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Beyond the token status: Women in business consultancies in Germany

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Hedwig Rudolph

Beyond the Token Status: Women in Business Consultancies in Germany

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Abstract

This article documents and analyzes the extent and structure of gender-related differences in employment conditions in the business consulting sector in Germany. Using a structural and actor-oriented approach, I tested the hypothesis that the (limited) career paths of women are attributable to the interaction of structural aspects of the sector and company-specific personnel policies. Analysis of the empirical material (e.g., interviews with executives in 40 consulting firms) points to the "filter effects" of structural factors (location, company size, consulting field, hierarchy level) as well as to certain components of corporate culture (performance assessment criteria, the role of informal networks, the ideology of extensive employee availability). Consequently, the main problem for women is not getting into business consulting, but coping with the substantial social costs of a long-term career in this field.

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag dokumentiert und analysiert Ausmaß und Struktur geschlechtsbezogener Unterschiede der Beschäftigungsbedingungen in der Branche Unternehmensberatung in Deutschland. Ausgehend von struktur- und akteursorientierten Ansätzen wird die These überprüft, dass die (begrenzten) Karrierewege von Frauen dem Zusammenspiel von strukturellen Merkmalen der Branche mit unternehmensspezifischen Personalpolitiken geschuldet sind. Die Auswertung der empirischen Materialien (u.a. Interviews mit Führungskräften in 40 Beratungsunternehmen) verweist auf die „Filtereffekte“ von strukturellen Faktoren (Standort, Unternehmensgröße, Beratungsfeld, Hierarchie-Ebene), aber auch von Komponenten der Unternehmenskultur (Kriterien der Leistungsbeurteilung, Rolle informeller Netzwerke, Ideologie umfassender Verfügbarkeit). Somit erweist sich nicht der Zugang zur Branche als problematisch für Frauen, sondern die sozialen Kosten einer längerfristigen Karriere in diesem Feld.

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1 Introduction*

Business consultancies present themselves as attractive employers: they offer varied and interesting work, above-average salaries and well-developed career structures. During the last decade the consulting branch in Germany (as in most European countries) has experienced major structural changes in the context of the internal market and globalisation. The most prominent developments have been and still are: A trend towards market concentration due to mergers and acquisitions, tougher international competition and increasing transnational business. Marked shifts in context conditions are bound to be paralleled by re-organisation processes in companies. As a rule, times of change open new windows of opportunity for at least some groups of the workforce. It might be anticipated that women in Germany would react positively to these developments, given the fact that their level of education and career expectations are now similar to those of men. In addition, the proportion of women who choose a university degree in economics – the main field where business consultancies now recruit new candidates – has risen to over 40% over the last few years (BMBF 2002:168-170). Are these changes reflected in an increase in qualified female personnel in business consultancies, and, if so, do they compete on an equal footing with their male peers concerning areas of specialisation, position, career perspectives and income?

In the mid-90s, Staute put the situation of the branch in Germany in a nutshell: "Consultants are male. The female consultant is the exception" (Staute 1996:92). Data collected via a microcensus in 1997 confirms the minority status of female consultants: they make up 22% of all consultants in the former West Germany and 27% in the former East. When women represent late-comers in employment segments, they tend to do lower-status work, have inferior positions in the firm and enjoy less attractive working conditions than the majority of men (Wetterer 1995). Does this hold true for qualified women in business consulting?

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In the following essay, I will document and analyse the range and structure of gender-based social inequalities in the business consulting sector in Germany. The theoretical basis for the study combines structural and actor-oriented approaches to test the hypothesis that the employment situation of female consultants in Germany reflects the interactions between the structural characteristics of the branch and the specific logics of personnel policy at the firm level. The dynamics between the two levels tend to transform quantitative differences between male and female consultants into qualitative differences in terms of career opportunities. The main empirical and methodological tools used were interviews with representatives of professional associations, a sectoral evaluation of the microcensus data available for the years 1995 to 1997 and two empirical studies we conducted in business consultancies in Germany: a survey done in summer 2001 and 40 interviews with managers conducted in winter 2002-2003.

The paper is organized into five sections. After outlining the conceptual basis for the study, I document key features of female employment structures in the German consulting sector, with a special focus on the New States (of the former German Democratic Republic), which had special employment policies targeting women during the socialist regime. This heritage has left its mark in the New States, which have consistently higher female employment rates and a stronger representation of women in non-traditional branches and jobs (Hildebrandt 1999) than in the West. The fourth section describes consultants' perceptions of the low employment rate of women in the sector. In the fifth section, I discuss structural and cultural factors which work against equal employment and career chances for women in business consulting. In conclusion, conceptual findings are linked to the gender politics issues identified in the study.

2 Theoretical perspectives on the gendering of labour markets

The level of education and the career expectations of women have increased greatly in Germany during the last decades and, as a result, the differences between men and women in this respect have decreased. Nevertheless, most sectors of the German labour market and employment organisations are still characterised by more or less sharp structures of gender-specific segregation. Theories offering an explanation for this form of social inequality may be divided into two categories: structurally-oriented and action-oriented.

- Structural theories such as the statistical discrimination (Reskin 1994) and dual labour markets concepts (Sengenberger 1978) emphasise how formal and positional characteristics of organisations act as filtering mechanisms for

certain careers and/or areas of work and positions. Where women are concerned, this tends to mean that jobs and careers are categorised both within the organisation and between organisations according to gender (Achatz et al. 2002: 208). Thus, gender stereotyping in society has important consequences for both recruitment and career development.

The concept of gendered organisations (Acker 1990, 1998;Witz/Savage 1992) starts from the premise that the binary division of gender (male vs. female) is a constitutive element of every organisation. A gendered substructure working at a level that tends to be hidden behind the supposedly gender-neutral official structures functions according to norms and rules based on male life patterns. However, more recent studies concerning the relation between organisations and gender highlight the need for a differentiated, context-sensitive and contingent approach (Heintz/Nadai 1998, Rudolph/Theobald/Quack 2001).

- Actor-oriented theories comprise a wide range of concepts, including the human capital approach (Becker 1985), the socialisation approach (Friedel-Howe 1990) and the theory of feminine work capacity (Beck-Gernsheim 1981). These concepts have in common a tendency to ascribe the segregation of women to female characteristics or behaviour: women have too little or the wrong kind of human capital, their socialisation makes them unsuited to the demands of the labour market and/or their capacity for caring work “predestines” them to domestic tasks, thus limiting their availability for other types of work.

  A second group of action-oriented theories sees employing organisations as systems of social relations and focuses on actors, groups and interactions (cf. Achatz/Fuchs/van Stebut/Wimbauer 2002). Assignment according to gender has particular significance in categorisation processes and usually functions as the preferred basis for stereotypical evaluations. In the course of such processes and evaluations, it is usually women who end up in social categories perceived as being lower than those in which men are placed.

Professionalisation processes can be particularly relevant for the gendering of career positioning. Abbott (1988) characterises these processes as the competition for jurisdictions. A profession constitutes a group privileged by its monopoly of a “market”. The members try to protect their social status against what is seen as a devaluation arising from the entry of “inferior” social groups – for example women. If it is not possible to prevent their entry entirely, e.g. through legal measures, then they use other methods like the marginalisation of “newcomers” in jobs and positions that are less attractive in terms of tasks, pay and/or influence. This is why feminist researchers emphasise the androcentric core of professionalisation processes (Wetterer 1992, 1993, 1995; Witz 1992).

3 Female consultants, a minority in motion

This chapter describes the methodological foundation of the study and presents the main empirical results while focusing on personnel policies in business consultancies from a gender perspective. The main questions addressed are:

What characterises women who have a qualified job in the consulting sector? Does the distribution of women among the various consulting fields and/or positions point to patterns of gender-based segregation, and, if so, to what extent and which structuring forces are involved? Are segregation factors mostly located at the branch level or are they company-specific?

Four methodological approaches were used to collect empirical data to elucidate these questions:

- At the start of the empirical phase, my research team conducted focused interviews with the presidents or the managers of five German professional and business associations in the consulting sector and with one representative of the European professional association (Theobald 2001). The primary aim of these interviews was to gain some inside knowledge of the current and prospective challenges for competitive strategies and personnel policies. Moreover, these contacts to the associations facilitated our access to consultancy companies from the perspective of the branch level.
- As a second step, we analysed the 1995-1997 German microcensus data[1] with a focus on the consulting branch. The objective was to provide a reference base for the main two empirical approaches of the project: a survey and expert interviews in consultancies.
- While the microcensus is an aggregate of data from individuals (in this case: consultants) the survey was done to collect information on the firm level. Questions of special interest concerned details about business activities, competitive strategies (particularly in view of internationalisation of the market) and personnel policies. The structure of the sample had to meet three criteria (1) companies of all sizes (small, medium, big and global player), (2) companies from the old and the new Bundesländer, and – last but not least – (3) adequate representation of companies owned or managed by women. These criteria reflect the arguments that company size, location and the sex of management make a difference for employment and career chances of female consultants. 550 questionnaires were sent out in summer

1 The German microcensus is a representative annual survey based on a one percent sample; it is not a panel survey. Although a wide range of personal and work-related data were collected, the use of a branch-specific sub-sample (such as the one created for the project) limits the extent of differentiated analyses, especially in view of the small sample size.

2001 (Pannewitz 2002) mostly via electronic mail, and some via postal mail.[2] The response rate of about 20 percent, while somewhat low, is typical for social science surveys.

The aim of the last empirical step – interviews with owners or upper management in consulting companies – was to enlarge and deepen the information base accumulated through the survey. As a consequence, a similar spectrum of aspects was investigated, but more questions of the "why" type were included. A total of 40 interviews (in 39 companies) were conducted in winter 2002/3. The companies sampled were only partially drawn from the survey pool,[3] but the group sampled was structured following the same criteria. With only few exceptions, all interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and encoded.[4]

Structural patterns on the basis of microcensus data

The microcensus data for 1995-1997 presented the following picture of demographic and employment characteristics of female consultants:

- While the proportion of women fell significantly in former East Germany states (from 42% to 27%), it rose slightly in the former West (from 20% to 22%), so that East and West were closer together by the end of the period surveyed.
- If we differentiate between three age groups (20-34, 35-49 and 50 or over), the middle group was the biggest by far in 1997, both for men and women and in East and West. In the oldest group, there was a larger proportion of women in the former West than in the East (the difference was even more apparent for men). This age structure might (still) reflect the transformation process in the former East.
- The majority of consultants – 55% of the women and 70% of the men – were married.
- The level of school education of women and men was almost identical. In total, 70% of the women and 72% of the men had finished secondary school, a percentage far above the national average.
- The proportion of women with a university degree increased greatly (by 15 percentage points) between 1995 and 1997, but was still lower than that

2 Postal delivery was reserved for companies with no email address, i.e. for small consultancies only.

3 Some companies had already indicated on the questionnaire that they were not prepared to give an interview, and others no longer existed at the time we looked for interview partners. Surprisingly, leading managers of big companies and particularly the global players were more often willing to give an interview than to respond to a survey.

4 AskSam software was used to encrypt the data.

of men (54 vs. 63%). The study of economics was predominant, with 50% of both men and women holding a degree in this subject.

- Women are increasingly working as self-employed consultants. The proportion of self-employed female consultants (63.9%) was almost identical to that of males (62.8%) in 1997.[5]
- Overall, approximately one in five female consultants was employed on a part-time basis in 1997, whereby in the former East Germany the proportion was only one in seven. This is significantly less than the overall average. As might be expected, the proportion of men working part-time was much lower (5.3%). In 1996, 40% of the women and roughly 15% of the men named "personal or family reasons" as the reason for their part-time work. In total, the proportion of part-time consultants (i.e. those who worked less than 39 hours a week) fell in the three-year period, while the proportion of those working 60 or more hours a week rose – for both men and women. The "24/7" image which the consulting branch is eager to present would seem to be confirmed by these data.
- For 80% of women and 70% of men, the present term of employment began after 1990, i.e. women show a shorter length of employment than men. However, this does not necessarily imply higher fluctuation rates for women. It may also be a result of the significantly larger proportion of young women in the sector: In 1997, 39% of women and 24% of men were in the 20-34 age group.
- The data does not support the self-portrait of the consulting branch as the prototype of international business because only 3% of the men and none of the women work outside Germany.
- The gender differences are also small in regard to mobility. In 1997, 14% of women and 17% of men said that they had changed firms during the last year.
- A similar number of women (12%) and men (11%) stated in 1997 that they had changed from a job in a different branch during the last year. The proportion in the former East was significantly lower (at 4%) than that in the West (12%). As the proportion in the East had been 19% in 1996, this decline might be a result of the sector becoming less attractive in the New States during this time.
- The difference in working conditions for men and women in the consulting sector is most obvious if we look at the distribution of net income.[6] In 1997,

5 We were unable to find a plausible explanation for such a high rate of self-employment (and 20% growth rate in the three year period). An expert at ZUMA (the organisation that handles the microcensus data) suggested that the inclusion of marketing and distribution consultants and financial consultants in the "consultant" category might play a role (personal statement, 16 May 2003).

72% of women earned less than € 2,500 a month as compared to 80% in 1995. Obviously, women are beginning to enter the higher income groups. Women in the former East earn less than in the former West, but they are catching up. Male consultants are in a much better position; only one in two men belonged to the income group earning less than € 2,500 in both 1995 and 1997. Both self-employed and employed female consultants earned less than their male peers.

On the whole, these patterns show both differences and parallels for men and women concerning their personal characteristics and working conditions in the second half of the 1990s. The similarities can be found in the dominating age group (35-45), the above-average school education level, the high percentage of university education (especially in economics), the very high rate of self-employment (over 60%), the regional closeness of work and home, and in the group of consultants who changed careers in the last twelve months. Given this range of homogenous elements, the dimensions of inequality are even more remarkable: the significantly higher proportion of unmarried women, the three times higher percentage of part-time workers, the (somewhat) shorter length of employment and, last but not least, the conspicuous over-representation of (full-time) female consultants in the below € 2,500 income segment. The microcensus data thus contains the following messages:

- Women accept compromises on working hours far more frequently than men, although the part-time ratio in this sector is less than the national average.
- The high investment in education made by women leads to a lower pay-off in terms of additional income for female consultants compared to their male colleagues.
- The choice not to marry and/or to have children would seem to be a price frequently paid by women in Germany for their career in the consulting branch (as is also seen in other similarly demanding sectors).

The employment situation of female consultants

In their empirical research, my team uncovered markers concerning the gender distribution of consultants according to location (old versus new states), company size and women's positions at various career stages and in various consulting fields. I will first present the data of the survey, then the results of the interviews with managers in consultancies.

The survey found that 27% of consultants in Germany are women (30% in the new states, 26% in the old). As might be expected, the proportion of women varied according to company size. In small consultancies (1-5 consultants)

6 In order to control effects related to working-time, we only included men and women in full-time employment in this calculation.

women make up one-third of the qualified staff.[7] In medium-sized (6-50 consultants) and large companies (more than 50 consultants), only one in five consultants is female. In absolute numbers, however, the overwhelming majority of consultants, both male and female, are employed by large companies.

Women are not distributed evenly between all consultancies. Forty percent of the companies surveyed did not have any women on the payroll. On the other hand, a quarter of the consultancies had a proportion of women ranging between 20% and 50%; in at least one in five companies, women made up over half of the consultant staff. Due to this "clustering" of female consultants in around half of the companies, it would be inappropriate to view women as having a 'token' status. Kanter's (1977) concept would imply that they are an extreme minority in most organisations.

As remarked above, minority groups are at risk of being marginalised, i.e. excluded from attractive tasks and important positions. The concepts used to analyse fragmented labour markets include horizontal and vertical segregation. In the case of vertical segregation, the data on the distribution of female consultants in the hierarchy is relevant.[8] According to the findings of the survey, segmentation tendencies in Germany would seem to be more common in the old states than in the new. In over half of the companies in the former West, all management positions are filled by men; in the former East, this is the case for only a quarter of the companies. Moreover, the situation that managerial positions are filled exclusively by men is far more common in medium-sized companies than in small or large companies. In other words, medium-sized consultancies are rather male dominated. As might be expected, there are few companies where women fill all management positions. In the former East, however, this is actually true of one in ten small companies compared to one in twenty small companies in Germany as a whole. The higher proportion of women in the New States is probably (at least in part) due to the fact that the consulting branch in the former East is dominated by small companies.

A study carried out by the working group "International Business Consultants" of the German Association of Consultants (BDU 1998) showed a sharp fall in the percentage of women beyond entry level[9]: junior consultants 35%, project

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7 However, 40% of the small consultancies in the sample do not have any employees. There is no difference in this respect between companies owned by women or by men.

8 One particular example of extended vertical segmentation was found in the analysis of activities carried out within associations in the sector: one association developed two training programmes exclusively targeting female school-leavers, but both programmes only trained them to be assistants at consulting firms (Rudolph/Padmanabhan 2001).

9 The empirical basis (responses of 163 female and male consultants from 11 consultancies) was rather small.

managers 10%, and business managers 10%. The extent to which this apparent "melting away" of female consultants on their way up the career ladder is due to women's (possibly) shorter employment term and/or lack of experience. The notion that it may instead be due to gender-based vertical segregation is an open question.

Partner status is one of the greatest incentives the sector has to offer (Greenwood/Empson 2003:918). According to the survey, the proportion of female partners was 15%, which is much lower than the proportion of female consultants as a whole (27%). Women and men with partner status are very unevenly distributed between differently sized companies. Eighty percent of male partners are concentrated in large companies compared to only 55% of female partners. A third of all female partners are found in small companies, so that this size category would seem to act as a window of opportunity for women. The fact that the percentage of women with partner status in the New States is more than twice as high as in the old (38% to 14%) is probably due to the predominance of small consultancies in the former East Germany.

The results of the interviews with managers at consultancies point in the same direction. The higher you go up the hierarchy, the fewer women are to be found except in the case of small companies where it is difficult to differentiate between career stages[10] (see Table 1).

Table 1: Proportion of women in business consultancies differentiated according to status groups and company size

	Small companies (New States)	Small companies (Old States)	Medium-sized companies	Large companies	Global players
Manager/ partner	39%	30%	17.5% (0-66.7%)	8.5% (0-25%)	5% (0-7%)
Consultant	44% (0-100%)	70% (0-100%)	22% (0-63%)	30% (12,9-67%)	26% (16-35%)

Numbers in brackets indicate the range of answers from the companies.

Source: Our own interviews with managers in consultancy firms.

The fragmented pattern of employment of female consultants can be described as segregated integration. Our data tend to support the argument that major segregation factors are located not at the branch level but at the company level. We therefore asked whether it is possible to positively relate characteristics of consultancy companies to professional chances of female consultants.

10 In the group of small companies, we deliberately oversampled companies owned or managed by women.

The most obvious aspect is that the probability of finding female consultants among the employees tends to increase if women are represented among the upper management or the partners. This holds true for all company sizes except for the small ones (where no impact is visible). It is open whether there is a causal relationship and if so, in what direction (more female partners contributing to women-friendly policies or higher percentages of female consultants providing larger cohorts for career advancement) because the data concerning the personnel structure on the company level only relate to one year.

One form of segregated integration of women might also be their assignment to areas of work that are less prestigious and/or profitable. Strategic consulting and IT consulting are positioned at the high end of the scale and personnel consulting is at the low end. The three fields play an important role in creating turnover for consultancies in Germany, especially in view of increasing competition from abroad and of growing transnational activities carried out by many companies. While strategic and IT consulting have masculine connotations, women would seem to make acceptable consultants when it comes to personnel issues. Yet, Hördt (2002:57f.) documents that in her sample women were equally underrepresented both in management/strategy consulting and in IT systems consulting. In her view the surprising aspect is that women's representation in IT consulting is not lower than in management/strategy consulting given the marginal female students rate in engineering departments of German universities. Her empirical data do not provide solid arguments concerning the reasons.

The interviews in small companies revealed no clear pattern concerning the representation of women in different consulting fields. Three companies in personnel/organisational development consulting had high percentages of female consultants or managers. Yet, IT systems, e-business, logistics, finance are represented as female owned consultancies or with female employees, too. In personnel consulting, there is a high percentage of females at the consultant and management levels of medium-sized companies, whereas strategy consulting seems to be an all-male territory. Conversely, big companies in strategy consulting offer some chances for women, both as consultants and managers.

Company size, location (old/new state), hierarchy level and consulting field apparently function as filters in regard to the employment and career perspectives of qualified women in the consulting branch in Germany. The predominance of small companies in the New States may only offer limited career perspectives for women, yet within these limits companies in the former East are more open to female employment. Medium-sized companies, on the other hand, have a number of characteristics which favour men. In summary: Some positive quantitative changes in employment of female consultants go hand in hand with persisting qualitative gender differences in the consulting branch.

4 The consultant perspective: Women are no problem as long as they fit in

As educational deficits and limited professional motivation no longer hold true as explanations for the segregation of women at work, one must now attempt to determine how the aforementioned aspects of inequality in the consulting sector are explained and legitimised. Covin and Harris (1996) differentiate between two possible levels of discrimination against women in fields dominated by men:

(1) assumptions and attitudes concerning "appropriate" roles for women, and

(2) contextual conditions of and in organisations. I will discuss aspects of the first level in this section, looking at aspects of the second in section 5.

During the interviews with managers at consultancies, we observed that the lower proportion of qualified female personnel was more or less dismissed as "not a problem". This attitude was frequently backed up by two linked statements: Firstly, that women are underrepresented at management level in all sectors, so that looking for causes specific to business consulting is the wrong approach. Secondly, that there is a core presence of women in the sector and, consequently, that an increase in the number of women and in their representation at senior level is mainly a matter of time. This plea for putting an end to the debate – and to the analysis – overlooks the fact that the proportion of women in other professional labour markets in Germany (e.g. medicine and law) has greatly increased over the last decades. In addition, even if the same degree of marginal female integration was observed in all sectors, it might still be useful to carry out a differentiated study of how specific policies might affect this situation.

Three main arguments are used to accomplish and justify the segregation of women (cf. Hördt 2002): the wrong human capital, female socialisation deficiencies and the so-called family trap.

The first argument alleges that women have made an unsuitable choice of degree and/or vocational direction. Sometimes it is also argued that their level of education is too low. During the interviews managers cited, for example, the lack of female affinity to IT or to controlling. They mentioned also a requirement which women fulfil less often than men, i.e. of having two academic degrees. Yet, it is unclear whether this latter requirement is really due to the demands of the job or whether it is used purely for its selective function. It is at the least surprising that according to the "consultant profile" produced by the BDU cited above (BDU 1998) the level of formal education of consultants decreases with rising seniority.

The second argument uses stereotypes of female emotional reactions. In Hördt's (2002) study, a number of male managers of consultancies of all sizes pretended that women are too emotional, too aggressive and yet also too weak to make a career in the consulting branch. Apart from the fact that such labelling denies women basic professional skills, i.e. the ability to react appropriately to situations, it also inflicts a double bind of contradictory behavioural requirements on women: on the one hand the standard used to judge whether a reaction is "appropriate" or "out of order" is gender-based, on the other women risk the verdict "unfeminine" if they act professionally (Heintz/Nadai/Fischer/Ummel 1997:238). Examples of this in the interviews with managers include their criticism that women lack confidence and the ability to distance themselves when, for example, it was necessary to "take a hard line" during reengineering projects.

Very much in contrast to the dominant culture in most consultancies proponents of feminist values (Fletcher 1999) tend to emphasise loyalty, co-operative behaviour and flexibility as characteristic of feminist practice. During the interviews conducted by my research team, only three managers – all of them women – denied that there was a specific type of "feminine consulting". Some male consultants, in particular, saw specific opportunities for women in the branch, arguing that they can deal better with emotions and have an integrating effect. The qualities characterised as feminine – better communication, lateral thinking, more empathy – were all evaluated as positive. This is in line with a study cited by Covin/Harris (1996:8) in which women were seen as having better qualifications than men in nine out of ten areas. During the interviews with managers we repeatedly came across the statement that mixed teams were good for the company. This corresponds to Hördt's findings (2002) that female consultants contribute to a positive change of atmosphere at work.

The third argument, the family trap, refers to the difficulty women experience in dividing their time and energy between family and career. Men gain resources when they have a family; women more often have to invest resources in the same situation. The impossibility of combining a consulting career with a family was by far the most frequent reason given by managers when questioned as to why female career development in this branch seems to be so difficult and therefore tends to be the exception. I will come back to the organisational basis of this argument in the next section.

When exploring the reasons for the consistently low proportion of women in the consulting sector, the answers proposed by leading members of consulting companies and professional associations mainly pointed back to the women: they do not fit in with the ambitious profile of a consultant and they can't or won't adapt (enough).

5 Structures and culture in consultancies as gendered substructure

On the whole, the above-mentioned arguments reflecting the common perceptions of women's mixed capabilities in the consulting branch would seem to confront women who want to make a career on an equal footing with their male peers with substantial problems. I argue that the segregated integration of women in consulting is due to structural and cultural filtering mechanisms within the organisations. By filtering mechanisms I mean arrangements which are either clearly based on male life models or which men have created to support their professional habitus and/or informal infrastructures. In other words, there is a discrepancy between official statements and actual practice. It is possible to identify four types of barriers in this sense (see also Hördt 2002): (1) ideologies of availability, (2) acceptance by clients, (3) informal networks and (4) the manner in which achievement is "performed".[11]

(1) The ideology of availability means that consultants are expected to make themselves available to their company one hundred per cent of the time. That the standard for "normal" working hours in the branch has taken on critical dimensions was recently noted within the consulting branch, too. One nod in this direction was the workshop "Work and Leisure in Harmony", which took place during the world congress of business consultants in Berlin in 2000. The gender-neutral title of the workshop reflects its concentration on the general risk of burnout in extremely demanding jobs. However, Hördt (2002) found decidedly gender-specific views concerning availability requirements in her empirical data. While men saw a practically unlimited availability (in the interest of the client) as being absolutely necessary for their job, women were convinced that it would be possible to organise "family compatible" working hours, if the consultancies were only willing to invest in the corresponding changes in work organisation.

The time problems arising from the project-based organisation of work and the intensive travelling requirements were named by the managers interviewed at consultancies and associations as the most frequent and hardest obstacle limiting women's career development. Almost all interviewees thought it was absolutely out of the question that things might be organised

11 Hördt (2002) identifies a fifth type, the *dress code.* The way of dressing may take on a symbolic function of showing a serious and professional attitude. A dark suit, a lighter-coloured shirt and a tie are a must for male consultants. But what is the female equivalent? In Hördt's empirical findings, there were varying opinions on the question of whether a skirt was more likely to be tolerated if worn by beginners or rather by established female consultants or if it would be seen as symbolising an unprofessional attitude. Strangely enough, the dress code was never mentioned by the managers interviewed.

differently.[12] The demands made by companies on their employees are emphasised by the "up or out" principle. This principle, which is an integral part of the corporate culture of many large consultancies, means that there is little or no room for an individual career plan. Employees are confronted with a career structure with more or less compulsory time-scales for promotions. It may be that this principle mainly has a symbolic function, i.e. to give outsiders the impression that the personnel policy is extremely selective (Kipping/Armbrüster 2000:63). But even if this is true, it still has an effect internally, as it is clear that it could be implemented if necessary.

That their professional work consumes the time of consultants to such a huge extent is not a phenomenon limited to this branch. In an intensive case study of a US based multinational, Hochschild (2002) analysed how the principles of total quality support the company in "winning the fight against the family" (ibid., 2002:220). In this corporate culture, the company took over a number of functions that were previously associated with the family with regards to privacy or free time. This kind of insourcing blurs the boundaries between different life areas. When – thanks to the new company culture - employees were defined as their own time strategists and achievement experts, they tended to invest even more time and energy in the company.

The blurring of the divisions between work and leisure time and the organisation of activities together with colleagues is widely practised in the consulting branch, where the teams often spend weeks working and living together in foreign cities. Such a working life may be hard, but it also welds people together. Moreover, it contributes to a feeling of distinction – especially as the financial rewards often provide lavish compensation. Kipping/Armbrüster (2000:73) sum it up as follows:

> The organisational culture in management consultancies is strongly influenced by these values. It is dominated by male individuals with a background in positivist academic disciplines who are prepared to subject some years of their lives to the career promising work in a consultancy.

Such intensive demands on time, which significantly impinge upon one's private life, are probably an important barrier stopping women from entering the consulting branch. At the least, they seem to limit their stay there. One indicator of this is the drastic fall in the percentage of women after the first career stage, as was shown by the BDU survey cited above and in the field work of my research team. Also, the microcensus data document that a significantly higher percentage of female consultants than male is unmar-

12 One global player has recently been experimenting (at a very limited level) with part-time work in the form of a three to four-day week. Their reasons for using this model and the results achieved so far are not documented.

ried. Young female consultants may have difficulty finding positive role models among their established female colleagues.[13]

Many of the managers interviewed at large companies agree that: “It’s no real problem recruiting women to the consulting sector – the challenge is to keep them there.” But even during the most recent boom period in the sector, where consultancies were searching intensively for qualified personnel, no serious steps were undertaken to get rid of the time obstacles. It would seem that an extremely intensive demand for high potentials is still not a good enough reason to restructure working patterns with the aim of achieving balanced working hours.

(2) There is a long tradition of arguing that women are less acceptable to clients in male-dominated professional service sectors (Janshen/Rudolph 1987: 239-241). It is easy to argue this because it is rarely empirically tested. Gealy/Larwood/Palitz (1979) refer to a study carried out in the 1970s in consultancies in Southern California. There, both men and women thought it would be more difficult for female consultants than for males to get male clients to accept their advice; but the clients themselves were not asked. Similarly, in Hördt’s study (2002), male consultants at all levels of the hierarchy questioned whether women could ever expect to be seen as experts by clients, but they could not offer any concrete examples of problems. Female consultants, however, saw the problem of “proving” oneself to clients as something only liable to be a risk for beginners.

During the interviews with managers at consultancies, the hesitant or lacking acceptance of female consultants by clients was one of the most frequent ideas offered as a reason for the low proportion of women in the branch. It was not always clear whether this was meant to be a reason for the low number of female applicants or for the marginal recruitment carried out by the consultancies themselves. Here, too, the statements were not usually based on any concrete experience. It is, of course, quite possible that some clients might have difficulty accepting a woman expert. Usually, however, the team, or at least the CVs of its members, are introduced to the client before the beginning of the project. Therefore, one might expect that a record of previous successes would be more important than the sex of the consultant. So why does this argument continue to be so popular? Some of our female interview partners said that they judged the consulting branch, despite its modern image, to be more conservative than industrial or manufacturing firms. This raises the question of whether perhaps male consultants were projecting their own attitudes on to clients.

(3) Informal networks are frequently built up and developed through after-work activities. Women are often excluded (or exclude themselves) from these

13 Bailyn (2003) documents the enormous importance of positive female role models for the recruitment and retention of qualified female personnel in a study of university careers in the US.

activities; and this is why the networks tend to take on the atmosphere of a men's club (McCracken 2000). As important information is traded and also decisions are pre-formed within this framework, women's exclusion handicaps them greatly both in ongoing and future project work and in promoting their career goals.

(4) Career development is only loosely linked to tested knowledge, skills and experience. It also, to a great extent, involves impression management. This is especially relevant for higher levels of the hierarchy, where, in judging achievements, formal criteria become less important (Autenrith/ Chemnitzer/Domsch 1993:45f.). Men know how to "sell" themselves better – a view confirmed by the managers interviewed by my research team. They are aware that social interactions are never just a question of objective issues – but that negotiations of position and power are always involved (Edding 2000). For instance, not all contributions relevant to the success of a project team can be documented. Whether something is seen from above and from the outside as an achievement, and whether this contributes towards career advancement, is dependent on how it is performed. Far more often than women, men are aware of this and behave accordingly. Yet, the managers interviewed never questioned that the professional profile for consultants should be exclusively efficiency-oriented, as if this were objectively and obviously the only possible criterion.

In the consulting branch in Germany – with rare exceptions – hardly any special efforts to recruit and keep women for consulting work are reported. Yet, one might expect the contrary to be true, given the fact that again and again, both in research findings and in our interviews, the specific qualities of female consulting were emphasised. In view of this positive attitude, it is not surprising that a third of all companies where we carried out interviews stated that they intended to increase the number of women consultants. Occasionally it was also mentioned that the American headquarters see the low proportion of female consultants in the German offices as a performance deficit. I therefore have to ask: if there are so many good arguments for employing women, why haven't more women been employed? One assumption is that the apparently positive view of specifically feminine qualities serves to conceal the refusal or inability of the dominant group in the branch to stop women being marginalised – praise instead of action, with the aim of protecting one's own status, of limiting competition or of resisting change.

These speculations could relate to the fact that business consultants lack the status of a profession. Yet, they have to compete in the market with accountants and lawyers, two professions with strongly protected jurisdictions – and particularly so in Germany. Alluding to the concept of isomorphism (DiMaggio/Powell 1991) one could argue that consultants have largely adopted functional equivalents for professional structures, behaviours and logics. Outstanding characteristics of professions are the standardized high level entry

qualifications and the explicit material and ethical codes of good conduct in professional work (Abbott 1988). Business consultancies – and particularly the big companies – might try to copy these practices by extremely selective recruitment processes, intensive training activities (implying company-specific socialisation, too) and elaborate systems of knowledge management. There is ample empirical evidence that selective recruitment policies as an instrument of professionalisation tend to marginalise women (Wetterer 1992; Witz 1992). The unspoken argument is that women's subordinate social status might have an detrimental impact on the standing of the would-be profession. Following this line of argument it is the weak self-esteem of the occupational group of consultants which motivates them to practice particularly selective personnel policies. In this context initiatives at the branch or company level with the aim of more balanced gender relations would hardly be regarded as an attractive option.

6 Conceptual and gender-political results

My analysis of the situation and development of employment patterns in the consulting branch in Germany from a gender-sensitive perspective has highlighted the minority status of women, who make up around a quarter of the qualified personnel. Findings linked to segregation were: the inverse relation between company size and the proportion of women and between the hierarchy level and the proportion of women, the under-representation of women in the most prestigious consulting fields and – as a result of all these different factors – the high concentration of female consultants in the lower income groups.

To what extent have my theoretical-conceptual approaches been helpful? Abbott's (1988) concept of dynamic professionalisation offers a plausible framework for gender-specific segregation. In this light, the filtering mechanisms on the company level appear as defensive mechanisms with the aim of warding off the danger that men's own status in terms of exclusivity and reputation could be damaged in the eyes of potential clients and high-potential male colleagues. The complementary concept of a gendered substructure makes it possible to articulate the filter effects of structural and cultural components of typical working practices within the branch (especially at large companies): the performance of achievement, the significance of informal networks, the perception of a problem with client acceptance and – above all – the ideology of availability. It is possible that these substructures have particularly strong male connotations in the consulting sector because the status of this work is so precarious.

However, the segregated integration of female consultants in day-to-day practice – i.e. at the micro-political level - could not be documented and ana-

lysed here due to limited scope and the methodology of the study. I was unable, for example, to examine the criteria and processes by which teams (as a typical organisation of work in consulting) are put together, nor could I study how applications for leadership of or decisions on participation in specific projects take place. Even basic data on the gender differences in employment structures within the firm were not available from all companies. On the whole, the topic of gender relations within consultancies proved to be a difficult one, as was already shown in the survey. In the section of the questionnaire relating to personnel, questions about gender differences were often left unanswered and, in the final section, where comments could be made, the responders repeatedly expressed annoyance at the perceived bias towards women. A similar reaction could be observed during the interviews (with 31 men and 11 women), where the atmosphere tended to become less friendly as soon as the issue of gender differences was brought up. Especially in the larger companies, it was the exception rather than the rule that the members of my research team were given the detailed information and data concerning gender differences that they had requested.

On the level of gender politics, my study confirms and expands three insights: (1) While now more important than ever, a high level of education is becoming less and less of a guarantee of attractive employment and particularly career advancement – especially where women are concerned. (2) The filters working against female employment vary according to market segment and hierarchy level. (3) A career in a knowledge-intensive service sector such as business consulting implies substantial adaptation to traditionally male life models. The price to be paid for this strategy in social terms is apparently so high that women are only willing to pay it for a limited period. Thus, the proportion of female consultants has hardly increased, although women are continuously being recruited.

In view of the minority status of women in the consulting branch, *exit* would seem to be the most obvious individual solution for the unbalanced work-life relation. In order to resolve the problem through active coping strategies, the option of *voice*, female consultants would need allies. Who might these be? To hope that the state might step in is unrealistic given the fact that, in the last few years, numerous and exhaustive initiatives have been launched in Germany to obtain an equal opportunities law that actually works, all of which ended disappointingly. Consultancies themselves might be interested in coalitions, especially if a foreign parent company has set out corresponding performance targets and placed sanctions on deficits. Bottlenecks in the personnel pool might also offer chances when looking at changes in structural and cultural conditions with the aim of both recruiting and retaining more women. In the last few years, both of these options were potentially available at several consultancies, but there is no record of initiatives targeting women. However, it must also be said that there is no indication that women have been making demands to this effect.

Male colleagues could perhaps be allies if and in so far as they perceive that they themselves are suffering from the “men’s club” structure and culture, e.g. with burnout syndrome. However, business consultancies provide a good jumping-off point for attractive career alternatives, particularly for management positions with clients and for self-employment as a consultant. I anticipate that men – like women – are more likely to choose such an exit option than to join their female colleagues in implementing strategies for change.

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