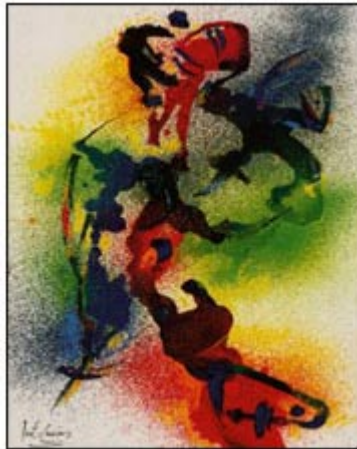


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*Women in business consultancies:
chances or risks for professionalisation?*

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Introduction*

Business consultancies are generally seen as attractive employers: they offer varied and interesting work, above-average salaries and well-developed career structures. It might be anticipated that women would react positively to these advantages, given the fact that their level of education and the 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 years (BMBF 2002:168ff). Are these changes reflected in an increase in qualified female personnel in business consultancies?

In the mid-90s, Staute put the situation in a nutshell: “Consultants are male. The female consultant is the exception” (Staute 1996:92). Data collected via a micro-census in 1997 confirms the minority status of female consultants: they make up 21.8% of all consultants in the former West Germany and 26.8% in the former East. Groups of employees with minority status frequently tend to do lower-status work, have lower positions in the firm and enjoy worse working conditions. Does this hold true for qualified women in business consulting?

The following essay documents and analyses the range and structure of social inequalities based on gender in the business consulting sector in Germany. Our premise is that the marginalizing of women in business consultancies is not only due to the professionalisation policies of the sector.

Rather, structural and cultural factors at work would appear to have an excluding effect. The theoretical-conceptual basis for our study combines structural with actor-oriented approaches. The main empirical and methodological tools were a sectoral evaluation of the micro-census data available for the years 1995 to 1997 and two empirical studies carried out by us in business consultancies in Germany. These consisted of a survey (partly web-based) in summer 2001 (cf. Pannewitz 2002) and 40 interviews with managers, which took place in the winter of 2002-2003.

The paper is divided into five sections. Following a sketch of the conceptual basis for the study (2), we document some of the features of female employment structures in the consulting sector (3), differentiating – as far as possible – between the former West and former East Germany (old and new Länder respectively). The fourth section looks at the perceptions held by business consultancies concerning the low employment of women in the sector. In the fifth section, we discuss structural and cultural factors which work against equal employment and career chances

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It is the result of a shared working process:

Martina Padmanabhan provided technical and theoretical input for the web survey. Jana Okech analysed the data and carried out the majority of the interviews. She also provided helpful comments on an earlier version of the manuscript. Katja Rothe was responsible for the micro-census data analysis and supported the fieldwork by providing the necessary logistic base. Sylvia Pichorner invested much competent work and patience in the creation of the manuscript. Emily Richards did an excellent job in translating the German text. Many thanks to all for their co-operation. Any remaining errors or deficiencies are my responsibility.

for women in business consulting. In the conclusion, conceptual findings are linked to the gender-political issues arising from the study.

1 Are labour markets gendered?

Despite the fact that the level of education and the career expectations of women have increased greatly in the last decades in Germany, and that thus the differences between men and women in this area have decreased as a result, most labour markets 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: (a) structurally-oriented theories and (b) action-oriented theories:

- Structural concepts such as *statistical discrimination* (Reskin 1994) and *dual labour markets* (Sengenberger 1978) emphasise how formal and positional characteristics of organisations act as exclusion 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. These perceived gender-based differences also play a part when a person changes his or her task within an organisation or when he or she wants to change career (Achatz et al. 2002: 208). Thus, gender stereotyping in society has important consequences for both recruitment and career development.
- There is a broad spectrum of actor-oriented theories. One important group might contain the human capital approach (Becker 1985), the socialisation approach (Friedel-Howe 1990) and the theory of feminine work practice (“weibliches Arbeitsvermögen”, Beck-Gernsheim 1981). On the whole, these all tend to ascribe the exclusion of women to female characteristics or behaviour: women have too little or the wrong 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, so that their availability for other types of work is limited.
- A second group of action-oriented theories sees employing organisations as systems of social relations and focuses on actors, groups and interactions (for the following, cf. also Achatz et al., 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 a social category which is perceived as being of lower value compared to those in which men are placed. These approaches also offer new perspectives for a look at the relation between organisations and gender, which according to newer research should be seen as differentiated, context-sensitive and contingent (Heintz/Nadai 1998, Rudolph et al. 2001). The concept of *gendered organisations* (Acker 1990, 1998; Witz/Savage 1992) starts from the premise that the binary division male/female is a constitutive element of every organisation. A *gendered substructure*, working at a level which tends to be hidden behind the supposedly gender-neutral official structures, functions according to norms and rules based on male life patterns.

The professions show a specific profile of gender-based conflicts around career positioning. Abbott (1988) characterises the professionalisation process as the competition for the right to control specific abstract systems of knowledge in order to apply them to particular cases. Feminist research on professions, on the other hand, emphasises the androcentric core of such projects (Wetterer 1992, 1993, 1995; Witz 1992). The professions constitute a group privileged by its monopoly of the “market”. They try to protect their social status against what is seen as a devaluation arising from the entry of “inferior” social groups – in this case women – into the group. If it is not possible to prevent entry entirely, for example for legal reasons, then another method would seem to be the marginalisation of “newcomers” in jobs and positions which are less attractive in terms of tasks, pay and influence.

Is it meaningful to work with concepts derived from professions theories when analysing the consulting sector? Consultancies may be knowledge-intensive service providers, but they are not professions in the classical sense. The term “consultant” is not even a protected job description. Consultants do not have a monopoly on a specific field of social problem-solving, nor do they have clearly defined, enforceable training regulations or recognised quality standards or rules for how they work. Their market position is also precarious in that they have to deal with competition from the legal and accounting professions. As the market environment for consultancies is thus dominated by the recognised professions, we assume that consultants – in order to appear competitive – have largely adopted professional structures, behaviours and logics. This is mainly a question of ensuring that practices are seen positively in terms of qualification and reputation by external viewers, especially by potential clients and by the so-called *high potentials* as potential recruits.

2 Female consultants, a minority in motion

What characterises women who have a qualified job in the consulting sector? And in how far does the distribution of women among the various consulting fields and/or positions point to patterns of gender-based segregation – and thus marginalisation - as the result of professional policies?

3.1 Structural patterns on the basis of micro-census data

The micro-census data for 1995-1997 presents the following picture of demographic and employment characteristics of female consultants:

- While the proportion of women fell significantly in the former East Germany (from 41.9% to 26.8%) in this period, it rose slightly in the former West (from 19.9% to 21.8%), so that East and West were drawing closer together by the end of the period.
- 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 were proportionally more women than men in the former West (this 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 women, but 70% of men – was 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 school at a level which qualified them for a degree course at university. This is a percentage far above the social average.
- The proportion of women with a university degree increased greatly (by 15 percentage points) between 1995 and 1997, but was still, at 53.7%, lower than that of the men (62.5%). Economics dominated, with 50% of both men and women having a degree in this subject.
- Women are increasingly active as self-employed consultants – including the group “with employees”. The proportion of self-employed female consultants was at 63.9% slightly higher than that of men (62.8%) in 1997.¹
- 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 average for all employees. As might be expected, the proportion of men working part-time is lower (5.3%). In 1996, 40% of the women, but only about 15% of the men, named “personal or family reasons” as the reason for their part-time work. In total, the proportion of part-time workers (i.e. who work 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 hours a day job” image of the consulting sector would seem to be confirmed here.
- For 80% of women and 70% of men, the present job 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.²
- For nine out of ten consultants (male and female), their place of work is in the same federal Land as their home. The gender difference is marginal: just 2.6% of the men, and none of the women, is employed abroad. This data does not support the international image of the consulting sector.
- The gender differences are also small in regard to mobility. In 1997, 13.9% of women and 16.8% of men said that they had changed firm during the last year. During the three-year period, the rate of change in the former West increased slightly, while that in the former East fell strongly.
- A similar number of women (12%) to men (11.2%) stated in 1997 that they had changed career during the last year. The proportion in the former East was significantly lower (at 3.6%) than that in the West (12.4%). As the proportion in the East was 18.8% in 1996, we might view this change as resulting from the sector becoming less attractive in the new Länder during this time.
- The difference in working conditions for men and women in the consulting sector are obvious if we look at the distribution of net income.³ In 1997, 72% of women earned less than 5,000 DM as compared to 80% in 1995. Women are beginning to enter the higher income groups. However, the men, as might be anticipated, are in a much better position;

¹ We were unable to find a plausible explanation for such a high rate (and 20% growth rate in the three year period) of self-employment. A female employee at ZUMA (the organisation which handles the micro-census data) suggested that one reason might be that marketing and distribution consultants and financial consultants (but not bank employees) were included in the “consultant” category (personal statement, 16.05.2003).

² In 1997, 38.9% of women and 23.5% of men were in the group 20-34.

³ In order to control for work-related effects, we only included men and women in full-time employment in this calculation.

just one in two men belonged to the income group earning less than 5,000 DM in both 1995 and 1997. Both self-employed and employed female consultants earn less than their male peers. The situation is similar when comparing East and West; women in the former East earn less than in the former West, but they are catching up.

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 are to be found in the dominating age group (35-45), the above-average school education, the high level of university degrees (especially in economics), the very high rate of self-employment (over 60%), the regional closeness of work and home and in the number of those who had changed careers in the last twelve months. Given this range of homogenous elements, the dimensions of inequality are even more surprising: the significantly higher proportion of unmarried women, the three times higher proportion 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 income segment below 5,000 DM. The micro-census data thus contains the following messages:

- Compromises on working hours are far more frequently made by women than by men, even if the part-time ratio in this sector is less than that for the total of employees in Germany.
- 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 sector and elsewhere.

3.2 The employment situation of female consultants – our own explorations

Our own empirical research provided us with markers by which we could judge the distribution of female consultants according to the size of the company and also their positioning in the various consulting fields and career stages. The survey carried out in summer 2001 found that women made up 27% of consultants (30% in the new Länder, 26% in the old). The proportion, as might be expected, varied according to company size. In small consultancies (1-5 consultants) women make up one third of the qualified staff, in the medium sized consultancies (6-50) and in the large companies only one in five consultants is female. In absolute numbers, however, the huge majority (95%) of consultants, both male and female, is employed by the large companies.

Women, however, are not distributed evenly between all consultancies. Just 40% of all companies have no women at all on their payroll; in small companies and in the new Länder every other company employs no women. On the other hand, in a quarter of the companies the proportion of women lies between 20% and 50%; in at least one in five companies, women make up over half of all consultants. Due to this “clumping” of female consultants in around half of the companies, it would be inappropriate to view women as having ‘token’ status (in the sense described by Kanter (1977), of being on average a minority in an organisation).

As we remarked above, minority groups are always at risk of being marginalised, i.e. excluded from attractive tasks and important positions, in professionalisation processes. The categories

used for analysing the labour market work with both horizontal and vertical segregation. On the issue of vertical segregation, the data on the distribution of female consultants in the hierarchy is useful.⁴ According to the findings of our survey, segmentation tendencies would seem to be more common in the old Länder than in the new. In over half of the companies in the former West, all the manager positions are filled by men; in the former East, only half of them are. That positions are filled exclusively by men is a phenomenon far more common in middle-sized companies than in small or large companies, i.e. the medium size category of companies is the most “male dominated”. As might be expected, there are few companies where women fill all management positions, but in the former East this is actually true of one in ten companies and in Germany as a whole of one in twenty small companies. The higher proportion of women in the new Länder is probably at least in part due to the effect of company size, i.e. to the fact that the consulting market in the former East is shaped by the dominance of small companies.

Partner status is one of the greatest incentives the sector has to offer. The proportion of women partners was 15% according to our partly web-based survey, i.e. much lower than the proportion of female consultants as a whole (27%). Women and men with partner status are distributed very unevenly between differently sized companies. While 80% of male partners are concentrated at large companies, this is true for only 55% of female partners. A third of all female partners are found at 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 Länder is more than twice as high as in the old (38% to 14%) is probably also due to the dominance of small companies in the former East.

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 (see Table 1). A survey carried out by the working group “International business consultants” (Internationale Unternehmensberater) in the BDU (BDU 1998) shows a sharp fall in the numbers of women beyond entry level⁵: Junior consultant 35%, project manager 10%, business manager 10%. It is an open question in how far this apparent “melting away” of female consultants on their way up the hierarchy is due to women’s (possibly) shorter employment span and/or lack of experience, or if it is due instead to gender-based vertical segregation aimed at protecting the professionalisation goals of the sector.

Table 1: Proportion of women employees in business consultancies differentiated according to employee groups and size categories

	Small companies	Small companies	Medium-sized	Large companies	Global Players
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⁴ One example of an extended vertical segmentation was shown in our analyses of the activities carried out within associations in the sector: one association had developed two training programmes targeting female school-leavers, but both programmes only trained them to be assistants at consulting firms. (Rudolph/Padmanabhan 2001).

⁵ The empirical basis was relatively small. The responses of 163 female and male consultants from 11 consultancies were evaluated.

	(new Länder)	(old Länder)	companies		
<u>Manager/partner/stakeholder</u>	40% ^(a) (0-100)		17.5% (0-66.7%)	8.5% (0-25%)	ca. 5% (0-7%)
Consultant	44% (0-100%)	70% ^(b) (0-100%)	22% (0-63%)	30% (12,9-67%)	26% (16-35%)
Support/Other	80% (0-100%)	83% (0-100%)	91.5% (86-100%)	76% (63-100%)	50% (21.3-60%)
Freelance ^(c)	26% (0-66.7%)	31% (0-62.5%)	<5% (0-3%)	-	-

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

- (a) Here it is necessary to point out that in the group of small companies, companies led by women were among those deliberately selected.
- (b) The significantly higher average for small companies in the old Länder compared to the new can be explained by the high proportion of personnel consulting and consulting involving aspects of personnel and organisation development. The proportion of female consultants is much higher here than in other consulting fields.
- (c) Due to the small proportion of freelance consultants at large companies and global players, it is impossible to draw any meaningful conclusions on the proportion of women among freelancers here.

Source: Our own interviews with managers.

One form of exclusion of women for reasons connected with professionalisation policies might also be the assigning of women to those areas of work which are less prestigious and/or profitable. On this spectrum, strategic consulting and IT consulting are at one end of the scale and personnel consulting is at the other. All these fields play an important role in creating turnover for the firm, especially in view of increasing competition from abroad and of growing transnational activities carried out by the company. While strategic and IT consulting have masculine connotations, women would seem to make acceptable consultants when it comes to personnel issues. Hördt (2002) documents how women are equally underrepresented both in management/strategy consulting and in IT systems consulting. That gender plays an important role was generally confirmed by the findings of our (partly) web-based survey and our manager interviews. Women are more weakly represented in strategy and IT consulting than in the areas of personnel and organisation development, personnel consulting, marketing and PR.

The size of company, the location (old/new Länder), the hierarchy level and the consulting field apparently function as “filters” in regard to the employment and career perspectives of qualified women in the consulting sector in Germany. The dominance of small companies in the new Länder may limit career development 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, reveal a number of areas which are “men-oriented”. On the whole, various changes, but only limited progress, can be seen to be taking place in working conditions for female consultants,

4 *The consultant perspective: women are no problem, as long as they fit in*

As female educational deficits and limited motivation no longer hold good as explanations for the segregation of women at work, it must be asked which mechanisms produce and legitimise those aspects of inequality in the consulting sector documented above. During our manager interviews at consultancies, the lower proportion of qualified female personnel was more or less dismissed as a “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 that therefore 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 present in all sectors, it might still be useful to carry out a differentiated study of how goal-led policies affect this situation. 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. We will discuss aspects of the first level in this section, looking at aspects of the second in section 5.

In particular, there are three personal excluding mechanisms which are used as arguments to accomplish and justify the marginalizing of women (for the following, cf. Hördt 2002): the wrong human capital, female socialisation deficiencies and the “family trap”.

The first issue concerns an allegedly unsuitable choice of degree and/or vocational direction; sometimes it also implies a level of education which is “too low”. This was the implication of a number of arguments employed during the manager interviews which cited, for example, the lack of female affinity to IT or to controlling, and also of references to a requirement which women fulfil less often than men, i.e. of having two academic degrees. Here 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, however, that according to the “consultant profile” produced by the BDU (BDU 1998) the level of formal education of consultants decreases with rising seniority.

The second issue has to do with stereotypes concerning female emotional reactions. Apparently, the intensity and effect of such emotions is inappropriate for the consulting sector. Women are characterised as too emotional, too aggressive and yet also as too weak to get what they want. Apart from the fact that such labelling denies women a basic professional ability, 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. Examples for this in the manager interviews were the criticisms that women lack confidence and the ability to distance themselves (where, for example, it was necessary to “take a hard line” during projects in the context of restructuring).

Some male consultants, however, see specific opportunities for women in the sector, because they can deal better with emotions and have an integrating effect. Covin/Harris (1996:8) also cite a study in which women were seen as having better qualifications than men in nine out of ten areas. Proponents of “feminist values” tend to emphasise loyalty, co-operative behaviour and flexibility as characteristic for feminist practice – very much in contrast to the dominant culture in most consultancies. During the manager interviews, only three interviewees –all of them women – denied that there was a specific type of “feminine consulting”. Otherwise, the qualities named are all seen as positive: better communication, lateral thinking, more empathy. Again and again we 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”.

The third argument (the family trap) refers to the difficulty women experience in dividing their time and energy between family and career. Men gain a resource when they have a family; women tend to lose resources in the same situation. Experience shows that women are discriminated against because they are, were or could become mothers. 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 sector is so difficult.

When asking for reasons for the consistently low proportion of women in the consulting sector, the answers in the manager interviews (both at companies and professional associations) mainly referred us back to the women: it is they who do not fit in with the ambitious profile of a consultant – and who can’t, or won’t, adapt (enough).

5 *Structures and culture in consultancies as gendered substructure*

On the whole, the excluding mechanisms we have sketched above in the consulting sector would seem to confront women with a difficult obstacle course if they want to achieve their career goals. Women on their own are hardly able to get rid of or subvert these “filters” and “brakes”. Often there is only an appearance of objectivity when making decisions, while in reality it is a question of value judgements based on the standards of a male majority. In addition, the behavioural expectations for women are often contradictory, leading to no-win situations. It is never questioned that the professional profile for consultants should be exclusively efficiency-oriented, as if this were objectively and obviously the only possible criterion. Here, however, we argue that the under-representation of women in consulting is also essentially due to structural and cultural excluding mechanisms within the organisation.

By “excluding mechanisms” we mean arrangements which are either clearly based on male life models or which men have created as support for their professional habitus and/or as informal infrastructures. That is to say, it is also a question of the discrepancies between official statements and lived practice. It is possible to identify four types of barrier in this sense (for the following,

see also Hördt 2002): (1) how achievement is “performed”, (2) informal networks, (3) acceptance by clients and (4) ideologies of availability.⁶

- (1) Career development has only a limited amount to do with 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. Men know how to “sell” themselves better – a view confirmed by the manager interviews. They are aware that social interactions are never just a question of “objective issues” – a negotiation of position and power is always involved. For instance, not all contributions relevant to the success of a project team can be documented. Whether something is seen as an “achievement” from “above” and from the outside, 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.
- (2) Informal networks are often built up and developed through after-work activities, typically visits to bars and saunas. As women are usually excluded from these activities, the networks tend to take on the atmosphere of a men’s club. As not only important information is traded within this framework, but also decisions are pre-formed, the fact that women are excluded handicaps them greatly both in ongoing project work and in terms of planning for future projects and for career development.
- (3) There is a long tradition of arguing that women are less acceptable to clients in male-dominated professional service sectors. It is easy to argue this, because it is impossible to prove either way. Gealy et al. (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 than for male consultants 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 our manager interviews at consultancies, the hesitant or lacking acceptance of female consultants by clients was one of the most frequent ideas offered as reasons for the low proportion of women in the sector. 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.⁷ 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,

⁶ Hördt (2002) identifies a fifth type, the *dress code*. In business consulting, this has the important 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 in the course of our manager interviews.

⁷ In one case, a manager backed up his statement with the story of a colleague whose female colleague, many years ago in Portugal, etc....Stories from the Arabian Nights!

are introduced to the client before the beginning of the project, so that it might be expected 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 sector, 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.

- (4) By “ideologies of availability” we mean the expectation that consultants make themselves one hundred per cent available to their company in terms of time. That the standard for “normal” working hours in the branch has taken on critical dimensions has recently been noticed within the consulting sector. 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 name 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 findings. 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 could be possible to organise “family compatible” working hours, if the consultancies were only willing to invest in the corresponding restructuring – something which was so far not the case.

The time problems arising from the project-based organisation of work and the intensive travelling demands linked to this were seen in the manager interviews (both at consultancies and in associations) as the most frequent and hardest obstacle for female career development. It was seen as absolutely out of the question that things might be organised differently.⁸ 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 pre-formed career structure with more or less compulsory time-scales.⁹

That work eats into the life of consultants to such a huge extent is not a phenomenon limited to this sector. On the basis of 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). It is part of this corporate culture that the company takes over a number of functions and experiences which were previously associated with the family, with privacy or with free time – that it *insources* them, as it were, thus blurring the division between different life areas. When employees were promoted to being their own “time strategists” and “achievement experts”, they tended to invest even more in the company.

The blurring of the divisions between work and leisure time, and the organisation even of relaxation activities together with colleagues, is widely practised in the consulting sector,

⁸ 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. The reasons for using this model, and the results so far, are not known.

⁹ It may be that this principle mainly has a symbolic function, i.e. to give outsiders the impression that the personnel policy is highly 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.

especially “on projects”, where the teams spend weeks or months working and living together in foreign cities. Such a working culture may be hard, but it also welds people together and gives them a feeling of distinction – especially as in many cases the financial rewards provide lavish compensation. Kipping/Armbrüster (2000:73) sum 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 complete demands on time, which significantly restrict the possibilities for one’s own personal life, are probably an important barrier stopping women entering the consulting sector. At the least, they seem to limit their stay there. One indicator for this is the drastic fall in the percentage of women after the first career stage, shown by the BDU survey and our manager interviews. Also, we have seen from the micro-census data that a significantly higher percentage of female consultants than male is unmarried. Young female consultants may have difficulty finding attractive role models among their established female colleagues.¹⁰

It’s no real problem recruiting women to the consulting sector – the challenge is keeping them there. This seems to be a statement on which many of the managers interviewed at large companies agree. 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 a hundred percent demand on personnel capacities is still no reason to restructure working patterns with the aim of achieving balanced working hours.

In the entire sector – apart from individual cases – there are hardly any visible attempts being made to recruit and keep women for consulting work. Yet we 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. It is not surprising, in view of this positive attitude, 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 US American headquarters see the low proportion of women consultants as a performance deficit. We therefore have to ask: if there are so many good arguments for employing women, why haven’t more women been employed? One analysis¹¹ is that it could be that the apparently positive view of “specifically feminine” qualities serves to conceal the refusal or inability of the dominant group in the “profession” to stop women being marginalised – praise instead of action, with the aim of protecting one’s own status, of limiting competition, of resisting change and so on.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Another explanation might lie in the social dynamic of the interview situation; the male expert fulfils what he assumes to be the expectations of his female interviewer with “cheap talk”.

5 Conclusion: Conceptual and gender-political results

Our analysis of the situation and development of employment patterns in the consulting sector 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 size of company and 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.

In how far have the theoretical-conceptual approaches we used been helpful? Abbott's (1988) concept of dynamic professionalisation offers a plausible framework for gender-specific exclusions. They appear in this light 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 excluding effects of structural and cultural components of typical working practices within the sector (especially at large companies): 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 sector is so precarious (it is not, after all, a profession). How the exclusion and "holding back" of female consultants works in day-to-day practice could not be analysed here in more detail due to lack of data. We were unable, for example, to examine the criteria and processes by which teams (as a typical form of work in consulting) are put together, nor could we study how applications for leadership of, or 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, something we had already experienced to some extent during the partly web-based survey. In the section relating to personnel, questions about gender differences were often unanswered and in the section at the end where comments could be made, these often 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. It was the exception rather than the rule – especially in the larger companies – that we were given such detailed information and data concerning gender differences as we had asked for.

On the level of gender politics, our study confirms and expands three insights:

A high level of education is becoming more and more important for, yet at the same time it is less and less of a guarantee of attractive employment – especially where women are concerned.

The "filters" working against female employment change according to market segment and hierarchy level. A career in a knowledge-intensive service sector such as business consulting implies an increased 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

amount of time. Thus, the proportion of female consultants hardly ever rises, although women are continuously being recruited.

In view of the minority status of women in the consulting sector, individual solutions in the sense of *exit* would seem to be the most obvious. In order to choose the option *voice* instead, female consultants need allies. Who might these be? To hope that the state might step in is unrealistic, given that in the last years numerous and exhaustive initiatives have arisen on the subject of 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 structural and cultural conditions with the aim of both recruiting and retaining more women. In the last years, both these options were potentially available at several consultancies, but there is no record of initiatives targeting women – though it must be said that there is also no record of women making demands to this effect. Male colleagues could perhaps be allies, if and 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. We anticipate that men – like women – are more likely to make such a move than to join with their female colleagues in achieving strategies of change.

Eliminado:

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