woman, I’m not as strict as I would be with a man because we need more women to meet our quota.” These little comments, while not necessarily ill-intentioned, can create a sense that women aren’t seen as equals but rather as a means to an end. “- Marlene Knöbig</p>
Quota-related stigma and competence perceptions	<p>“And although that might seem a solution at first because you think, OK, I put a female quota and no matter what we hire a woman for this particular role, but it doesn't actually help the person because once they are in. Somehow they're flagged as the person that joined because of that quota, so it should always still be</p>

with on the basis of meritocracy and with the same, let's say, level for everyone. So I think at some"-Giovanna Roma

Constraints and potential downsides of prioritizing gender quotas without considering broader factors

"Lateral hires are a little different. They are specifically looking for people with professional experience, and although gender is not a major factor here, it can be more difficult to find women. Many people in their early 30s, i.e. after five to six years of professional experience, are often in the phase of starting a family - this can make it difficult to meet target values because the recruitment criteria here relate to specific knowledge and experience. You can't always afford to focus exclusively on gender quotas." -Frank Hohenleitner

"For example, in my previous company, when I was involved in recruiting, there was a phase where one of the key hiring criteria became "the candidate must be female." To me, that was completely unnecessary." - Axel Vollmar

## 7. Leadership Development and Visibility

Proactive leadership development programs empowering women to navigate male-dominated fields

"What's crucial for women, in my opinion, is to find allies and to network effectively. Consulting is all about networking and leveraging those networks to advance together" - Axel Vollmar

Success stories showcasing female leaders' ability to inspire the next generation

"For example, having more testimonials and best practices from women who successfully work a four-day week and say, "I have Fridays off, and it works perfectly for me and my family." Showing more examples of how this can work in practice would be helpful. I don't think we can push this enough if we really want to embed it culturally. If someone speaks up in a call every six months saying, "Look at me, I'm making it work," everyone forgets about it quickly. But if you consistently highlight it, reinforcing that we want it as part of our culture, I think that's crucial. So yes, there's definitely more we can do. - Conrad Weiss

Importance of visible female leaders as role models for women in consulting and business

"Instead, I impose him to give visibility to her. To be very honest, not because she's a female, because she's good and the way she has to grow. And I like her to have visibility." - Fabio\_Piccinini

Scarcity of female partners in key decision-making roles

"Overall, I see fewer female employees in consulting as you move up the ranks. The higher you climb in an organization, the lower the proportion of women becomes." -Sevilay Huesman-Koecke,

"There are very few women at the executive level in consulting firms." -Michael Schmidt

"from Principal upwards, there's a significant shift. The proportion of men is considerably higher at that level and especially at the Partner level. At other firms, they may call it Principal, but for us, it's Director Partner. At those levels, you definitely see a larger

number of men. The so-called “glass ceiling” in our hierarchy seems to be at the Senior Manager level.”-Conrad Weiss

Encouragement for junior women to aspire to leadership roles by demonstrating female success stories

“I think that’s incredibly important, to create these mentors, especially female mentors.”-Conrad Weiss

Designed to showcase female executives and their significant roles within the organization

“I was referring to ZDB’s initiative, specifically to “Women in Leadership” within the X organization. This initiative brings together female executives—women who are already in leadership roles. My interpretation is that it serves two purposes: first, it’s partly about image-building, showing that women play important roles here; and second, it aims to inspire younger female employees by saying, “Look, women can advance here.” - Michael Schmidt

Men are more proactive in career steps, take steps to ensure visibility and frame basic work as an achievement

“Men promote themselves, even if they only meet 20% of the job requirements. Women, on the other hand, want to be nominated and typically apply only if they meet 150% of the criteria. Women often doubt themselves, thinking, “I’m not good enough for this,” which holds them back from stepping forward. “-Sevilay Huesman-Koecke, Pos. 29)

“I apologise for using clichés here, but my feeling is that women often greatly underestimate themselves. They position and market themselves far too rationally and soberly and tend to withdraw more quickly. Men, on the other hand, often tend - and I say this very cautiously - to show less self-criticism and self-reflection. They often think they are the greatest, appear self-confident, make their statements and enter the meeting room where one woman and nine men are sitting and the men immediately start talking about football, cars and other 'men's topics'.”- Frank Hohenleitner  
“women may be less proactive about making the jump from Manager to Director compared to men. “-Conrad Weiss  
“I often feel that men are more proactive in taking that step, whereas women tend to hold back or subordinate themselves slightly.” - Marlene Knöbig

Visibility based on performance and merit rather than gender for fair career growth

“So, you should incentivize from the beginning, from bottom, female having the same visibility. It doesn't mean more. Having the same, you know? “ – Fabio Piccinini  
“I can't speak for others, but for me personally, gender makes no difference—I'm only focused on performance. “-Axel Vollmar

Incentivizing women to have the same visibility as men

“If employers want to provide support here, they should help female employees to market themselves better, strengthen their position and recognise the value of their work more clearly. In my opinion, the so-called impostor syndrome, where people believe

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themselves to be unqualified, is more pronounced in women than in men, although it is often unfounded.” -Frank Hohenleitner

“Men seem more comfortable advocating for themselves, signaling to project leads or supervisors that they should be considered for advancement. Women, on the other hand, often think meeting project expectations is sufficient and may not push for recognition in the same way. “-Marlene Knöbig

“I’ve heard more often that women say, “I don’t think I’m ready yet,” even though I know for a fact that she’s ten times better than the guy who’s convinced he’s the ultimate performer. “-Conrad Weiss

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## 8. Retention issues for Women in Leadership

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Retention issues for women in consulting due to family demands

“One is retention of women, i.e., even if you equalise gender balance at the junior level, holding on to women proves to be harder, and I think that's probably multiple factors which I'll come back to in a minute. As you rise up the ladder, women seem to attrition more than men, in consulting particularly. Consulting environments are less “family-friendly”.” – Tim Roberts

Struggles to retain women employees post-investment in their development

“There should be project controlling afterward to assess: Were the initiatives worthwhile? Was the money well spent? What happened to the participants? For example, I attended many leadership training programs. At C Consultancy, I participated in a high-potential program for future female partners. It was an expensive program, and participants came from all over. But even with such investments, we knew that 20% of participants would leave the company afterward. I left too, eventually. This raises a question: Companies invest money, but if they don’t create structures that allow people to truly progress, what’s the point? That’s the underlying issue “-Sevilay Huesman-Koecke

Reduced but not eliminated challenges for working mothers.

“The disadvantage, I mean, I put it in her shoes, that her problems or her constraints for having a child, maybe would be 10 years ago, would have been 100. And now they are 10. But it's not zero.” - Fabio Piccinin

Challenges of managing predictable absences, such as maternity leave, during long-term projects

“If we rely on this girl that is now pregnant, if we have an engagement that lasts probably December, she will leave for pregnancy. So, if we sell now a project that is a one-year project and the client wants to rely on a one-year team, of course, you cannot prevent or manage the early leave for one guy that maybe goes to X Consultancy at a certain point. But this is something unexpected that you can’t imagine now. But for sure, you know that this girl will leave the company in December and will disappear for the next six months. For us, it is not a problem, because we know that it is business as usual to manage the onboarding of another resource and the handover. But the client

might have some resistance. So, if we work with a bank, no one today would take this kind of position. But I'm sure that for some industry, it might be that the client says, okay, but I want a team that for sure is guaranteed for the next 12 months. And then you have a problem to manage with the client. “- Fabio Piccinini  
 “But suppose that for this girl, this girl is the only one covering one client or the only covering one topic like cost transformation or ESG solution for clients. And you really need the continuation on this. At the end of the day, you need to somehow replace her when she goes away for pregnancy leave. Then when she comes back, by definition, and she's right about that, she claims about her previous position, her previous job. But you might be in the position that the new one is so good that, potentially, she wants to be confirmed in the same position. Then you can find a solution. But in any case, you might have one of the two that is not happy. Because the second one comes back to do something different. But maybe she or he would have liked to stay there. And the previous one said, “OK, this is my job. I don't want to lose my role and position.” But it's a matter of fact that she was not there for six months. And you have in any way to manage the balance sheet, the client expectation, etc.” - Fabio Piccinini

Recognition of gender underrepresentation in leadership

“Women in leadership roles within consulting, especially at the partner level, are really the exception, and in my view, it depends on the practice areas as well. “ -Michael Schmidt  
 “Still, the reality is that not many women stay in consulting long enough to reach the Partner level. They often find that the working conditions are difficult to reconcile with family life, and there isn't enough support in that regard.” - Marlene Knöbig

Perceived lack of trust or confidence in women's leadership capabilities

“If there is any push from male management, it often feels like it's just to meet a quota, rather than a genuine commitment. We don't have an entirely male management team, but it can sometimes feel that way when the focus seems to be on fulfilling a diversity target rather than promoting qualified women.” -Marlene Knöbig

Employer commitment to supportive policies

“This could also make parental leave more attractive. You could say that you not only offer the part-time option, but also work with additional incentives. For example, the bonus could be reduced only slightly or the holiday entitlement could be reduced less for part-time work. There are many ways to manage this. In my opinion, the question is simply how much you really want to do this. “ -Frank Hohenleitner

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## 9. Cultural Reform and Long-Term Solutions

Broader cultural work required to redefine expectations around gender and communication

"There's still too many environments where overconfident, loud leadership behaviours are thought of as what leadership looks like, whereas actually humility, being more softly spoken, being more able to build a consensus rather than stride into the middle of the room and say, 'Listen to me.' Those kinds of behaviours I think have been slow to be recognised." – Tim Roberts

	<p>"Women often feel like they have to adapt their behaviour at work or during projects, especially at the beginning, to avoid fitting into certain stereotypes. This drains additional energy in an already intensive environment." – Marlene Knöbig</p>
Highlights the acceptance of short-term compromises to achieve long-term gender parity	<p>"The percentage of female applicants we get is no more than 10 to 15 percent... progress in this segment is slow. However, sometimes promoting a woman over a man if they are equally qualified is fine because it's about the bigger picture and diversity's importance." – Frank Hohenleitner</p> <p>"One example is promoting part-time programs for both men and women to balance family duties and ensure retention of senior female talent, which ultimately helps in maintaining long-term diversity goals." – Tim Roberts</p>
Role of male allies as critical agents for cultural reform	<p>"Since there are generally more men than women in most consulting companies, it would be much more effective if men felt as responsible for these initiatives as women do." – Giovanna Roma</p> <p>"I would have had no problem becoming a househusband or giving up my consulting job if my wife really had a strong desire for children and a career." – Frank Hohenleitner</p>
Overemphasis on gender-focused initiatives limiting broader inclusivity efforts	<p>"Sometimes these initiatives are sensible, but in my view, some are less so. For example, when hiring criteria became 'the candidate must be female,' it felt unnecessary and created friction among employees." -Axel Vollmar</p> <p>"I think the challenge with policies is that they can't feel like they are favoring one gender over the other—it creates internal tension and resistance from male colleagues." – Fabio Piccinini</p>
Cultural shifts necessary to foster inclusivity and equity in professional settings	<p>"The real challenge is that you need to change people's mindsets over the long term... newer generations are generally more sensitive and aware, but older generations are slower to adopt this." – Giovanna Roma</p> <p>"Flexibility in terms of working hours, location, and project allocation must be combined with cultural changes to ensure these are actually implemented and respected." – Frank Hohenleitner</p>

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## 10. Organizational Policies and Initiatives

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Role of the organization in initiating and supporting cultural shifts through policies and practices	<p>"Organizations need to actively promote flexible working models and ensure they are respected across teams. This goes beyond having policies—it requires leadership commitment to uphold and normalize these practices." – Conrad Weiss</p>
Quotas or targets as mechanisms to ensure gender representation and combat unconscious bias	<p>"At X consultancy, for example, there are targets for 'female intake'... For partner promotions, care is taken to promote a woman when in doubt if two candidates are equally qualified." – Frank Hohenleitner</p> <p>"Creating female-only shortlists has worked well for us. For instance, we ensured that the aerospace and defense team had a</p>

strong female leader through targeted recruitment efforts." – Tim Roberts

Points to the role of consistent reporting in creating visibility and accountability for diversity progress  
Programs designed to boost women's confidence in leadership

"We organize quarterly reviews of diversity statistics to ensure we stay on track with our gender parity goals. It's not just about hiring but also tracking retention and promotions." – Fabio Piccinini

"Women@X Consultancy provides mentoring and coaching sessions that encourage women to step up confidently in male-dominated spaces and prove their expertise." – Frank Hohenleitner  
"we organize monthly women's roundtables where senior women share career tips and experiences to build confidence among junior staff." – Marlene Knöbig

Structured sponsorship initiatives to support women's career advancement

"We implemented a program where newly hired senior women are asked, 'Who else do you know that we should consider hiring?' This helps build a pipeline and strengthens their network." – Tim Roberts  
"Mentorship programs pair younger women with experienced colleagues, creating role models and support systems for advancement." – Tim Roberts

Intention of programs to make women ready earlier for leadership roles

"Programs like KNOW aim to prepare women for leadership roles by addressing both professional and personal barriers through coaching and network-building." – Sevilay Huesman-Koecke  
"High-potential programs focus on identifying future female leaders early and equipping them with skills and exposure needed for senior roles." – Sevilay Huesman-Koecke

Post-program evaluations to measure impact and sustainability

"There should be project controlling afterward to assess: Were the initiatives worthwhile? Was the money well spent? What happened to the participants?" – Sevilay Huesman-Koecke

Limited focus on customizing training to address specific barriers faced by women

"We need to move beyond generic training. Coaching women without addressing systemic workplace issues doesn't lead to real progress." – Sevilay Huesman-Koecke

"There's often an assumption that a single program can address all issues women face, but what we really need are tailored initiatives." – Giovanna Roma

Recognition of gender underrepresentation in leadership

"Despite many efforts, senior positions remain predominantly male, and it feels like progress is slower than it should be." – Giovanna Roma

How virtual flexibility post-COVID supports career progression	<p>"After COVID, the situation has improved a lot in terms of lifestyle, quality, etc. But still, you need to travel a lot, you need to work hard, long hours in the evening. However, working here in consulting might be more flexible than working in a bank, because banks now are asking people... if you have two days of smart working in a week, it means that for three days you have to be there." – Fabio Piccinini</p> <p>"Expanding virtual consulting options reduces the need for physical presence on-site... These flexible structures will evolve naturally as part of the broader cycle." –Michael Schmidt</p> <p>"After COVID, remote work allows consulting roles to be more flexible than in banking, where physical presence is often still required several days a week." – Fabio Piccinini</p>
Role of virtual consulting options in creating flexibility	<p>"Providing four days of remote work and only one day on-site allows leaders to manage family life alongside their career, making the consulting field more accessible."- Sevilay Huesman-Koecke</p>
Organizational shifts post-COVID creating opportunities for flexibility	<p>"The industry has changed tremendously in the last ten years, and X Company has adapted significantly. Many leaders work 80% schedules or part-time, which is a big shift from the rigid models of the past." –Axel Vollmar</p> <p>"Post-COVID, there's an increase in trust-based working hours and flexible work from anywhere policies, which are particularly appealing to new talent."- Sevilay Huesman-Koecke</p> <p>"I can only speak from my experience with my previous employer because back then, when things started to pick up—let's say about five years ago, before COVID—there was a noticeable shift. More and more women were being promoted as companies began to set quotas, saying, for example, "We want to have a certain percentage of women at every level." - Sevilay Huesman-Koecke</p>
Shifts in societal norms fostering dual-career aspirations for both genders	<p>"Some couples now take turns or decide together how to balance career and family, which was less common before. It's a slow but noticeable shift in societal expectations." – Tim Roberts</p> <p>"Dual-career families are becoming more feasible, but statistically speaking, we're still far from parity in how responsibilities are divided at home." – Tim Roberts</p>
Universal desire for flexibility in demanding roles	<p>"Flexibility is now a universal demand, not just for women. Male colleagues also value options like working from home or flexible hours, and organizations need to adapt to this shift." – Fabio Piccinini</p> <p>"The consulting field's future depends on providing a balance between demanding client work and flexibility, as this is now a priority for all genders." –Michael Schmidt</p>

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## 12. Societal Norms and Caregiving Expectations

Cultural or societal norms as a factor in the unequal distribution of caregiving tasks	<p>"If there is a child to be taken to school, by default, in our culture, unfortunately, the woman has to think about that... meaning that even if the opportunities are the same, it's the level of job, the typology of job that is not consistent with the needs." – Fabio Piccinini</p> <p>"Historically, it is often expected that the woman will leave the consulting job at some point because it might become too strenuous or require too much traveling, leaving less time for the family." – Frank Hohenleitner</p>
Shift toward a more equal sharing of family responsibilities between partners in this generation	<p>"In this generation—typically those around 30 to 35 years old, which is when you're developing toward partner or managing director—there is usually a more collaborative approach to raising children." –Michael Schmidt</p> <p>"I had a consultant here who took four months of parental leave while his wife went back to work two weeks after giving birth. He took on the primary caregiving role during those first months." – Michael Schmidt</p>
Societal expectations for women to prioritize caregiving over professional ambitions	<p>"Society often still holds traditional views about women being the primary caregivers, so initiatives that make consulting more accessible could still be more beneficial to women." –Michael Schmidt</p>
Limited parental leave policies that disproportionately affect women	<p>"The hours haven't changed, of course, but there were benefits to help cover costs for nannies and kindergartens, along with extended paid leave, allowing maternity leave to go beyond what the government offers." – Giovanna Roma</p> <p>"At X Consultancy, for example, if you work at 80 percent, you also have 80 percent holiday entitlement, salary, and working hours. This could also make parental leave more attractive... There are many ways to manage this." – Frank Hohenleitner</p>

### 13. Work-Life Balance and Structural Barriers

Career sustainability linked to caregiving roles	<p>"In consulting firms that have done better at retaining senior women, they've made part-time programs more effective and promoted these programs for both men and women, including for those with caregiving responsibilities." – Tim Roberts</p> <p>"At x Consultancy, for example, there is Tibor von Meroy, who works 80 percent because of his daughter and always has Thursdays off. He lives the concept to the full and is not available on these days." – Frank Hohenleitner</p>
Family responsibilities as a barrier to retaining women	<p>"Statistically speaking, more women are likely to take a career break when they have kids. This makes it harder to retain women who want to start a family or have a young family." – Tim Roberts</p> <p>"If a female colleague finds it difficult to balance work and family obligations, she might leave for a more balanced role, even accepting a lower salary." – Fabio Piccinini</p>

Internalized guilt among women balancing family and leadership roles	<p>"I often hear from women, especially those who have or want children, that family is the main reason their careers don't progress. However, I've met many women in leadership roles who told me that their careers succeeded, but they had to do things like A, B, and C to make it work." – Sevilay Huesman-Koecke</p> <p>"Women often take extended parental leave thinking it's the best choice for the child, but later realize they've missed career rounds or risk financial insecurity." – Sevilay Huesman-Koecke</p>
Remote work as a tool for work-life integration	<p>"Expanding virtual consulting options reduces the need for physical presence on-site, offering greater flexibility for employees to integrate family life." – Michael Schmidt</p> <p>"After COVID, remote work allows consulting roles to be more flexible than in banking, where physical presence is often still required several days a week." – Fabio Piccinini</p>
Flexible work arrangements often relegated to women, reinforcing stereotypes	<p>"We tend to be more flexible with women because society expects women to take on family responsibilities, but this creates implicit judgments about their career dedication." – Fabio Piccinini</p> <p>"Flexible work arrangements are often seen as something for women, which unintentionally reinforces stereotypes about gender roles in the workplace." – Tim Roberts</p>
Limited parental leave policies that disproportionately affect women	<p>"In Europe, consulting firms are improving maternity and parental leave policies, but the burden still often falls on women." – Giovanna Roma</p> <p>"Extended parental leave policies are necessary to support both genders equally, but women are still more likely to take these leaves, impacting their career trajectory." – Sevilay Huesman-Koecke</p>
Insufficient childcare support (e.g., on-site childcare or subsidies)	<p>"We're exploring on-site childcare and subsidies for working parents, but implementation is still slow." – Sevilay Huesman-Koecke</p> <p>"Maternity leave benefits now cover costs for nannies and kindergartens, but these policies still require further development to support both men and women equally." – Giovanna Roma</p>
Structural limitations in consulting for family life	<p>"In consulting, it's difficult if both partners are consultants and have a child, as the demanding nature of the job often requires one to step back." – Frank Hohenleitner</p> <p>"Some types of consulting make it very difficult to take a career break or work part-time, which hinders family life compatibility." – Tim Roberts</p>
Responsibility of the organization to help employees manage their career and personal life effectively	<p>"Flexibility, including part-time models and remote work, must be supported by leadership to help employees balance career and family responsibilities effectively." – Frank Hohenleitner</p> <p>"Organizations need to establish frameworks that encourage men and women equally to balance work and caregiving responsibilities, setting clear paths for returning to work." – Michael Schmidt</p>

Recognition of the role of proactive behavior in career success

"Women who want to advance need to take an active role in shaping their careers, investing in childcare, and leveraging their networks effectively." – Sevilay Huesman-Koecke

"In consulting, those who succeed are often those who actively promote their visibility and take ownership of their career path." – Axel Vollmar

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