Gender, work-life balance, and career advancement in management consulting

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Introduction

In recent decades, women have made significant progress in labor market participation. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics women made up roughly 47% of the labor force in 2019. Yet, despite advancements toward gender equity in workforce participation, higher education, occupational distribution, and earnings (Padavic and Rekisn 2002), women continue to be underrepresented at the highest levels of corporate employment. Within the S&P 500 companies, women make up roughly 37% of mid-level management positions and 27% of senior management positions (Catalyst 2019). Roles with the highest earnings potential and status show the starkest disparity, with women occupying 21% of corporate board seats and representing only 5.8% of CEOs (Catalyst 2019). As recently as 2015, there were more men named John running large companies than women (Wolfers 2015). Women's advancement to these top positions has stagnated, with trends showing little hope for significant progress in the coming years. This research suggests that although women have established their presence in the professional workforce, they continue to struggle to ascend to the top.

Why are women largely underrepresented in these top positions? A common narrative suggests high-level corporate positions require long hours, which compete with women's family commitments and ultimately hinder their career advancement. This narrative has been particularly pervasive in the legal (Sommerlad 2016; Bacik and Drew 2006), financial (Bertrand, Goldin, and Katz 2010), and client service (Kumra and Vinnicombe 2008) sectors, which often have high demands on employees' time and 24/7 work cultures. However, both men and women working in these time intensive industries report difficulties balancing their professional and personal responsibilities, but only women's promotions are assumed to be constrained by this lifestyle (Padavic, Ely, and Reid 2019).

In this paper, I take the case of management consulting firms to examine the stagnation of women's career advancement in the modern 24/7 work culture. Because management consulting imposes unique demands on employees' time, including face-to-face client interactions and Monday-Thursday travel norms, examining how these requirements influence employees' career decisions can indicate how women may be disadvantaged in their career progression. Additionally, management consulting firms typically have a standardized promotion path, from analyst to partner. Because there is a delineated path to each promotion level with clear performance targets along the way, identifying career points where women struggle to advance and understanding why men and women diverge at these points can inform potential interventions.

Existing research shows that women's professional progress in consulting begins to stagnate at the management level, with women being far less likely to hold high-level management positions than men (Tadros 2016). When steps to advancement are plainly outlined and seemingly achievable to all employees, why are women still not making it to the top? Consulting firms offer a variety of flexible work arrangements to help employees achieve improved work-life balance, mainly part-time work schedules, telework, and the opportunity to move from a client-facing to an internal-facing role (Galinsky et al. 2017; Padavic, Ely, and Reid 2019). Analyzing how men and women differ in their evaluations of these flexible work options and the career consequences for those evaluations can reveal the processes through which women diverge from the partner trajectory in client services. 3

To approach this question, I interviewed employees from top global management consulting firms to explore how men and women's beliefs about career advancement and work-life balance differ across career stages. I found that men and women diverge in how they weigh personal and professional factors in their career decisions at different stages of their lives. Particularly at the management level, women perceived family responsibilities as having – or as likely to have – a greater impact on their career progression than men.

These divergent evaluations were also linked to tangible career outcomes, with women utilizing flexible work arrangements and deviating from the partner promotion path more often than men. Women who adopted these alternative work options also continued to experience high work-life conflict, even after moving out of traditional consulting roles in an effort to find more balance.

I examine the implications for these diverging beliefs and career outcomes on the perpetuation of the gender gap in high-level corporate positions. I argue that the work-life balance narrative in management consulting is disproportionately detrimental to women, both professionally and personally. Not only are women hindered in their career advancement by choosing flexible work alternatives, but also the work-life balance they are promised is not delivered. In my study, women who used the work flexibility programs ended up taking on additional responsibilities at home and continued to find a livable work-life balance elusive. My study expands on existing research to reveal how men and women in the field of consulting evaluate work-life balance across different stages in their careers and the professional and personal consequences of those evaluations. This line of research is important for understanding when and why women's careers do and do not advance and to inform potential interventions for closing the gender gap in high-level positions.

Background And Literature Review

The phenomenon known as the "glass ceiling" was first presented in the 1980s as a symbol for the invisible barriers keeping women from advancing up the corporate ladder. The glass ceiling effect has since been widely studied across countries and industries; however, recent analyses have redefined the glass ceiling to better encompass the breadth of the issue. Eagly and Carli (2007) have suggested the glass ceiling metaphor is outdated and a "labyrinth" may more appropriately describe women's paths to leadership considering the "indirect, complex, and often discontinuous" nature of women's professional journeys. Given the intricacies of women's career advancement, it has been historically difficult to combat the glass ceiling effect. Despite companies instituting a variety of policies and programs in efforts to promote women to the top corporate positions, women remain largely excluded from these leadership roles.

A common attempt to encourage more women to remain in the workforce and ascend the corporate ladder is by protecting working mothers through the promotion of work-life balance and flexible work schedules. Many companies adopted these programs as a way to support working parents; however, recent research has shown how these policies are potentially harmful to women's advancement, as they can reproduce gendered stereotypes about the differences between men and women at work and what it means to be the ideal worker (Lewis and Humbert 2010; Hoobler, Wayne, and Lemmon 2009). Padavic, Ely, and Reid (2019) illustrates how the "hegemonic narrative" about women (but not men) struggling to balance work and personal life responsibilities keeps women from being promoted in a professional service firm where the job requires particularly long hours. The authors argue this work-life narrative is sustained at the cultural and organizational levels where those in power use it as a social defense to maintain their control. These findings indicate how workplace flexibility and work-life balance programs 5

do not solve the issue of women's stalled progress but rather perpetuate an acceptance that women cannot handle the responsibilities the leadership roles demand. Padavic, Ely, and Reid (2019) point to the 24/7 culture of work as the main issue facing gender equality in the workforce, whereby work demands disproportionately disadvantage women, as men are rewarded for choosing work responsibilities over home and women are judged for taking more time away from work to focus on home life. While this research points to the influence organizational narratives have on hindering women's progress up the corporate ladder, it does not expand on the mechanisms through which that narrative differentially impacts men and women's assessment of their careers and effectively reproduce gender inequality at the top. Further research is needed to explore how men and women weigh personal and professional factors in their career decisions at different stages of their lives and the resulting outcomes of these considerations.

In addition to the implications of organizational narratives supporting the advancement of men, previous research shows how the promotional path in professional services firms, in particular, is saturated with gendered ideology. Kumra and Vinnicombe (2008) assessed gender differences in consultants' perceptions about the promotion to partner process of their firm. They determined that the self-managed structure of the firm's career development and a masculine model for success disadvantage women's career progression.

These findings support both an organizational and societal effect keeping women from advancing to partner, the highest possible level in a management consulting firm. From an organizational perspective, self-promotion was found to differentially reward men moving up to partner, while at the societal level, women are socialized to be more collaboratively, rather than competitively focused. While this study addressed men and women's perceptions of the partner promotion path in a professional services firm, it lacks an individualized understanding of how men and women process their own career choices when deciding whether or not to stay on the path to partnership. Building on these findings, this study aims to understand why men and women diverge at different points in their careers and make decisions which ultimately support or hinder their access to the partner level. Expanding beyond employees' perceptions of the partner promotion path will provide more insight into men and women's critical considerations when determining whether to pursue a position at the highest levels of their firms.

Management consulting offers a unique environment for investigating these issues of gender inequality and the glass ceiling. Beyond the high number of hours seen in several client services professions, expectations for in-person presence, stemming from the perceived benefits of facetime with clients, leads to high demands on employees' time and commensurate high compensation (Goldin 2014). However, given women's preferences for careers with increased work-life balance (Barbulescu and Bidwell 2013), it is important to assess whether women are opting out of consulting careers in favor of a more balanced lifestyle. Alternative performance paths are available to consultants, such as moving to an internal position, shifting to part-time work, or choosing a flexible work schedule, indicating the consulting industry offers many ways for women to divert from the traditional partner path. Comparatively, women working in law firms, a similar professional situation to consulting in terms of hours, have been found to leave the labor force entirely when presented with such occupational pressures, particularly when their partners are financially secure and they have children, as children require more time and attention from a parent (Goldin 2014). Because consulting promotes flexible work options, unlike other industries, it is critical to examine the professional consequences for women utilizing these alternatives. revealing how women are being Given the intense nature of consulting and the significant demands of the job in terms of hours and travel requirements, investigating how men and women make career decisions in this industry can provide insight into why women are unable to reach the highest levels at top corporations.

Finally, women continue to take on the majority of responsibilities at home, which taxes their time and negatively impacts their career progression. Women are typically responsible for a greater portion of the housework and childcare, which leads working women to take on what has been termed the "second shift" (Hochschild and Machung 2012) at home to accomplish all of their duties. Additionally, in dual-earner households, men in senior corporate positions delegate family responsibilities to women, but the majority of women in senior corporate positions do not (Drew and Murtagh 2005), allowing men to continue to outpace women in their career success (Schneer and Reitman 2002). Although many organizations have attempted to alleviate the pressures of competing professional and personal responsibilities by implementing flexible work policies and work-life balance programs, the modern 24/7 work culture often imposes a "time bind" (Hochschild 1997), making it difficult for employees to realize the intended benefits of these initiatives. Importantly, previous research shows women continue to experience significant time constraints even when they utilize flexible work arrangements, such as part-time schedules (Warren 2004) and telework (Hilbrecht et al. 2008). The widespread adoption of flexible work disadvantages women, as home and family responsibilities are not shared equally, and women's careers suffer.

From management to the executive suite, women struggle to be promoted to the most senior positions in organizations. While previous studies have acknowledged the complex nature of this issue and offered organizational and societal explanations for its persistence in a variety of industries, it is important to more closely examine how men and women diverge in their decision-making processes. Assessing consultants' perceptions of their career decisions at various stages throughout their professional tenure will indicate where men and women begin to diverge on the traditional performance path. This study examines the career choices available to women within consulting and illuminates a path not often addressed when discussing women's participation in the labor market: transitioning to an internal position within a company. As employees are confronted with balancing competing priorities between work and personal responsibilities, the choice to move to an internal position is yet another form of a flexible work arrangement preventing women from reaching higher-level roles. The considerations underlying these different career decisions and the implications of these choices are discussed.

Data And Research Design

This study draws from semi-structured interview responses with 21 employees from four of the top1 management consulting firms in the United States. Sampling for this study followed best practices for interview-based research, including identifying criteria for inclusion and exclusion of participation, as well as having a clear sampling strategy and sample sourcing (Robinson 2014). Criteria for participation included being currently employed by a management consulting firm. At the time of the interviews, all participants had opted to stay employed with their companies despite any concerns they identified during the interviews. Because all participants were currently employed by a management consulting firm, the results are specific to the experiences and preferences of those who remained in consulting, rather than choosing to permanently leave the firm at some point in their careers. The employees interviewed for this study represent a range of diversity across key dimensions of age, gender, job tenure,

1 From market research analyses and peer evaluations, these firms are widely regarded as the industry leaders, consistently ranking the highest in terms of revenue and prestige. relationship status, and parental status. The demographic characteristics of the sample are summarized in Appendix 1. Given the varying job titles across organizations, I standardized participants into three categories – entry-level, mid-level, and senior-level – in order to better compare participants across career tenure. Examples of each of the positions in these categories is outlined below:

1. Entry-level: analysts, consultants, associate consultants
2. Mid-level: managers, engagement managers, senior associates, senior consultants
3. Senior-level: senior managers, partners, chief administrators, directors

Data Collection

Given the target sample of management consultants, email and web-based mechanisms increased the likelihood of response, due to consultants' access to email and potentially restrictive schedule constraints. I used LinkedIn, company websites, and snowball sampling to access a large pool of potential participants. I targeted employees at the top management consulting firms because these elite global firms have reputations for 24/7 work cultures and publicly highlight their employee work-life balance programs. I also sought a distribution of employees at various personal and professional stages and used indicators such as professional titles, tenures in role, and academic graduation years to build a more diverse sample with a broader range of experiences.

Due to the inductive, qualitative nature of the research question, conducting interviews was the appropriate methodology to understand participants' perspectives of their own career advancement, as well as how and why they have that particular perspective (Cassell and Symon 2004). Additionally, interviewing consultants who were at various points in their careers strengthened this study's explanatory power by revealing insights into the variety of paths available to employees throughout their career progression, as well as both professional and personal factors these consultants considered at pivotal points in their careers. However, this study design also has limitations in drawing from a sample of consultants at different levels in their careers, rather than utilizing a longitudinal sample to assess how career decisions evolved over time. A longitudinal sample would provide more compelling evidence for and argument of how career development decisions change over time.

When possible, I completed interviews in-person (2 total) to produce more direct communication with participants, followed by a preference for face-to-face video conference calls (1 total) and then phone calls (18 total). Interviews began with a brief description of the study, and interviewees were assured all information would remain confidential. Conversations lasted between 30 minutes and one and a half hours, depending on interviewee availability. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

To begin analyzing the data, I first reviewed the transcripts to gain a better understanding of the participants' career aspirations and rationale for major career decisions. Due to my own personal background as a consultant for three years, it was important for me to ground my understanding of the data in the

participants' experiences and reflections, rather than be driven by my existing perceptions as a young professional from the industry. This initial assessment also revealed potential concepts and themes specific to career progression in consulting. Similar to the methods used in Kumra and Vinnicombe (2008), I imported the transcripts into a qualitative coding software, MAXQDA, and began labeling the content using the themes already identified to build hierarchical categories for analysis. Following this phase of coding, I identified similarities and differences of participant experiences across job and life stages, as well as between men and women. In analyzing how men and women's experiences differed, content coding the interviews allowed for a deeper comparison of how thought processes and perceived social pressures around job decisions varied across gender (Boeije 2002). Utilizing MAXQDA's analysis of documents across variables, I compared documents on dimensions such as age, gender, and parental status to cultivate important findings about the mechanisms driving divergences in career decisions for men and women. This methodology allowed for an in-depth analysis of a diverse set of pertinent topics, including job expectations, how employees were (un)able to balance work and personal life, key considerations for career decisions, and the personal and professional impact of those career decisions. Furthermore, examining transcripts by overlaying comments and analyses directly onto the original content ensured interviewees' perspectives were carefully represented.

Analysis

Examining how men and women in the consulting industry assessed the interaction between their work and personal priorities revealed differences across career levels and gender. Findings indicate men and women weigh career decisions differently, particularly at the management level. Responses provide insight into why women may opt out of more lucrative positions in consulting firms while men continue to progress toward these higher-status, higher-earning roles. Management consulting often includes rigorous travel and intense work hours, with some respondents traveling nearly every week out of the year and working over 70 hours per week on projects. Respondents tended to portray the job's expectations as demanding and unpredictable, with consulting requiring a dependence on client needs and typically quick turnarounds for deliverables. Interviewees described difficult choices in balancing work and personal responsibilities as a result of this strenuous consulting culture. 12

First, I address how men and women evaluate priorities differently across life stage and job tenure. Next, I consider how women explain work-life conflict in times of career transition and the methods women use to manage this perceived conflict. Finally, I analyze how these different experiences for men and women play a role in shaping diverging career paths and the professional, personal, and financial consequences associated with these decisions.

A. Gendered Differences In Perceptions Of Career Choices

Entry-Level Career Assessment

Early on in their consulting careers, men and women tend to perceive their career paths similarly, as they seek to gain experience and learn from the variety of opportunities open to them in the field. Those participants who I categorized as entry-level tend to be in their 20s and did not yet have any specific family responsibilities, including spouses or children. When asked about their own plans for career progression within their respective firms, men and women both cited opportunities for career development and advancement as reasons to stay, while women were only slightly more likely to articulate concerns about the demands of hours and travel impacting their ambitions for having a family in the future. Reece, a young man who has been in consulting for two years, discussed how his firm's ability to sponsor him going back to school and then returning to the firm to work for another few years appealed to him, although he did not want to stay long-term to be a manager:

I can see myself going to business school or law school…and coming back [to consulting] for a couple of years... I think beyond that, especially if my company wants me to become [manager], I do not want to do that because I still have some work-life balance. As [manager] at [my company] you have no work-life balance. That's single-handedly the hardest job, at least at our company it is. 13

While work-life balance seems to play a role in Reece's decision to stay in consulting, he emphasized such balance as a lifestyle decision rather than a necessity for a future family. Although he does not have children or specific family responsibilities at this time, he did not mention how having a family in the future may influence his career decisions. His main motivators for staying or leaving the consulting field seemed to be learning and development opportunities.

Women were also likely to state work-life balance and the demands of long hours and travel as reasons why their careers may not be sustainable. Tina, who has only been working in consulting for a few months since graduating from her MBA program, expressed concerns about how long hours and travel expectations may impact her job satisfaction:

I think that as long as there's a balance, it can be manageable. But if all my [projects] were like I have to work till 10:00 PM, 11:00 PM, 12:00 AM every day, I don't think I could manage it in the long-term. [It's] very important [for me to be home for dinner with my fiancé]. Obviously at some point, I'm going to [need to travel for work]. It's going to be harder to manage the work-life balance because I'm going to be away for the whole week, but most projects will last four or five months. I don't think it's that bad because you know it's temporary.

While Tina acknowledged the difficulties of consulting, she was confident the lifestyle would be sustainable because each project is "temporary." This notion that any work-life conflicts are project-specific and, therefore, transient did not carry through for participants in higher positions, as women in the mid- and senior-level positions often found consulting inherently clashed with family life. Denice specifically stated concerns about how family obligations may influence her future career decisions. Particularly, when considering the manager level, a position which 14

typically takes at least 6 years to reach, Denice expressed apprehensions about balancing work and family life. Although Denice is new to consulting, with only one year of experience, she worried about the impact having children will likely have on her career progression:

I think my consulting timeline is go to business school…and then I'd like to stay until manager, be a manager for about a year and then probably leave at that point. I love this job. I would do it forever if it was more of a normal job in terms of hours, but it never will be. Partners still don't have complete control over their schedules and are working 60 hours a week, and long-term that's…not something I'd want to be. I don't want to work until 10:00 PM ever when I have kids. I don't want that to be part of my path.

Denice's concerns illustrate how the perceived discrepancy between working and having a family has already impacted how she believes her career will advance. By invoking the incompatibilities of her work with childcare, she expressed disbelief about being able to reach the highest levels at her firm.

While work-life balance was a consideration for all of the people I interviewed in junior positions, Denice explicitly stated her desire to be available to her future children as a reason her job would not be sustainable long-term. While these junior employees acknowledged their jobs may not be sustainable, mid- and senior-level employees express significantly more distress over the imbalance of their personal and professional lives, suggesting entry-level employees may not fully comprehend the trade-offs they will likely encounter later in their careers. As the mid-level employees in this study will show, these young consultants likely underestimated how professional and personal obligations come into conflict with one another later in life.

Mid-Level Career Assessment 15

Although men and women tend to progress along a standardized path in the beginning years of their consulting careers, at a certain point, usually around the management level, the women and men in the study clearly begin to diverge in how they weigh the advantages and disadvantages of pursuing career advancement. Evidence emerged indicating how men and women differed in assessing the impact family had on their career aspirations. For example, women often expressed how children would interfere with their abilities to fulfill their professional responsibilities at the management level, as the role typically requires demanding hours and consistent weekly travel.

Niki, a consultant about to be promoted to manager and who recently got married the year prior to the interview expressed concerns about her work commitments clashing with her changing lifestyle:

Once we start having kids, it's going to be challenging to do the travel lifestyle, but I feel like I have a couple of years before that happens. I think that's where the real decision will come is how will the firm respond to a greater need for travel flexibility? And is it something that I'm willing to do with kids? I think that's where my real decision will come.

As Niki weighed the idea of having children with the demands of her next role, she explained how consulting may inherently conflict with the future personal life she envisions having. Particularly, the demands of travel, which is a standard expectation in the consulting industry, raised concerns about how she will be able to effectively balance having children and being away from home during the week.

While men stated an understanding of balancing work and home responsibilities, they were less concerned about their ability to balance both. Hewie, who worked at multiple consulting firms over the six years since he graduated from college, acknowledged family as a factor in career decision-making but believed the lifestyle will be more flexible at the management level:

As you can continue to rise up the ranks, you still have responsibilities, but I think you have more discretion and control over when you put in the hours, which helps as you're managing a family and things like that. My mentality was that I wanted to stay maybe…four to five years and then decide whether a long-term career in consulting is right for me, but I don't imagine myself leaving anytime particularly soon…Whatever family commitments I have [later], whether I see those being compatible with professionally what I know I'd have to do to continue to rise…But if I think that I'm still enjoying the work in consulting…then I think I'll stay consulting.

Hewie's confidence in "managing a family" and managing work indicates his confidence that being promoted will actually bring about increased freedom in his life, whereas the women tended to see the promotion as more restrictive on their time and mental resources. Some men acknowledged family life may require a reevaluation of their careers but believed that factor alone would not dictate their career decisions, while women's career decisions seemed to be largely based on family needs. Kathy, who moved to an internal company position after becoming a manager, expressed how her family was the main motivation for stepping back from her client-facing role:

Starting a family, and [being] a consultant who traveled, [with] an investment banker husband, who traveled, and a baby was very hard…I thought I was going to leave consulting, which I've been back and forth a few times, but finding a [internal] role that really energized me and felt more manageable to me was a real win-win for me. While the women felt a family had been or would be disruptive to their career progression, the men were more confident they would be able to maintain their career aspirations, even with a family. These differing beliefs emerged at the management level in these consultants' careers and remained evident at the highest levels of management consulting.

Senior-Level Career Assessment

Participants in senior-level positions talked the most explicitly about the work-life trade-offs and sacrifices they experienced during their career progression. Those in these senior-level positions were in their early-to-late 40s, and most had established families. Yara, a senior-level manager, contemplated her path to a potential partnership – the highest level possible for the traditional performance track at her firm – but "pulled back" on her hours and travel commitments to focus on having children, which meant forgoing a promotion:

Essentially, I came to the realization that I want to have kids, and I want it badly enough that I'd be willing to do it on my own. Given my age, I kind of had to come to terms with the fact that it's got to be soon. I'm relatively close to making partner, but not close enough. I'm not going to make it this year. If I had not pulled back about six to eight months ago, I would have gone up next year and maybe made it or maybe been pushed a year. This is the time when I really need to be thinking about the kid thing…I'm very driven. I want to be very successful in my career. I also know that if I was 80 years old and I didn't have a family and I made partner I would regret it. I am trying to make sure that I can have a family even though it may kind of slow down my path to partner, or I have to detour for it.

Even though Yara could be promoted to the most senior position available to her in a couple more years, she was not willing to give up her personal ambition of starting a family. As women advanced to more senior positions, they came to the realization that progressing in either their professional or personal aspirations would require a sacrifice from one or the other.

By choosing to prioritize having a family and being available for their children, women often took a professional step back, whether that meant reducing the number of hours they work or cutting back on travel to spend more time at home. Natalie, who has 13 years of consulting experience chose to move to an internal position at her company to be available for her children and have increased flexibility in her schedule while her husband was away on active duty in the military:

I was on the client-facing track for nine years, and basically, right before what would have been partner promotion, my husband is active duty military…so I couldn't be on the road to where my clients were and be moving around to the different towns that we had to move with the military and be there for my kids. When my husband is gone, I needed to be there for my kids, so I took a role internally. In that world, I actually work from home. The benefit of being at home is I'm less tied to exactly when I'm "in the office" so if it's important to my kids that I pick them up from school that day, I'll go do that, or I'll go volunteer in their classroom, and nobody's the wiser. I don't have to tell anybody. Because I'm at home, I just kind of get my job done, and it might mean I work longer hours at night, but I have the ability to go in and out during the day.

While Natalie highlighted the importance of being home for her children, the inconsistencies of working in the consulting industry and being a parent emerged. Several women expressed this increased flexibility and control over working hours as a significant contributor to their career decisions once they started having children. 1

However, while men in the study expressed increased flexibility in their work as a bonus of being promoted, they did not cut back on travel or change the amount they worked to accommodate evolving family needs in the way women did. Brant, a partner with over 20 years of consulting experience and two children, claimed a much more personal approach to his most recent career transition. Rather than prioritizing family, he expressed the change as a development opportunity with the increased flexibility allowing him to spend time doing what he most enjoys:

It was time. I was asked if I wanted to do it. It wasn't that at some point I'd like to [have this role]. It wasn't this intrinsic attraction to doing [this role]. If my mentor had asked me to do training, I'd be the head of training. If he'd asked me to do something else, I'd probably be the head of that. It was just a neat role that I figured would be an interesting transition for a couple years, and if I didn't like it, then it was probably time to leave anyway. Here we are six years later. So far, so good…For the next couple of years, there's a lot of work to get done here. I have a lot left to do here, so I don't necessarily worry too much about my 5-10-year "what do I want to be doing professionally?" because it's more about the lifestyle that you lead. I'm not super impressed by having a bigger title or something like that. To me, that's not that important. It's about doing good work for a good organization and helping people develop themselves while [being] able to invest the time in things that I like doing with my wife, with my sons, with my hobbies, with my church, and as long as I can do all of those things [I] will keep going.

Although Brant expressed a desire to live the right "lifestyle" and spend time with his wife and children, he does not highlight active involvement with his children's lives, nor the hours required for childcare that women at his level articulated. The increased flexibility he experiences allows him to continue to work, whereas the women sought flexibility to step back and dedicate more time to their families.

For women at the highest level in their firms, flexibility involves balancing time at home and at work. Another partner, Karolina, has four children and discussed prioritizing time with her family by instituting a flexible work schedule whenever possible:

I'm doing my best to get more local projects that would allow me to travel less and be more home. It varies - sometimes I'm successful, sometimes I'm not - but I think proactive planning and flexibility that my firm gives to me, allow me to balance it quite well. I have the choice to decline some of the projects or give them to my colleagues to run.

Leveraging the flexibility her firm affords her, Karolina balanced the demands of her role while being actively involved with her family. Moving into more senior-level roles, women expressed there was maneuvering required to meet the requirements of both their professional and personal lives while men did not emphasize personal factors as frequently. Men continued to emphasize how their career decisions were driven by developmental opportunities and interests. These differences highlight how the decision-making process throughout consultants' career trajectories vary by gender.

B. Diverging Career Outcomes

The men and women in this study presented different priorities and concerns when analyzing their career advancement potential. The beliefs and values they expressed also had implications for the choices they subsequently made in their career paths. While none of the men in the study noted taking advantage of alternative work arrangements or family leave policies, several women chose to take maternity leave, switch to a part-time work schedule, or move to an internal position to better balance their work and home responsibilities. These decisions, even when temporary, had significant consequences for the women's ultimate career advancement.

The Impact of Family Leave

One significant factor impacting career trajectories for the women in this study was family leave. Several women took advantage of the family leave policies, typically offered by top consulting firms, but they found the time away from work often impacted their future career advancement. Karolina, a partner, described the impact maternity leave had on her career progression compared to other colleagues who did not interrupt their careers to take maternity leave:

It definitely slows it down, and that is by choice. The firm offers an opportunity to basically take back the time and say my utility will be lower because I take extra time for my maternity leave, and if you are not working for half a year, that's only fair. There are colleagues who I know decided not to take advantage of that, and they decided to continue pushing for [partner], and that probably didn't slow down them. Again, that's the choice.

Taking time away from work to start or grow a family, women tend to be the ones who take advantage of this leave, thus stalling their career progression in a way that can have exponential impacts. Lori explained how although she was once ahead of her husband in her career track, taking multiple maternity leaves left her in a disadvantaged position that was nearly impossible to make up as the demands of childcare meant she would be the parent to step back professionally:

We were kind of getting promoted at the same timeframe, but once I started taking maternity leave, his promotion schedule continued to move at the same rate, and my work [didn't] because I was out of the market for six months at a time… It was very much a give and take. A tough decision to leave, but at the end of the day, we knew that, for the way that we wanted to parent our kids, we wanted to have one parent who was more present. It's ideal to have two parents present, but we knew it was less of a challenge to have one.

While Lori was originally at a higher level than her husband, the multiple maternity leaves she took impeded her promotion timeline and, ultimately, drove her to opt out of the traditional partner performance track. Maternity leave can interrupt career trajectories for women, which typically delays promotions and can lead women to opt out of the career paths they had previously been following.

Part-Time and Flexible Work Schedules

With competing interests at work and home, several women reported cutting back on hours and taking on a part-time schedule to have increased flexibility.

Even a woman at the partner level, Katrina, expressed shifting to what she deemed a "part-time" schedule at 60% to 80% as a way to establish a balance between work and home life:

I do have four children, and I do want to spend more time with them. When my workload allows, I can reach the part-time, so I only work 60% or 80%. My company allows doing that a bit flexibly. I just need to let Accounting know at the beginning of the month, and I plan my time, my days, my work, according to that. For example, if I work 60%, I only work three days a week, and if one week, I work for four days because the client required that, I can work only two days the next week. It's up to me how I balance it out, or I can, instead of the whole day, I can take two optional, but it requires some planning and discipline. 23

While Katrina strives for flexible work hours whenever possible, her motivation to adapt her schedule is mainly to spend more time with her family. Kathy, who has 12 years of consulting experience and four children, discussed how her part-time schedule provides her with flexibility and allows her to be more available for her family:

I have four kids, and I love being able to control my week, and say this is a week I'm going to work 50 or 60 hours a week - my husband's in town, everything's held down there - but I love getting to go to my kids' sports games and getting to go to their presentations and performances at school and the parent-teacher conferences are not stressful because I can just work my work schedule around it. It is ideal. Someone on my team was just asking me: Are you ever going to go full-time? And I said, I don't think I ever will. I said, even if I don't stay at 60%, I don't think I'd go more than 80% because I just love this flexibility… I love it. I mean, it comes at a pay cost, but it totally works for me.

By limiting the number of hours dedicated to work, Kathy was able to take part in her children's daily activities, even at the expense of her potential earnings. Leveraging part-time and flexible work schedules are typical ways women managed the conflict between their consulting careers and family needs. While these flexible work schedules have become a popular solution for working mothers, choosing to utilize these programs in the consulting industry can have a detrimental effect on the promotion timeline and earnings potential for women.

Moving to an Internal Role

As women find barriers to progressing in the traditional, client-facing role, many also opt out of the traditional performance path which would ultimately lead them to the partner level. Several women in the study chose to move to an internal, more predictable role to achieve greater work-life balance and be actively involved with their families. Ivette made the decision to move to an internal role to alleviate the time constraints of her client-facing role and spend time with her children:

I think a lot of it was around becoming a manager…During my consultant years, I was working very hard, but I always had this carrot being dangled in front of me of do this well, you're going to be a manager. I became a manager, and once you're in that role, you have a lot more visibility into what it's like to be a partner, and I just looked at their lives and thought I don't want what they have. They are working just as hard as me, if not more. They're traveling just as much as me, if not more. I mean they're making more money, but I make enough money. I want more of other things than just money. It was just this realization that the next stage in the client-facing career, I could see was not something that I was going to enjoy because it wasn't going to improve on aspects of my life that were important for me.

While Ivette recognized the financial implications of moving to an internal position, her desire to be present for her children outweighed these incentives. The transition away from the traditional client-facing trajectory to an internal position offers increased flexibility and predictability often sought by mothers who are the primary caretakers of their children. Natalie, who chose to take an internal role after deciding the partner track did not fit with her family's needs, described how consulting causes conflicts for women:

I do think there are some aspects of the consulting job that fundamentally make it really hard for women. The travel component is a huge part of it. The unpredictability… that's hard to say I didn't know it in advance, but now all of a sudden, I'm having to work 14 hours today, and I wasn't expecting I was going to.

Therefore, it's hard to know exactly when you would leave the office, leave the client site. Kind of the face time expectations of the client side. I think that's harder for women than men. I don't know that all men understand or appreciate that.

Seeing how women may have a more difficult decision than men in how to balance career progression with family needs, Natalie chose to move to an internal position, allowing her the increased flexibility she desired. The demands of consulting, from travel to unpredictable hours, often leads women to take internal positions to better balance their responsibilities.

Consequences of Leaving the Traditional Performance Track

Importantly, deciding to divert from the traditional consulting performance path has significant financial implications. Being removed from this trajectory greatly inhibits women's future earnings, as partners have significantly greater earnings opportunities. The standard trajectory allows consultants, at the highest partner level, to sell work for their firm and earn income commensurate with their sales. Lori, one of the women who opted for an internal role, discussed how her compensation model differs from those in the traditional path:

In part because we work for a firm, where building firm revenue is driven by... the people are selling and producing revenue. We're not in the market selling in my department. Though we are supporting those teams and working with those teams directly, so our compensation models are different because we, as practitioners, will not travel four days a week to go to the client site. We explicitly talk about what that means in terms of work-life balance, in that when you take a role like this, the idea is that you would not be expected to bill hours up to 100% billing. By taking advantage of the flexible hours of working in an internal role, Lori acknowledged the financial implications of not being in a client-facing, revenue-building position. Furthermore, being part of a dual-earner household, Lori pointed to her partner's higher earning potential as justification to limit her own career progression. Lori articulated the trade-offs between the success of her husband's own consulting career and continuing to attempt to advance in her own career:

[My husband] had been elected partner…so it didn't really make sense for him to then take a step back and for us to take a financial loss in our shares for me to then push for partner when I was still a couple years away. That was the discussion that we had - from a financial perspective right now this doesn't make sense. Because Lori took multiple maternity leaves during her career, her husband's earnings continued to grow while her progression stalled, making it financially responsible for her to step back from striving for a partnership in her firm to be the primary caregiver for their three children.

In addition to the financial ramifications, those who choose alternative career paths often lose the professional structure provided by standard performance tracks. The traditional client-facing performance path tends to have a set structure, with a range of years spent in each role and clear metrics for success, such as skills development and sales targets, leading to promotion. Moving to an internal position removes potentially motivating features of the job, such as incentives for professional growth, since there are no longer delineated job levels or explicit performance metrics. Instead, women talk about creating their own goals for professional success. Lori explained how she measures her professional success:

To be honest, most of my friends who I went to business school with are now partners, so I'm not looking at them because that's not what I want. Trying to find who that person is that I can look at their career and go, yeah, that's the kind of thing I want to do, I've been really lucky that the folks that I work for are super supportive of that kind of growth. I think if I didn't have that, it'd be a lot harder.

Diverging from the traditional path of a client-facing role left Lori with uncertainty about how to advance in her career but also the freedom to dictate what success will look like for her. This reframing of her identity shows her commitment to the work-life balance narrative, as she reconciled her friends being able to make partner with her decision to move to an internal position.

Beyond concerns about finances and performance clarity, leaving the client-facing side of consulting also had social consequences. Working part-time or working from home restricted women's work relationships and networks. Being separated from her colleagues, Quinn expressed feeling alienated in her role:

I think especially because the whole team is there, and I'm the only one [working remotely], there's a lot of hallway conversations after meetings, the meeting after the meeting, all of those sorts of things that happen in-person. It feels a little less formal to stop by someone's desk than to call someone to talk about something, so those are the things that make me feel a little bit more disengaged. Since they're all together, they can all sit in a meeting room together, and we use a lot of video, so I can see the room sort of, but it's still different than body language and side conversations and things that you can't have when you're the only one not there. By choosing to work remotely and prioritizing her family life, Quinn sacrificed the social relationships she would have otherwise had at work. When transitioning to an internal role or part-time schedule, many women believed the benefit to their work-life balance would make the transition worthwhile but later saw significant consequences, including financial losses, performance ambiguity, and social isolation.

C. Gendered Work-Life Narrative

Although both men and women in this study highlighted work-life balance as important for their future careers, men were able to achieve this sense of flexibility at the manager level and beyond, while some women made professional sacrifices. The women who chose alternative career paths in consulting, such as part-time work and internal roles, explained how their family responsibilities and personal desires to be available for their children had a significant impact on their decision to move away from their client-facing roles. Fathers in similar positions climbed to the partner level while also maintaining a sense of personal-professional flexibility.

Women who eventually opted for flexible work arrangements attempted several times to remain on the path to becoming a partner. One way these women managed work-life conflict was by distributing the division of household labor more equally. Even when the responsibilities at home were perceived as equal, women often took on more responsibilities in daily childcare and household management. Additionally, women spoke of carrying the "mental load" for their families, tracking and managing all household and children activities, which requires additional mental and emotional labor beyond the physically observed tasks accomplished in the home. Natalie, a senior-level employee, who transferred to an internal role, works from home and is a mother of three children, listed numerous activities making up the mental load she is responsible for even though she and her husband continue to split the observable labor equally:

What everybody says about the mental load is so real, right? So, with the kids, it's like, who has an upcoming field trip? What do we need to get ready for that field trip? There's some project coming up in two weeks that we've done that. When was the lasttime they went to the dentist? Do we need to schedule that appointment?...My husband and I kind of share the hands-on stuff, and the actual doing of work feels very shared, in terms of it's morning who's getting the kids out of bed, who's making the breakfasts…That feels very shared. The mental load of remembering all this stuff…It goes on.

Natalie described how mental load was an unseen labor impacting her day-to-day availability. Despite adopting a flexible work arrangement to achieve greater work-life balance, household labor continued to take a significant toll on her time. Rebecca, a woman with 10 years of consulting experience and mother of two children, mentioned the "hidden work" she is responsible for and how her and her husband divide the household responsibilities, yet she is largely responsible for the children:

When he's here, I'd say they're like 50-50. I take on more of the kind of stuff that surrounds...the hidden work, I guess is what a lot of articles talk about. The planning and scheduling of doctor's appointments and birthday parties, and buying presents for those birthday parties, and sending thank you notes for our kids' birthday parties, and all that those kind of kid logistics things…My husband is very good at managing anything and everything to do with outside, and our garden, and the lawn, and the services that we purchase like lawn care service and things like that. He's also good at basically executing. Rebecca illustrates how women become the default for the mental and emotional responsibilities often overlooked in the household division of labor. Several women felt excessively responsible for keeping family operations running smoothly and diverted energy away from their professional aspirations to provide their families with additional time and attention.Working in consulting often comes with additional financial benefits that can be used to counterbalance the inevitable work-life conflict of the occupation.

With these financial resources, employees have the option of outsourcing household labor, such as cleaning, cooking, and childcare. Natalie, who expressed exasperation over the demands of carrying the mental load for her household, explained how most of the housework and errands are delegated to their nanny, allowing Natalie to dedicate more time to work:

My nanny puts gas in the car. She took a bunch of stuff to Goodwill for me today. She'll go to the post office for me like any errands that I don't physically have to be the person to go do, my nanny does. And it's partially because my two older kids are in school one five days, one four days a week, and my baby's really easy. But even before I had the baby, I needed somebody full-time because you need the flexibility in these jobs…It needs to be somebody's full-time job, so that if the schedule changes, they're the one who can pick it up and it's not me. Because that is something that happens in our family too: If anything goes wrong, it was always me to make the adjustment in the work schedule…and that's when I started outsourcing all that stuff. I honestly can't go back. These resources come to be seen as essential, freeing up time, which is quickly filled again by both other work and home responsibilities, a cycle which leads to persistent work-life conflict for women.

Self-Judgement

Even when women believed they had achieved a more balanced work-life situation, they often expressed self-judgment in making the decision to push for a partner promotion or maintain a full-time work schedule. Several women internalized the social expectations of motherhood, motivating them to make career decisions more closely in line with how they felt they should allocate their time within and away from the home. Social beliefs about how mothers spend their time influenced how women felt about their ability to balance professional life and motherhood. Ivette revealed feeling "mediocre" at work and at home as she struggled to fulfill all responsibilities:

I certainly feel that, to a certain extent, both my job as an employee and my job as a mother, I am doing mediocre at both of them. The basics get done. My job is getting done. That my kids are still alive and fed and feel loved, but I could just do a lot better with either one of them. I'm not fully, as a type A personality, satisfied with my performance in either realm. This mentality of inadequacy reveals how mothers can struggle to achieve the level of performance expected of them by society and themselves. Rebecca, a manager with 10 years of consulting experience, expressed difficulties with self-judgment around her performance as both an employee and parent:

I think there's feelings of not being present enough. Not being present enough when you're home, not being present enough at work, and always just being in a rush - rushing to get the kids up, and the kids dressed, and the kids fed, and then rushing to get out the door, and getting from meeting to meeting, and to talk to my team, and to have the professional development chat, and to have lunch, so it all kind of just felt like a rush, and when you're rushing like that, you just feel like you're not fully present in any moments…I think that's probably the main [issue] is where you're not feeling like you're fully present, and therefore not feeling like you've got enough time to do both family and work well…You don't have as much time as you need in the day to do everything that you want to do in the way that you want to do it.

The increased time demands on mothers and stresses of the 24/7 work culture exacerbated Rebecca's work-life conflict. These negative self-assessments left her feeling inadequate on a personal and social level. Even women in management positions who did not have children can begin to internalize these feelings of failure, expressing difficulties with how their relationships suffer as a result of the job. Leyla, a manager who temporarily switched to an internal role with her firm to improve her work-life balance asserted how the quality of her relationships deteriorated when she was client-facing:

I think part of it was a lack of this work-life balance. A good chunk of it was I felt like all of my energy, particularly during the week, was going towards these client problems, which I was happy to do them, I enjoyed working with the clients, I enjoyed doing the actual work, but often the amount of work that we were trying to accomplish and just all the challenges and stresses that would go with it, meant that I wasn't able to really take care of myself during the week…I wasn't a very good partner to my fiancé, wasn't a good friend, wasn't a good family member…Because of the way that I internalize the demands of the job, I've just felt like I was not living the life I wanted to be living.

Leyla and other women expressed long hours and intense travel schedules were misaligned with the social expectations they internalized. These women adapted to these expectations by taking a step back at work while men continued to advance in their careers.

Conclusion

This study has shown how men and women in consulting evolve their priorities throughout their careers. Responses indicated men and women began to assess the costs and benefits of their career choices differently around the time of mid-level management. Junior professionals tend to focus on career development opportunities and general work-life balance when contemplating future professional decisions. Women in mid- and senior-level positions stress family considerations as a high priority for their future career decisions, while men did not express the same concerns. These differences in processing were associated with career outcomes, as more women chose to adopt flexible work arrangements than men.

It is also important to note the drivers and outcomes of these diverging choices. Women at the mid- and senior-level expressed both personal and social pressures, connected to family obligations and work-life balance, as motivators for adopting a more flexible work schedule. However, women who took advantage of these work-life programs continued to experience significant strains on their time due to the 24/7 nature of their work and their disproportionate share of household duties. Not only did women divert their careers in pursuit of work-life balance, but after they adopted more flexible ways of work, they continued to experience severe burdens on their time, financial losses, performance ambiguity, and social isolation at work.

There are a number of factors influencing career decisions and the corresponding impact to career development and promotion. While alternative work arrangements such as flexible hours or telework are intended to improve work-life balance, these options are not without career consequences, and women are disproportionately affected by those consequences. As organizations promote work-life balance programs as solutions for working mothers, it is important to assess the professional, personal, and financial impacts of choosing such an alternative. Exposing how men and women differ in their career decision-making processes highlights the social mechanisms hindering women's advancement and can ultimately inform potential interventions for closing the gender gap at top levels of organizations.

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