



LUND UNIVERSITY
School of Economics and Management

The Effects of Gender Stereotypes on Female Professionals

A Critical Analysis of Women's Perception of their Career
Opportunities and Organizational Measures for Gender Equality
at a Consultancy

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May 2020

M.Sc. Managing People, Knowledge and Change

BUSN49: Master's Degree Project

Word Count: 20.658

Examiner: Stefan Sveningsson



Abstract

Title	The Effects of Gender Stereotypes on Female Professionals: A Critical Analysis of Women's Perception of their Career Opportunities and Organizational Measures for Gender Equality at a Consultancy
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Submission Date	22 nd of May 2020
Keywords	Gender Stereotypes, Implicit Bias, Career Opportunities, Management Consulting, Organizational Measures, Women Initiatives, Feminism
Purpose	To critically analyse women's understanding of gender stereotypes and their perception of their career opportunities and organizational measures for gender equality at a consultancy, with the aim of the resulting in-depth insights contributing to organizations' approach to enhance gender equality at top management levels.
Research Question	How do women at a consultancy perceive gender stereotypes and organizational measures for gender equality affecting their career opportunities?
Methodology	We conducted a qualitative study influenced by critical feminist and interpretive traditions, while involving both literature and empirical material. We came to our findings by conducting ten individual interviews with female professionals mostly from the millennial generation working at a consultancy.
Findings	There is a discrepancy of explicit statements and implicit beliefs of the interviewed women regarding the effect of gender stereotypes on their career opportunities. Despite not feeling personally affected, they imply an influence of gender stereotypes in their view of having to step back in their career and being disadvantaged when having children. Moreover, organizational measures and initiatives aiming to support women in their career as well as the prevalent overwork culture at the case company are perceived as reinforcing gender stereotypes.
Contributions	Our findings support scholars in their argumentation that women face challenges and dilemmas when pursuing a career and leadership positions. They further contribute to the lack of micro-level understanding of the perception of women, specifically working at a consultancy and being from the millennial generation. We further contribute to how organizational measures, initiatives and an overwork culture might actually obstruct a gender balance by reinforcing gender stereotypes.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we would like to express our gratitude to all our interviewees for providing valuable and extensive insights. Their personal experiences and perceptions are the heart of our thesis and inspired us both in academic as well as in personal ways!

We also would like to thank our supervisor Jens Rennstam for his exceptional wealth of knowledge, providing us with valuable recommendations and critical comments. You are a great supervisor and a true role model within the academic world.

Our deepest gratitude goes to our mothers, our role models that paved us the way to be ambitious and confident women.

To our beloved Niko and Henrik, thank you for your unconditional support and encouragement, and making sure that we go for a walk and get a breeze of fresh air now and then in times of ‘corona isolation’.

Lastly, we want to thank each other for amazing teamwork, an excellent complementation of each other’s strengths, and a great amount of fun and laughter.

Have fun reading and take care,

Emma Judith Scholl & Melina Jass

Lund, 22nd of May 2020

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1. Introduction

The introductory chapter of this thesis will outline the theoretical background that has determined the parameters for this research. First, we provide a short overview of the research area we decided on which is embedded in the discourse on gender stereotypes and their effects on women in their career progression. We continue by problematizing said discourse and the inherent lack of female perspectives in order to justify our research direction. Lastly, this chapter concludes with the presentation of our research question.

1.1. Background

Gender stereotyping occurs when individuals perceive and assess others based on general expectations they hold about men and women (Talbot, 2003; Denhag et al., 2019). Traditionally, gender roles were based on division of labor, thus associating women with communal traits due to them commonly acting as caregivers, while men tended to be associated with attributes around power or leadership (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006). While in recent years, studies have found a slow change in gender stereotypes, especially in regards to women (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006; Lenton, Sedikides & Bruder, 2009), they continue to cause disadvantages. In particular, women striving for leadership positions are faced with backlash effects for displaying behavior that is considered agentic and assertive, and thus stereotypically male (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Moreover, to this day there is a tendency to ‘think manager - think male’, indicating that both men and women consider managerial roles as predominantly masculine (Schein, Mueller et al., 1989; Schein & Mueller, 1992). According to Ely and Padavic (2020), despite the progress of women obtaining higher positions in organizations in the past decades, there remains a gender inequality at the workplace.

However, as the perspective on gender stereotypes is undergoing change, there are also some studies pointing towards opportunities for women in this context. For instance, there is a general belief that if women do reach leadership positions, it implies higher competence on their part, hence hinting at them being much more effective than their male colleagues (Rosette & Tost, 2010). In addition, a rising awareness for the challenges women encounter in the workplace means an increasing implementation of supportive measures, such as women quotas (Krook, 2016; Sojo et

al., 2016; Unzueta, Gutiérrez, & Ghavami, 2010). Although quite controversial, there is quantitative evidence for the effectiveness of including more women in high managerial positions (McKinsey & Company, 2007). Other measures include leadership development programmes with a focus on aspects such as networking, mentoring or trainings (Hopkins, O’Neil, Passarelli & Bilimoria, 2008).

1.2. Problem Area

In recent years, the inequalities pertaining to women at work have gained popularity. It represents an issue that is commonly discussed and which people are arguably aware of, with well-known individuals such as Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook, addressing it in her book ‘Lean In’ (2015). There, she discusses the disadvantages women face in the corporate world and how to work around them to be successful. The awareness of the difficulties of getting women into leadership positions can be further demonstrated by the increasing usage of organizational measures such as gender quotas (IDEA, 2009) and initiatives aimed specifically at women (i.e. ‘Women@PwC’, ‘Women@Deloitte’)¹. Consequently, one would assume that the disadvantages women face in business are diminishing. Likewise, the measures described previously show that we are aware of the stereotypes and the resulting implicit bias concerning women. Despite research indicating that there is a shift taking place, with the traditional view of women as communal caregivers slowly extending to adapt to their contemporary social roles (Diekmann & Goodfriend, 2006; Johnston & Diekmann, 2015), gender stereotypes still disadvantage women. In fact, those who strive to occupy leadership positions are faced with negative sanctions both for staying inside the stereotype as well as stepping outside of it (Phelan & Rudman, 2010). This indicates that the common perception of women is still an inhibiting factor for those who strive for a successful career within organizations.

Our thesis thus aims to explore whether and how gender stereotypes affect women in their career progression, taking on the perspective of female professionals. Further, we examine the role of organizational measures in this context. By conducting interviews, our research thereby studies the experiences and perception of women from different hierarchical levels at a large and well-known

¹ ‘Women@PwC’ (PwC.com, 2020), ‘Women@Deloitte’ (Deloitte.com, 2020)

consultancy, being in an industry that enables great career opportunities and fast progression along the hierarchy for those who perform accordingly (Muse, 2014).

We decided to focus on a consultancy because the provided environment is shaped by high turnover rates due to an overwork culture as well as the emphasis on up-or-out policies, where consultants are pushed to perform and aim for a promotion, or to leave the organization (Alvesson, 2012; Armbrüster 2006). Interestingly, this is coupled with a tendency to offer a variety of women development programmes (The Times & The Sunday Times, 2019; Consultancy.uk, 2019). In light of our thesis focusing on the impact of gender stereotypes on women's career progression, we believe a dynamic and competitive organization such as this will provide a fruitful setting. This is especially of significance considering the numbers provided by our case company, in the following referred to as The Consultancy, indicating a gender imbalance permeating the organization despite an elaborate offer of women initiatives.

1.3. Purpose and Research Question

The overall purpose of this study is to assess and present how women perceive gender stereotypes affecting their career opportunities and the perceived effect of organizational measures aimed at gender equality at a consultancy. Therefore, a qualitative approach enables the collection of perceptions, experiences and implicit understanding from female professionals. Thus, the purpose of our research is to gain in-depth insights contributing to organization's approaches to enhance gender equality at top management levels.

Previous research has shown negative effects of gender stereotypical thinking on career opportunities for women and how organizations might address these to promote gender equality. However, this thesis aims to go beyond this understanding and present more implicit insights through the respondents' personal perception on how they are affected and how their employer addresses such issues. We feel this micro-level point of view is missing in existing literature, which presents a gap we aim to fill by focusing on the perspective of female professionals. Hence, the discovered findings intend the narrowing of the existing research gap, as similar efforts have not yet reached this particular in-depth qualitative data. This study aims to provide more in-depth knowledge on women and some obstacles they have to overcome in their career, for organizations that value diversity and want to effectively address gender inequality. Additionally, this research

might provide insights for young female professionals to be aware of and consider in the development of their career.

Consequently, this thesis aims to fulfil the purpose described above by answering the following research question:

How do women at a consultancy perceive gender stereotypes and organizational measures for gender equality affecting their career opportunities?

2. Literature Review

This chapter serves as the theoretical background, consisting of four main topics: gender stereotypes and implicit bias, career as a woman, organizational initiatives for women, and career at a consultancy. We will start by outlining the contemporary discourse around gender stereotypes and implicit bias, as well as potential generational differences. Within the second topic, we elaborate on both challenges and opportunities associated with the careers of women, establishing a connection with gender stereotypes, while the third topic is divided into a general overview of common organizational initiatives, followed by their effectiveness. In the fourth and final topic, we outline the conditions of working and pursuing a career at a consultancy and particularly what effects these might have on female consultants.

2.1. Gender Stereotypes and Implicit Bias

In this first part of our literature review, we describe the contemporary discourse around gender stereotypes and implicit bias, explaining their meaning, origin, and current developments. We also outline the literature on generational differences and their effect on the workplace.

2.1.1. The Contemporary Discourse

Stereotyping as such can be described as a defined filter applied on different social categories (Talbot, 2003), including the social category of gender, where individuals are likely to perceive and assess others based on their general expectations of that specific social category (Talbot, 2003; Drenth et al., 2019). Unconscious bias, or implicit bias, generally refers to “people of all backgrounds show[ing] unconscious preferences on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, or other aspects of identity” (Fiarman, 2016, p. 1). Moreover, there is a tendency to favour the group one belongs to (Fiarman, 2016). Unconscious gender bias is further defined as a person consciously rejecting gender stereotypes while unconsciously evaluating based on said stereotypes (Madsen & Andrade, 2018). Thus, implicit bias is based on gender stereotypes, showing the two are closely intertwined. For this reason, primarily the contemporary literature regarding gender stereotypes will be elaborated on.

Diekman and Goodfriend (2006) applied role congruity theory to examine the relationship between gender stereotypes, specifically their prescriptive content, and perceived social roles. Prescriptive content refers to traits describing what women and men should ideally be like (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006). They argue that gender roles are based on the division of labour, which is why women are often perceived as communal since historically, they tended to occupy roles related to caring for other people. Vice versa, men used to hold roles in relation to power or leadership. For this reason, there is a tendency to associate men with agency and women with communion (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006). However, the authors propose that a change in the division of labour will lead to a change in gender roles, and thus gender stereotypes. Indeed, they found that “social roles act as a framework for prescriptive gender beliefs” (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006, p. 380), meaning that gender stereotypes depend on social roles. Moreover, the authors found a tendency to accommodate for any change in social roles, implying that the stereotypical perception of women can change over time if the associated social role does as well (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006).

Lenton, Sedikides and Bruder (2009) conducted research focusing on the extent to which gender stereotypes are reinforced by the American English language and found that stereotype-relevant words are closely linked with gendered pronouns, i.e. for women, she and her, and for men, he and him. In other words, relating gender stereotypical role words to a specific gender, such as technician with man, is very deeply rooted in the English language. Interestingly, the authors also found that the concept of woman is broader than the concept of man, serving as an indicator that changes around the female gender role have positively affected the stereotype-relevant words associated with it (Lenton, Sedikides & Bruder, 2009).

In a recent study, Johnston and Diekman (2015) have taken a closer look at the reason why women and men are perceived as possessing the traits they do, differentiating between ideals and oughts. Ideals include aspirations, dreams and hopes, whereas oughts include duties, responsibilities and obligations (Johnston & Diekman, 2015). They argue that beliefs about why men and women act accordingly can serve as legitimization for social arrangements. Their aim was thus to discover whether gender roles are perceived to be constrained or flexible. The authors found that women are perceived to be particularly motivated by ideals, meaning they are caring or competitive because that is what they hope to be. Men, on the other hand, are perceived to be motivated by both ideals and oughts (Johnston & Diekman, 2015). Their findings imply that women acting in a communal manner, for instance, is a desire instead of an obligation imposed by existing

stereotypes. Consequently, it is further implied that men should avoid communal roles since women want to fulfil them (Johnston & Diekman, 2015), making it their ‘domain’ of sorts. Additionally, considering women as motivated by ideals can potentially limit role changes for them and might lead to a lack of support when it comes to social change (Johnston & Diekman, 2015).

While research shows that the image of women and related stereotypes are changing, albeit slowly, we did not find any studies examining how women themselves perceive gender stereotypes and their effect on themselves.

2.1.2. Generational Differences

Another relevant body of literature pertains to the effect of generational differences on work values and attitudes. In particular, there are several studies around the different leadership styles preferred and executed by different generations. Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal and Brown (2007) conducted a study in the U.S. workplace, where they divided generations into various cohorts. They found that the ‘Generation X’ prefers a leadership style that revolves around engagement, team-building and partnership, whereas the ‘Silent Generation’ favoured a “command-and-control style” (Sessa et al., 2007, p. 54). Specifically, the authors describe the latter generation as focusing on executing capability, power and authority as a way to ‘rule’ their employees. In comparison, the ‘Generation X’ appears to focus more on creating and providing conditions where others can contribute to and lead (Sessa et al., 2007).

Twenge and Campbell (2008) conducted research on how psychological traits differ among generations and their effect on the workplace. They argue that there are differences especially between the young generation and the older generations (comparing different data sets between the 1930’s and 2007). While they analyse traits such as the need for social approval or level of anxiety and depression, their focus on the change of women’s characteristics is somewhat relevant to this thesis. In particular, they noted a positive change in how females perceived their own roles, emphasizing a change towards more agency and assertiveness among women (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). Additionally, they state that it is much more common for young mothers to remain part of the workforce, thus requiring improved day care solutions to support this change. Twenge and Campbell (2008) argue further that “we have been conditioned to expect that there is a feminine versus masculine style of leadership” (p. 873), although no statistical evidence has been

found for this assumption. Further, they noted that the recent generation of women put particular emphasis on work-life balance.

Another study by Cichy, Lefkowitz and Fingerman (2007) revolved around different gender attitudes held by different generations, for which they examined families at home. Interestingly, the authors found that mothers and their daughters held less traditional attitudes towards child-rearing when compared to fathers and sons. Moreover, they discovered that “daughters are not only more motivated to reject norms of male authority than fathers and sons, but they do so more than mothers” (Cichy, Lefkowitz & Fingerman, 2007, p. 833). This may be an indicator for daughters having greater expectations for gender equality at home.

Summarily, thus far we have outlined that female gender stereotypes are slowly changing as indicated by role congruity theory (Diekmann & Goodfriend, 2006) and the breadth of the concept of woman in comparison to that of man (Lenton, Sedikides & Bruder, 2009), whereas the consideration of female gender stereotypes as motivated by ideals may prohibit women from getting support when it comes to social change (Johnston & Diekmann, 2015). However, there are no studies taking on the women’s viewpoint in order to examine how they perceive gender stereotypes affecting themselves. Furthermore, there is evidence for generational differences in preferred leadership style (Sessa et al., 2007), in women’s perception of their own roles shifting towards more agency (Twenge & Campbell, 2008), and in the attitude towards child-rearing, specifically indicating that daughters expect more gender equality at home (Cichy, Lefkowitz & Fingerman, 2007). Although one might then assume different generations holding differing attitudes towards gender stereotypes as well, there is no research on this topic yet. After elaborating on the contemporary discourse around gender stereotypes, the subsequent section will go into more depth in terms of the associated consequences for women at work.

2.2. Career as a Woman

In this second part of our literature review, we briefly describe the status women have taken in work environments and go further by elaborating on their career development and representation in leadership positions. We continue to outline the literature on specific challenges and dilemmas women face throughout their career and touch upon opposing theories that argue possible opportunities for women in their career progression.

In recent decades, researchers have identified a vertical and horizontal segregation based on the gender of employees in an organization, which particularly affects women (e.g. Anker, 1998). The horizontal segregation refers to women and men generally working in different work fields and functions. For instance, women tend to take up supporting functions in administration, whereas managerial positions are more likely to be held by men (Reskin and Roos, 1990 cited in Kelan, 2012). The vertical segregation, being at focus in this research, refers to the phenomenon of women being less represented in higher hierarchy levels at an organization and predominantly in lower positions (Liff & Ward, 2001; Dreher, 2003).

Although the references given above were published up to 30 years ago, more recent literature and studies support these theories and findings. A recent five-year study conducted by McKinsey showed in 2019 that the representation of women in senior leadership positions in corporate America has increased, however, a full gender equality in the business environment remains out of reach (Huang et al., 2019). Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb (2011) claim the phenomenon to be “the powerful yet often invisible barriers to women’s advancement that arise from cultural beliefs about gender, as well as workplace structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently favour men” (p. 475). A broad spectrum of research more precisely finds that gender stereotypes and implicit bias are often the main cause for negative sanctions that women face throughout their career and thereby inhibiting leadership opportunities, namely, for example, by concepts of institutionalized discrimination metaphorically referred to as the ‘glass ceiling’ and the ‘glass cliff’ (Filut, Kaatz & Carnes, 2017; Powell, 1999; Beardwell & Thompson, 2017; Ryan et al., 2016). However, some opposing research finds that gender stereotypes, implicit bias and measures to support women might actually work in their favour when striving for top leadership positions (e.g. Filut, Kaatz & Carnes, 2017; Mölders et al., 2017).

In the following we provide an overview of relevant challenges and dilemmas women face, caused by stereotypical thinking and implicit bias, and contrast them with possible opportunities that might arise from some of the inhibiting factors.

2.2.1. Challenges and Dilemmas

Numerous authors and researchers have observed rather negative sanctions that women encounter when pursuing a career, resulting in them having to face detrimental challenges and dilemmas. Women thereby face different issues at different stages of their career, while others follow them throughout their entire working life.

In the business environment, especially important is the paradigm of ‘think manager - think male’, where both men and women show a tendency to regard managerial roles as more masculine than feminine (Schein, Mueller et al., 1989; Schein & Mueller 1992). According to the authors, this leads to less women in leadership positions as organizations’ management competency frameworks still use stereotypical male traits as orientation for good leadership characteristics. Schein and colleagues also found that the dominance of male gender stereotypes in the understanding of leadership has an influence on those who decide on recruiting, assignments and promotions (Schein, Mueller et al., 1989; Schein & Mueller 1992). Eagly, Makhijani and Klonsky (1992) found that generally, female leaders are evaluated slightly more negative than their male counterparts, with an enhanced effect in situations where women showed typically masculine leadership approaches. Moreover, women tended to be evaluated more negatively when occupying traditionally male positions as well as when those who evaluated them were mostly men (Eagly, Makhijani & Klonsky, 1992). Regarding leadership style, Eagly and colleagues (1992) argue that women that lead in a directive way, thereby adopting male stereotypes, are likely to be disadvantaged in their effectiveness. These backlash effects on women are supported by scholars Phelan and Rudman (2010). In fact, they argue that women who strive for or occupy leadership positions are faced with negative sanctions both for staying inside the gender stereotype as well as stepping outside of it, creating a dilemma that affects women in many aspects throughout their career.

Besides the dominant thinking in male stereotypes, a further issue shown by research is that the common notion is to regard women as housewives, whose communal and nurturing nature implicates that their job is primarily taking care of the family (Rudman & Glick, 2001), with the resulting implicit bias negatively affecting women who pursue a career. Given the career model

that is implemented in organizations is primarily designed for men (Wajcman, 1998 cited in Kelan, 2012), it implies an incompatibility with women's interruptive lifecycles and challenges with maintaining a proper work-life balance (O'Leary, 1997). As O'Leary (1997) puts it: "traditional career development models, based as they are on male experiences, values and goals, fail to address how such opportunities and problems impact on women's careers". As such, problems faced by women that inhibit their career and professional status, include maternity leave absences, definition of parental roles or workplace discriminatory constraints (O'Leary, 1997). However, as Larwood and Gutek (1987, p. 173 cited in O'Leary, 1997, p. 95) already put it over 30 years ago, "that all men engage in work for a living and that women will leave their careers in favour of a family – simply no longer holds true". Denmark (1993) argues that the reason women hold fewer positions of higher status than men is due to the roles instilled in males and females. According to Denmark (1993), the male gender role is traditionally associated with competitiveness and skills related to achievements, whereas the female gender role "does less to promote leadership ability in the workforce, involving instead only preparation for domestic roles as wife and mother or lower level traditional jobs in the workforce" (Denmark, 1993, p. 345).

According to Ely and Padavic (2020), despite the progress in women gaining higher positions in organizations in the past decades and since scholars such as Denmark (1993), O'Leary (1997) and Schein and Müller (1992) have studied this issue, there remains a gender inequality at the workplace until today. In their study, Ely and Padavic (2020) found that women are not falling behind in their career because they are struggling with balancing their work and family life, as previously assumed. They rather came to the conclusion that primarily women were encouraged by the employer to make use of part-time models or to switch to less demanding internal positions which eventually lead to an obstruction of their career. This supports the earlier mentioned concept of horizontal segregation by Reskin and Roos (1990 cited in Kelan, 2012). Despite already pursuing a successful career, most women of the study by Ely and Padavic (2020) struggled with the idea of distancing themselves from the role of an ambitious professional. Push factors, such as work/family accommodations or the poor reputation of female partners with children, imparting on them a feeling of being a misfit in the work environment, put women in the dilemma of either undermining their career, or undermining their perception by others of being 'good' mothers (Ely & Padavic, 2020).

2.2.2. Opportunities

We continue our literature review by showing some opposing theories and findings arguing that gender stereotypes, implicit bias and organizational measures intended to support women might actually work in favour of them when pursuing a career and gaining top leadership positions (e.g. Filut, Kaatz & Carnes, 2017; Mölders et al., 2017). This is supported by Denmark (1993), who found that regardless of gender, a leader's empowering ability generally increases with status, meaning the higher the status, the more empowering he or she is perceived as.

However, referring rather to women turning gender inequality to good account, Rosette and Tost (2010) have found that there exists a general belief of women having to be more competent than their male colleagues when gaining top leadership positions, which might actually make them appear much more effective. Regarding leadership styles, Bass (1999) and Heilman and Okimoto (2007) argue that the combination of agentic and communal behaviour, as well as other female traits, such as being caring, cover the concept of transformational leadership which is believed to be the most effective and contemporary way to lead. This would imply that it is actually essential to embody female stereotypical traits in order to be recognized as a good leader.

Interestingly enough, a study by scholars Cantor and Bernay (1992 cited in Denmark, 1993) interviewing female, American politicians discovered to their surprise that none of the women encountered obstacles although working in a male dominated area. The respondents rather attributed their successful careers to their confidence in their abilities. This result led to the authors creating an equation for female leadership:

$$\textit{Leadership} = \textit{Competent Self} + \textit{Creative Aggression} + \textit{Woman Power}$$

Denmark (1993) explains the three elements as follows: the 'Competent Self' refers to a strong self-awareness, and positive and opportunistic thinking. Second, namely 'Creative Aggression' implies the leading of others as well as openly voicing. The last refers to a combination of "the best of both masculine and feminine qualities - combining strength and force with nurturance" (Denmark, 1993, p. 348). The element of 'Woman Power' thereby includes the ability to make a

positive difference for a higher purpose (Denmark, 1993). However, despite a certain compatibility with corporate organizations, as stated by Denmark (1993), the authors had solely women in politics at focus and not leaders of other areas.

Recently many organizations introduced quotas as enforcement of a predefined distribution of women in specific hierarchical levels to support them in their career (Krook, 2016; Sojo et al., 2016; Unzueta, Gutiérrez, & Ghavami, 2010). Despite the increase in use of quotas to support women into leadership positions (Terjesen & Sealy, 2016), the measure remains highly disputed in contemporary literature (Sojo et al., 2016). On the one hand, it is argued quotas categorically favour women in the hiring and promotion process and inhibit competition among all, thereby undermining a woman's competence and performance (Kakabadse et al., 2015). On the other hand, the introduction of quotas is justified by the effect of leveraging talented women and ensuring their right to progress in their career and promote gender equality (Terjesen & Sealy, 2016). Focusing on the positive arguments for the introduction of quotas, a research by Mölders et al. (2017) studied "the relationship between stereotypic views about women and support for quotas for women in leadership" (p. 877) while focusing on the stereotypes of men as well as the workplace traditionally being characterized as being agentic and women rather being associated with being communal. Despite some research indicating that women are increasingly seen as agentic (Wilde & Diekman, 2005), there still remains the view that they are less agentic than men (Steinmetz et al., 2014). Interestingly, in their research Mölders et al. (2017) discovered that, specifically in male-dominated industries, it appeared increasingly important for women to be seen as agentic, consequently being perceived as competent leaders. For this reason, the support for quotas is thereby viewed rather positive (Mölders et al., 2017; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Further discovered was the different perception of women, who rated their fellow females as much more agentic and communal than the participating men rated these women, indicating that women are influenced by an in-group bias, seeing their gender more positive (Rudman & Goodwin, 2004), or men being biased towards women (Castilla & Benard, 2010). Hence, this research shows that despite disputable arguments, introducing quotas to support women bypasses the possibility of facing negative sanctions through biased men. This can be particularly valuable in male-dominated organizations, and regardless of quotas, this research shows the positive view women have of each other.

In summary, while the above-mentioned scholars and authors emphasize challenges imposed on women due to gender stereotypes, such as the tendency to associate male traits with leadership (Eagly, Makhijani & Klonsky, 1992; Phelan & Rudman, 2010), they also indicate several possible positive outcomes of gender stereotyping in the career path, for instance considering those women who do manage to occupy leadership positions as more competent compared to their male counterparts (Rosette & Tost, 2010). Hence, they are paving the way for future research on favourable conditions for women striving for leadership. Following this outline of challenges and opportunities female professionals face due to gender stereotypes, and after having touched upon quotas as one organizational measure implemented to even the playing field, we will go on to examine which organizational initiatives are commonly used in the mission to support women.

2.3. Organizational Initiatives for Women

This section outlines common initiatives that organizations make use of in their quest of supporting women in their career advancement, as well as the effectiveness of said measures.

2.3.1. Common Organizational Initiatives

Hopkins, O'Neil, Passarelli and Bilimoria (2008) conducted research on development programs for women and organizations. They state that for leadership development programs to be effective, it is necessary to focus on both individual and organizational level learning. The authors go on to propose a categorization of development initiatives along the following themes: coaching, mentoring, assessment, training and education, networking, experiential learning, as well as career planning (Hopkins et al., 2008). In terms of mentoring for instance, they recommend to support the development of both male and female mentors and help them in managing their mentoring relationships. For organizations, it is key to ensure high-profile women are matched with high-profile executives to obtain access to relevant opportunities. In reference to networking, Hopkins et al. (2008) emphasize the importance for women of including both men and women in their networks, plus recognizing the beneficial nature of having networks. Vice versa, the authors see it as an organization's responsibility to find opportunities to provide women with increasing access to both informal and formal networking opportunities (Hopkins et al., 2008). When it comes to

career planning, the authors suggest women share their career plans with key individuals that occupy positions where they can help implementing those plans. On the organizational side, they deem it relevant to provide accountability for managers giving career and leadership development advice specifically for females (Hopkins et al., 2008). The underlying argument is first, leadership development programs are beneficial for both women and organizations as they extend women's political, human, and social portfolios. Secondly, these development initiatives prove a strategic advantage for organizations. And thirdly, it is key that women can feel connected to the objectives of the organization they work for to ensure they are able to regard themselves as being integral partners of the organization (Hopkins et al., 2008).

In light of our case company being a consultancy, we made it a point to discover what this industry in particular is doing to support women, and have found that the majority of larger consultancy firms offer a variety of initiatives and programmes explicitly for women and introduced campaigns to support women in their career opportunities and development (Consultancy.uk, 2019). In 2019, the *Times Top 50 Employers for Women* list in the U.K. revealed that among all employers included, 10 well-known consulting firms proved their efforts for gender equality, for creating an inclusive environment and career development opportunities for women (The Times & The Sunday Times, 2019). Among organizational measures, such as quotas and corporate initiatives like *Inclusion Starts With I* (Consultancy.uk, 2019), they provide “formal and informal mentoring, training, and relationship-building opportunities” (McKinsey & Company, n.d.) as well as “training designed to develop women leaders, including *Steering Your Career*, *Maximizing Your Career* and *Women in Negotiations*” (Accenture.com, n.d.).

Another measure intended to help women pertains to quotas. They are most prominently implemented in political systems in many countries and serve the purpose of creating equality by focusing on representation in numbers (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2005). As Lewis, Benschop and Simpson (2017) state, “[q]uota systems shift the burden of recruitment from the individual woman to those who control the recruitment process” (p. 16). However, this measure is quite controversial, in particular because it includes an element of being taken for granted. Opponents argue that with quota systems, women are being selected because of their gender instead of their qualities. Moreover, the implication is that quotas constitute “help for women lacking the strength and talent

to make it on their own or as reverse discrimination and the faulty preference of women over better qualified men” (Lewis, Benschop & Simpson, 2017, p. 17).

After having discussed common organizational measures, such as mentoring and the relevance of matching high-profile women with high-profile executives (Hopkins et al., 2008), the popularity of offering said measures within consultancies (Consultancy.uk, 2019; The Times & The Sunday Times, 2019) as well as women quotas and the associated controversy (Lewis, Benschop & Simpson, 2017), we deem it necessary to briefly examine the effectiveness of some measures in the next section.

2.3.2. Effectiveness

Ibarra, Carter and Silva (2010) took a closer look at mentorship programmes and their effectiveness for women compared to men. They found that the number of women being put into said programmes is rather high, 83 percent to be precise, whereas the percentage for men is at 76 percent. This would indicate a benefit for women. However, the authors found that in reality, it mostly means a high amount of work and effort for women. Despite mentoring and networking programmes as well as specific initiatives for women being popular organizational measures, the intended output of more female promotions do not take effect (Ibarra, Carter & Silva, 2010). They found that sponsorship, a special form of mentorship where mentors not only advise, but show investment into their mentees by actively promoting them by means of their own influence, is key to being promoted. As such, it is a much more frequent occurrence for men than women, explaining the lack of females in higher management positions (Ibarra, Carter & Silva, 2010). In the words of the authors, “women are overmentored and undersponsored” (Ibarra, Carter & Silva, 2010, p. 82).

As already discussed in the section on opportunities for women, Mölders et al. (2017) conducted a study regarding women quotas in leadership and their relation to female gender stereotypes. Specifically, they found the apparent importance of women being regarded as agentic in male-dominated industries, as they were consequently seen as competent leaders. Hence, quotas were considered as rather positive in this context (Mölders et al., 2017). Natividad (2010) supports the positive effects of quotas, particularly in reference to corporate boards. One example she refers to is Norway, which implemented a quota law in 2003, subsequently raising the percentage of women directors from 6.8 percent at implementation to 40.3 percent in 2010. More importantly, however,

a study by McKinsey and Company (2007) found that the higher female representation at senior manager and board level, the better the financial performance of the respective companies.

In sum, we described networking, training and education, and mentoring, among others, as common measures implemented by organizations wanting to support women in their career development (Hopkins et al., 2008), pointed out the tendency of consultancies to offer these initiatives (Consultancy.uk, 2019) and briefly discussed the effectiveness of some measures in order to find out if they serve their intended purpose (Ibarra, Carter & Silva, 2010; Natividad, 2010). Aiming to illustrate why the consulting industry in particular may favour supporting initiatives for female professionals, the next section of this literature review will outline the work environment at a consultancy and potential challenges for women due to gender stereotypes.

2.4. Career at a Consultancy

In this last section of our literature review, we provide a brief overview of research on consulting firms. We continue by elaborating on literature that focuses on the profession of a consultant and how organizational policies and framework conditions shape the terms of being a consultant and particularly what effect it has on female consultants.

In their publication on researching management consulting, Kipping and Clark (2012) showcase that in the previous two decades, research and publications on consulting firms have increased prominently, involving work by academic researchers as well as former consultants, exercising harsh criticism. They further display many different academic disciplines contributing to research on management consultancy, as being an industry of rapid growth, dynamic environment and debatable economic value. Nevertheless, Kipping and Clark (2012) argue that the presence of management consultancies in today's economic environment has shown their significant role for contemporary organizations. In order to continue with the same understanding for our study, we provide a general definition of consultancy by the Management Consultancies Association (n.d.) which has been reproduced by many other associations around the world (O'Mahoney & Markham, 2013):

“Management consulting is the practice of creating value for organizations, through improved performance, achieved by providing objective advice and implementing business solutions.”

While research on the influence, value, accountability, and power of management consultancies continues to characterize academic literature, our review has shown that critical research on the career structures of consultants, the framework conditions and the human factor in consultancies have been less examined. Moreover, as displayed in the previous sections, there is a broad range of research on organizations and gender, however, only few studies take a closer look at consultancies and gender.

According to Kipping and Clark (2012), it has become apparent that management consultancy firms have become one of the larger hirers in the economy, especially recruiting graduating undergraduates and postgraduates from business schools. The profession of a consultant, having become a synonym for the contemporary ‘knowledge worker’, has left traces not only in academic management literature, ever since the term was first coined by Drucker in 1959, but also in the industry and job market. Intellectual abilities have become a significant competitive advantage and key asset to many companies, creating a high demand for academic talents (Kipping & Clark, 2012; Drucker, 2002). Hence, the companies having to attract and retain highly sought-after talents offer development programmes and learning opportunities, enabling rapid personal growth and great career advancement and opportunities for young professionals (Muse, 2014). Graduates view particularly leading consulting firms as a stepping stone for higher management positions and associate the affiliation with an elite status (Armbrüster 2006). Despite the potential career growth, a significant trend of turnover among consultants has been observed, most notably due to an overwork culture (Alvesson, 2012; Armbrüster 2006).

Despite some research on the management of consultants, including organizational and structural conditions to which the consultant as an employee is exposed to, we agree with Alvesson (2012) that there still remain areas of this matter that need yet to be studied in a much more detailed manner. Among other topics, in his article Alvesson (2012) explores the conditions and structures a consultant is exposed to in his/her work life and what consequences follow. Alongside Armbrüster (2006), Alvesson (2012) discusses the high turnover among the work force of consultancies. They attribute this to the organizations having up-or-out policies at place, pushing consultants at all levels to either perform and pursue a promotion, or leave the organization voluntarily. Alvesson (2012) refers to this stimulus to the employees’ ambition to climb up the career ladder as ‘aspirational control’. Further reasons for the high turnover at consultancies are ascribed to consultancy work requiring long over time hours and intense travel activities between

clients (Alvesson, 2012; Armbrüster, 2006). Particularly junior professionals are often exploited, putting them under pressure to perform and hence to work overtime (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009). Despite consulting firms offering workplace flexibility policies, most employees do not take advantage of them, fearing that by taking, for example, paid parental leave or working part-time will lead to been seen as less committed to work (Wynn & Rao, 2019). Hence, the term ‘overwork culture’ has predominantly been associated with the profession of a consultant causing various consequences for their work-life balance, especially for women (Ely & Padavic, 2020).

Despite research being quite limited, three consulting-related factors are suggested that construct gender-specific issues: the above mentioned up-or-out policies, the nature of client contact in consulting work and the image of consultants rather being associated with men (Kelan, 2012). Related to the first, research finds the phenomenon of a ‘leaky pipeline’ predominantly existing at consultancies (Kelan, 2012). This term refers to the fact that women are almost equally recruited, however, they tend to drop out more frequently as they advance in their career (Rudolph, 2004), making up less than 15% at the partner level (Kelan, 2012). However, research also found that drop-out rates of women were not very different to that of men, but rather that women were not promoted to certain levels, most of all to top management positions, suggesting rather a blocked pipeline instead of one that is leaking (Kelan, 2012). High competition, excessive working hours and tight deadlines lead to inflexible career structures that do not allow taking time out or missing out on career relevant events which particularly seems unsuitable for women (Hewlett et al., 2007 cited in Kelan, 2012; Hewlett, 2007; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008). Regarding the second gender-specific issue of client contact in consultancy work, Quental (2010 cited in Kelan, 2012) identified biases of the clients towards women that create potential barriers to their career progression. This is especially disadvantaging for women in leading positions since the client contact increases the higher one is in a hierarchy (Kelan, 2012). Finally, as elaborated upon in previous sections, the ideal consultant is associated with stereotypical masculine characteristics, which results in women generally having difficulties to fulfil this image (Kelan, 2012), equivalent to the ‘think manager - think male’ phenomenon introduced by Schein and colleagues (Schein, Mueller et al., 1989; Schein & Mueller 1992). Hence, women tend to work in departments of a consultancy that are rather stereotyped as feminine as they often have a strong focus on people (Kelan, 2012), for instance, human resources, organizational development and diversity (Rudolph, 2004; Marsh, 2009).

2.5. Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we have embedded our research in literature on gender stereotypes and implicit bias, career as a woman and career at a consultancy as well as organizational initiatives. We have argued that whilst gender stereotypes have historically disadvantaged women by limiting them to a specific set of traits, there has been a shift in recent years towards an adaptation between stereotypes and the changing social roles women occupy. Further, we have outlined resulting challenges for women's career advancement, such as 'think manager - think male' (Schein, Mueller et al., 1989; Schein & Mueller 1992), as well as opportunities, like a revised perspective on leadership in favour of women. Subsequently, we discovered a gap this thesis aims to fill, namely a lack of studies showcasing women's perspective on these issues. Next, we provided an overview of common organizational measures aimed at resolving some of the challenges we identified and elaborated on their effectiveness. We concluded this literature review by describing what a career at a consultancy entails, with a focus on gender-specific issues caused by an overwork culture, up-or-out policies, client contact and masculine traits associated with the ideal image of a consultant.

3. Methodology

This chapter aims to describe our methodology by first connecting our research approach to the critical research tradition. Basing our research on the feminist and interpretive tradition provides a perspective of female consultants from different hierarchical levels. Thereafter, we will give the reader insights on how we approached the research and continue by demonstrating our data collection process of our empirical material and describing the essential characteristics of our ten interviewees. Furthermore, we will explain how we evaluated the empirical material to present the most essential findings for the discussion and the results to our research questions while considering possible influences and limitations that stem from our research approach.

3.1. Philosophical Grounding

Our research is based on a dual approach, adopting the traditions of the critical feminist while building upon the interpretive thought, as described by Prasad (2018). As part of the critical feminist tradition, our study involves women's empowerment (Prasad, 2018), especially in regards to their career opportunities in a male-dominated organizational environment and their efforts to strive for higher positions. More precisely, our study explores the influence of gender stereotypes and implicit bias, and the reality they cause specifically for women in a profession that is associated with masculine traits. By conducting semi-structured interviews our aim is to study how female professionals perceive gender stereotypes and implicit bias affecting career opportunities for women and how they perceive the corporate organization addressing this phenomenon.

We agree with Reinharz and Davidman (1992) that our focus on women might enable us as female interviewers to create common ground and trust, thus allowing the female interviewees and us to exploit a deeper awareness as well as construct meaning that would potentially not be feasible in a mixed-gender composition. Hence, by constructing a space for liberation and adopting an interpretive approach, we take the reality as it is constructed by the individual interpretation in this social context (Prasad, 2018). However, the combination of the feminist and interpretive approach enables many perspectives and realities to exist in this social context of which some could be more neglected than others as their truth is socially less common or accepted. Our aim thereby is to bring forward the female perspectives and realities that construct unequal truths.

According to Reinharz and Davidmann (1992), “feminist research methods are methods used in research projects by people who identify themselves as a feminist” (p. 6). Thus, as feminists, we believe all individual perspectives and perceptions are equally valid and ought to be treated equal. While this includes the interests and understanding of men, in our study we focus on the initial stance of feminism, meaning the empowerment of women and “the gendered nature of work, [...] and organizational structuring” (Prasad, 2018, p. 201).

Despite numerous previous feminist research and the contemporary discourse on women empowerment, equal opportunities, gender stereotypes, and implicit bias in the workplace (Prasad, 2018), we believe it is a valuable contribution to existing literature to consider women’s perception and perspective from different hierarchical levels at a consultancy. Notably, the context of a consultancy with its unique work conditions and economic position provides a particular fundamental prerequisite of the research area.

3.2. Data Collection Process and Characteristics of the Interviewees

Our study is based on interviews with women from different hierarchical positions at a consultancy. It was the aim to gather perspectives and perceptions from women of diverse hierarchical distribution, however, it was not possible to expand the variety from the senior manager level upwards. With great support from a personal contact who is employed at the case company, in the following referred to as ‘The Consultancy’ due to reasons of confidentiality, the selection of interviewees and the scheduling of the interviews with the respective respondents was quickly organized. The study is built on ten interviews with each lasting between 30 and 45 minutes on average. Five of the interviews were conducted in person at one of the offices and the remaining five via Google Hangouts, a video conferencing service, due to the interviewees being located across Europe. All interviewees took their time to respond and explain their perspectives, and gave us their full attention throughout the interview. Despite initial concerns, we did not perceive a negative effect or loss of content from conducting some of the interviews digitally. The interviews allowed the collection of qualitative data in form of personal perceptions and experiences on different topics which enabled us to gain insights on emotions, motivation, and conflicts, instead

of plain, up-front responses that potentially lack awareness and reflection. All participants were informed about the research topic in advance in order to give them the opportunity to prepare and reflect if thought necessary.

To focus and listen attentively to the interviewees, and to be able to respond and dig deeper into certain topics, we recorded the interviews with prior consent by the interviewees and refrained from taking notes. Furthermore, the recordings assured that information did not get lost or overseen. Despite assuring the anonymity of the interviewees, when interpreting and analysing the data for the research purposes, one has to be aware of potential bias influencing the answers given when being recorded (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). However, the interviewees are experienced professionals, therefore, we, the authors, argue that they are sufficiently aware and reflective to not be generally biased or adjust their answers due to being recorded.

The interview guide (see Appendix A) was developed according to the purpose and problem area of this research, which are based on related literature presented in Chapter 2. The interview questions can be divided into the general perception, personal experiences, and the perceived role of women initiatives and programmes initiated by the case company. It was the aim to phrase questions that are open, easy to understand, and enable comprehensive answers in order to allow the interviewees to fully express their thoughts. However, according to Sekaran and Bougie (2016) it is essential to phrase unbiased questions to prevent the interviewees being biased by the interviewers. Therefore, we avoided using negative connotations and phrases conveying personal opinions to ensure a neutral starting-point. The chosen approach of a semi-structured interview allowed us to give room for expanding the topic, ask additional questions to gain deeper insights and to not set limits to the interviewees' answers (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). While we agreed beforehand on who would lead the interview, both of us being present enabled the other to ask further questions, or for more details when necessary.

The interviewed female professionals work at the same consultancy, however, due to the flexible structure of consultancy work they all work at different locations. All interviewed women are employed at the German organization, except for one that works in the Netherlands, and are originally from five different countries. However, the location and origin of the interviewees are not at focus for this research. The interviewees share characteristics, such as being mostly from the

‘millennial generation’², with the exception of three interviewees, and pursuing a career and aspiring higher positions. Further characteristics, such as the hitherto hierarchical position, marital status and if they have children can be taken from Table 1. The case company is a major player in today’s consulting industry and is internationally known for pushing gender equality and diversity in their organization.

	Position	Marital status	Children	Age
Interviewee 1	Associate (2 nd year)	Single	No	26-30
Interviewee 2	Associate (2 nd year)	Single	No	20-25
Interviewee 3	Associate (2 nd year)	Single	No	26-30
Interviewee 4	Assistant/Secretary	Relationship	No	20-25
Interviewee 5	Associate (1 st year)	Married	No	30-35
Interviewee 6	Senior Associate	Married	No	26-30
Interviewee 7	Senior Manager	Relationship	No	40-45
Interviewee 8	Manager	Married	Yes	30-35
Interviewee 9	Senior Associate	Relationship	No	26-30
Interviewee 10	Intern/Working Student	Relationship	No	20-25

Table 1. Selected characteristics of the interviewees.

² ‘millennial generation’: “Anyone born between 1981 and 1996 [...]” (Dimock, 2019)

3.3. Data Analysis Process

The process of our analysis is based on the two steps of sorting and reducing by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), whereby the aim was to create an overview and sort our empirical material as well as decide on which set of categories to prioritize. A third step added by the authors, ‘arguing’, begins in the presentation of our findings and is continued in the discussion part of this thesis. As Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) emphasize the importance of openness when sorting empirical material, we employed a critical-reflexive approach where we continuously challenged each other’s ideas. For instance, while transcribing the interviews, we made it a point to exchange primary interpretations of the content and manner of the responses, as well as discussing the reliability and importance to our research topic.

To be able to compile the written interviews, we transferred the audio file in to a transcription software. To avoid mistakes, we then split up the interviews and compared the transcripts with the audio files while correcting any errors. The following step pertained to the sorting process, where we again divided the interviews and thoroughly read them to ensure no important details were overlooked (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Since sorting addresses the “problem of chaos” (p. 71), labelled as such by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) due to the complexity of qualitative material and an inherent element of disorder, this step was meant to structure the gathered material. We did this in two steps; first, we each highlighted statements we deemed relevant according to content, thereby creating preliminary topics that would later be developed into categories. After getting together to discuss our results and decide on which topics to proceed with, the second step served to sort the statements based on form as well, meaning how our respondents answered, particular expressions or words they used etc. A particular challenge throughout this process were “negative cases” (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 98) that seemed to contradict our initial explanation, thus required us to rephrase. In our approach of openly and critically discussing each other’s viewpoints, we created a table, listing every category we decided on. In the next step, we sorted all the previously highlighted quotes into said categories. In a final step, we defined one main research question which our findings revolve around:

How do women at a consultancy perceive gender stereotypes and organizational measures for gender equality affecting their career opportunities?

Since the analysis process is usually not straightforward, but rather chaotic with a variety of things happening at the same time (Styhre, 2013), there was no clear distinction between our sorting and reducing procedures. While developing the topics chosen during the sorting process, we simultaneously clustered them into categories and focused on those that appeared most relevant, ignoring others that appeared less relevant to our research question. According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), reducing qualitative material is essential to create an amount of data that is manageable. The process of choosing those categories we deemed relevant is referred to as categorical reduction, which was then followed by illustrative reduction. Specifically, this means the identification of text segments which highlight a critical feature within our chosen categories (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Here for instance, we only used quotes that emphasized the nuance of experiences described by our respondents in terms of gender stereotypes (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Vice versa, we refrained from including any references not directly linked to our research question.

After presenting our empirical findings in the following chapter, we critically examined a few aspects raised during our interviews and put them in relation to existing literature in form of a discussion in chapter five. As stated by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), at this point researchers commonly face the “problem of authority” (p. 143), where they question the relevance of their findings in comparison to existing research, thus attempting to make a valuable contribution to academic literature by means of a discussion.

3.4. Critical Reflections on the Data Collection and Analysis Process

We are aware that our qualitative research was potentially influenced by a set of different limitations and influences. Consequently, we will discuss and point out a variety of said limitations and influences in our data collection and analysis process as they might impact the quality of our empirical material.

First, we feel it important to note that all respondents work not only for the same department, that being ‘People & Organization’, but for the same team within The Consultancy. This means that our findings are not transferable to other departments or team settings, and are not representative for The Consultancy as a whole. Moreover, any answers given by the respondents are subjective,

which means it is possible that they adjusted their answers to some degree since they knew they were being recorded. Furthermore, we noticed that a few of the respondents had not previously thought about the issues of gender stereotypes and/or implicit bias and thus seemed slightly overwhelmed with some of the questions, while others appeared rather familiar with the topics. As a consequence, interviews 3 and 5 provided less utilizable material for this thesis than the remainder of the interviewees. Although one might argue that it would have been beneficial to send our interview guide beforehand to provide the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the questions, we consciously decided against it as our intention was to gather answers as authentic as possible. One last limitation pertaining to the interviewees concerns potential cultural differences in mindset and attitude based on their country of origin that might have affected their answers.

4. Empirical Findings and Analysis

In this chapter, the empirical findings of the conducted interviews are presented and analysed to provide a profound understanding of the problem area of this thesis, as well as answers to the posed research question. In the process of conducting, transcribing, and categorizing the interviews, two key findings that refer to the research question were identified.

For one, we found a discrepancy of the interviewees' explicit and implicit views towards gender stereotypes, thus starting with their assertion of gender stereotypes not affecting them personally. This is followed by and contrasted with their implicit belief of stereotypical thinking leading to disadvantages in leadership as well as having children being detrimental to a woman's career. Secondly, we discovered a lack of effectiveness of organizational measures and initiatives that are aimed at supporting women in their career advancement and therefore the promotion of gender equality. We found that such measures and initiatives might actually reinforce gender stereotypical thinking, thereby contradicting their intended purpose. These key findings provide the reader with structure and guidance through our analysis.

4.1. Discrepancy in Explicit and Implicit Statements

4.1.1. Explicitly unaffected by Gender Stereotypes

The first significant finding pertains to the respondents' perception of stereotypes and implicit bias. Without exception, they all agreed that in general gender stereotypes exist to various extents, however, some felt it is more prevalent among the older generation and less so among their peers. It was equally evident that they considered themselves not having been affected by it and did not feel that being a woman gave them a disadvantage in their career opportunities. In fact, any examples given solely revolved around other women.

Stereotypes and Implicit Bias - No Personal Effects

The superordinate finding of the data collected through the interviews is that all interviewees explicitly expressed not being affected by gender stereotypes and implicit bias at their workplace and not being disadvantaged in their career opportunities due to their gender:

*“[...] **I haven't been really affected** by that. Like, I never felt that I couldn't do something that a male person could have done in business, like I never felt that in school, I never felt that during my apprenticeship, [...] it was never that people gave me the feeling I do something which I should not be doing because I'm a woman. So, **I never really felt attacked because of my gender** to be honest, like never.” (Interviewee 1)*

One interviewee suggested a certain imbalance in career opportunities between male and female colleagues in previous times at The Consultancy, however, she has not experienced it herself since she started working there:

*“[...] before I joined [The Consultancy], we had different teams, so our team was a lot smaller. And then [...] we had **more males in the leadership positions**. I know some colleagues then felt like, ‘oh, **if you're a male, you will get better projects**’ [...], you will make a quicker career out of it. But to be honest, the years I've been working here, no, **I don't really feel that**.” (Interviewee 9)*

Also, when projecting onto other female colleagues, it was the perception of the majority of the interviewees that they were not perceived or treated any differently than their male colleagues:

*“We have a female manager on our team and she's absolutely fantastic. She **gets stuff done** and I don't personally, like, **I don't perceive her any differently in a negative connotation compared to the male managers** that we have on our team.” (Interviewee 6)*

Acknowledgement and Awareness of Gender Stereotypes

Nevertheless, all interviewees pointed towards a gender imbalance at the upper management levels at The Consultancy and attributed this to gender bias being more present in the business

environment. More precisely, some argued that due to the business environment being more male dominated, the ideal professional pursuing a career is unconsciously shaped by male characteristics and judged based on this biased view:

*“So, you will have [...] these [...] gender biases being **more prevalent in the business world** than maybe in the general society. As you have a **male dominated environment**. With a male dominated environment, male characteristics, male behaviour is more permanent. So, you kind of say, ‘okay, **that’s the standard**’. And that’s why other kind of behaviour or how you do things around here might be **judged in a different way unconsciously**.”*
(Interviewee 8)

This, in turn, results in male characteristics being a norm of sorts and stereotypical female characteristics and behaviour being unconsciously perceived and judged divergently, thus, resulting in possible negative consequences for women. The interviewee (8) showed a high level of awareness in regards to a potential influence of gender stereotypes and implicit bias in her career. However, she also reflected on not ever being treated differently in terms of career opportunities compared to her male colleagues, despite being a woman and having taken time off work when she had a child. Hence, she demonstrates an expectation of being confronted with negative sanctions, however, explicitly recalls no disadvantages throughout her career. Her being in a manager position in her early 30’s and also having a child confirms her sentiment of not feeling affected.

A potential downside of an awareness for gender issues was observed in a much younger and less experienced interviewee (2):

*“[...] of course, we all know some studies around this. And then it’s like theory, and then it’s what I actually experienced at [the Consultancy], right? [...] Maybe interesting to share is that **my first project was actually only with guys** [...]. And that was pretty interesting because I’ve also been always really interested in [...] gender biases [...]. So [...] **I paid attention** to how it is to be with only guys and they will also match my experience.”*
(Interviewee 2)

This specific attention to gendered thinking might cause confirmation bias. It makes her potentially more biased because she might see stereotypical behaviour where there actually is none.

Considering that this interviewee has not yet gained much experience in the business environment and stated that she has not yet encountered any negative effects of gender stereotypes, might show that reflecting on gender stereotypes without experience to compare to could initiate unfounded interpretations of some situations. Interestingly, the same interviewee (2) hesitantly argued that gender stereotypes play no role in a person's career progression:

*"[...] sometimes I don't know if it's [...] really then the gender because it really depends also on the person and also on the **person's ambitions**."* (Interviewee 2)

The hesitant consideration of her correlating career opportunities with a person's character, performance and skills rather than with stereotypical thinking, shows her unsteady position on how much impact gender stereotypes and implicit bias actually have. Therefore, acknowledging that gender stereotypes exist based on research is one aspect, however, experiencing any effects caused by them is a whole other. According to all interviewees, none of them recall experiencing any kind of disadvantages in their career. If anything, they could only give examples of other women where they assumed that they might have been negatively affected by gender stereotypes and implicit bias. Hence, the question arises if acknowledging and being aware of gender stereotypes and implicit bias might actually cause counter-effects. It appears as if they mostly disadvantage women by over-occupying their thoughts with the issue and thereby standing in their own way.

Gender Stereotypes and Implicit Bias - A Generation Gap

An interesting perspective emerged from several interviews that could explain why the discourse on gender stereotypes, implicit bias, and the negative effects for women is prevalent in today's organizations, however seen as less so occurring among younger professionals. Some of the interviewees perceived the phenomenon as increasingly present in the older generation:

*"[...], but I think there's also a bit of **an age thing** maybe. Because **the partners are kind of my parents' age**, and if I look at my parents, my mother also stopped working for a few years when we were smaller. I can imagine that **with our generation things are different now, in terms of stereotyping and roles of the family**."* (Interviewee 9)

According to this statement, the issues of gender stereotyping and implicit bias are more present at the upper management levels. This perception can be supported by the fact that indeed most people

at higher management positions are from older generations, thus, implying them holding more traditional views on gender and women in the workplace. Therefore, the gender imbalance caused by stereotypes could be influenced by this specific critical group of influential people.

The following argument was brought up by another interviewee (1) regarding a negative example she witnessed, coupled with a certain bias towards men. Specifically, she seemed to believe that stereotypes against women are held by old men, but not by women her age:

*“[...] it's just something that you would rather expect [...] if you have a male boss or manager, who's like 50, 60, for them just having the [...] **more outdated gender roles**, I probably wouldn't be that surprised. But for me having a very engaging, motivated manager in the beginning of her 30's [...], I kind of felt we **should support each other more** [...].”*
(Interviewee 1)

In expecting older men to think in stereotypes, but not women of younger age, she displays her own biased thinking: for one, she seems to believe that stereotyping among the older generation of managers and leaders is to be expected. However, the same does not hold for younger generations and especially not women, since it is clear that she expects solidarity among women to break stereotypical thinking. In short, a generation gap regarding stereotypical thinking and potential implicit bias could support the explicit claim of all interviewees that they are not affected by them as it is primarily prevalent among the older generation.

4.1.2. Implicitly affected by Gender Stereotypes

The second relevant finding concerns the implicit effect of gender stereotypes and implicit bias on side of the respondents. As elaborated in the previous section, while all agreed on the existence of these issues, the interviewees claimed that they did not extend to them personally. Interestingly, it became apparent that stereotypical thinking in fact coloured the respondents' thinking in relation to their own career progression, even for those who were unfamiliar with the issue of gender stereotypes thus far. As such, whilst they made it a point to distance themselves from the topic on a conscious level, their perspectives were still biased - they just appeared unaware of this discrepancy.

Gender Stereotypes - An Obstacle in a Woman's Career Progression

While the respondents acknowledged the existence of gender stereotypes and related disadvantages for women, they also emphasized that none of it extended towards themselves. Moreover, as elaborated earlier, they attempted to argue that for a woman's career progression performance and skills were deciding factors. If that were the case, however, then the implication would be that the interviewees inherently believe that women rarely have the necessary skill set for leadership positions as the general consensus was a lack of female representation at the top:

*"[...] at [the Consultancy], also my team, we definitely have **only guys in [...] senior positions** [...], we have our partners, they are all male [...] but we also have **some females** who are actually really highly up." (Interviewee 2)*

Not only are they aware of this imbalance, they also noted that females with children in leadership positions are even rarer:

*"So, I'm hoping that one day a partner with children or **female partners with children**, it's not this **unicorn** anymore that everyone looks up to, but that this was just normal that we have male partners, female partners, some decided to have children and it should be also okay to not have children. [...] And I think this should be also accepted and fine." (Interviewee 1)*

By comparing mothers in higher managerial positions with unicorns, it seems as if in the eyes of the interviewee they are almost a myth or fairy tale. In particular, this shows that she actually believes having a career and having children is seemingly supernatural and not compatible for women, a sentiment that was shared by the majority of interviewees. This association with supernaturality strongly contrasts with the interviewees' explicit statements of not being disadvantaged by gender stereotypes. Consequently, the question is, how does this belief affect their view of their own work-related future and chances of having a career?

Stereotypes of Women in Leadership

We found that gender stereotyping played a significant role particularly in relation to women and leadership, specifically in comparison with their male colleagues:

*"[...] what's the problem of female and male stereotypes for leadership, is that **leadership** is seen or is described often with a lot of **male characteristics**: so, **strong** and **dominant***

*and things like that, while **females** are like **caring** or maybe even **empathy** [...].”*
(Interviewee 8)

On the one hand, the interviewee noticed the problematic nature of leadership attributes having a tendency to correlate with male characteristics at the expense of traditionally female traits. However, on the other hand this indicates her inherent belief that by acting as a stereotypical woman, i.e. by being empathetic, she would inadvertently undermine her chances of obtaining any leadership positions as it does not align with how a typical leader is pictured. This shows the stereotype she holds of women in leadership – a stereotype that was similarly remarked upon by a second interviewee:

*“So, maybe with women, especially who are trying to take like more leadership roles [...], sometimes that's **perceived a bit negative** because they come off as like **bossy** or something. Yeah, just **not welcome**. Whereas maybe if a **male** were to do something similar [...], it would be perceived as like [...] **taking ownership** and really leading the team and doing something **helpful**. So, I think I see that happen sometimes. Maybe not all the time, but I think it's a stereotype.”* (Interviewee 6)

This comparison is striking because the diverging perception of the same behaviour in a man and a woman is made abundantly clear. In particular, the contrast in wording is worth noting here: a woman acting in a leading fashion portrays behaviour that is ‘not welcome’; a man doing the same is seen as ‘taking ownership’. Consequently, the image being conveyed is that women are not supposed to take ownership and take the lead. In reverse, it is being said that they should remain being the caring, helpful lower-level employees. Further, they are thereby discouraged from taking on leadership positions since the required behaviour is not valued in women. The interviewee ‘thinking’ this could be a stereotype exemplifies how these implicitly affect her beliefs about women in the workplace. Said beliefs extended also to the context of physical appearance:

*“My mentor [...] said that she needs to be more dominant so that the males take her serious, because there are so many [...] male senior manager and she is [...] a **small person**, so that she **needs to be dominant** in her acting.”* (Interviewee 4)

*“[...] my **voice** is always a challenge. Because it's like **childish**. And it's hard. Because, you know, like, psychologically, there were a lot of studies that proved that if your voice is a bit **lower** then you will be **taken more seriously** by people so they kind of understand you better and get your decisions better.”* (Interviewee 10)

Implied are the interviewees' convictions that looking a certain way will prove a further disadvantage for women in leadership. Being small is equivalent to being unsuitable for any higher positions that include leading in some form, unless a woman adapts her behaviour to what was previously established as stereotypically male, i.e. acting in a dominant manner. The same can be said for females with voices that might be considered childlike. Moreover, both indicate that traditional masculinity is favoured as anything outside the norm of the tall, loud and strong man is not accepted. The bottom line is that thereby, women are being told that having the necessary education, skills and performance is not enough to be successful leaders if they have the genetic misfortune of exhibiting physical traits that enforce the stereotype of women as the weaker sex, such as being shorter or having a higher voice. As one interviewee succinctly put it, it is an issue that revolves around respect:

*"[...] just seeing, for example, so many men up in higher positions. For whatever reason, it's almost like **they get more respect**, just because they're male when it shouldn't be that way, like the thoughts that they have and what they're sharing is somehow **more valuable**."*
(Interviewee 6)

Not only does it serve the stereotype of women not being good enough on their own to fill a leader's shoes, this entire conversation also shows the interviewees' implicit conviction that women typically do not demonstrate behaviour that is regarded as compatible with leadership, whereas men do. This perfectly demonstrates that gender stereotypes do, in fact, strongly affect the way the interviewees think about women in leadership and about their own professional future.

While for some interviewees, the rare sight of females in top management positions was considered inspiring, they immediately associated it with sacrifices, particularly in reference to the seemingly necessary renounce of having children:

*"[...] but we also have some **females who are actually really high up**. And I think that's also very **inspiring**, but maybe you also **have to give up** then on things right, because **they are not having kids**."* (Interviewee 2)

Having Children - A Woman's Sickness

On the topic of women working and having children, one interviewee made a rather expressive comparison:

*“But of course, as a woman, it **may take longer to reach that goal** if you decide in between to [...] **have a child**, but on the other hand, **if this male gets sick**, [...] has a serious condition and needs to stop for two years to recover. **He also loses two years.**” (Interviewee 1)*

While the interviewee might not have meant this in a provocative fashion, we were perplexed by the sober comparison drawn. First, comparing women falling pregnant with men becoming sick enough to be unable to work for a period of two years is difficult, since the frequency of the two situations arguably diverges significantly: women having children is a regular occurrence, whereas men contracting an illness of the necessary severity to be unfit to work, is rather rare. Secondly, and more importantly, the interviewee implies that having children is a woman's equivalent for men falling seriously ill. In other words, she indirectly describes having children as a sickness only affecting women. Besides it being negatively perceived by the interviewee, it further indicates her belief that for women who want to progress in their career, starting a family is something that should be avoided at all costs – because who would want to be seriously ill? Moreover, this point makes it clear how she is in fact implicitly affected by gender stereotypes.

Whilst the remaining interviewees were not as stark in their statements, they all shared the sentiment of children presenting an inhibiting factor in a woman's career progression:

*“And I always do say if we talk about consultancy [...] you can have both family and career, [...] maybe it's **hard to have your big career steps at the same time when your children are small** [...], but that's also your **own decision** if you want to have a nanny in the beginning, or if you want to spend time with your children.” (Interviewee 8)*

*“I don't know if I would be **still a consultant** if I would have children [...].” (Interviewee 7)*

*“So, the question is, if you really miss out, I don't think so. It's just a **personal feeling** and I mean, the good thing, especially at [The Consultancy], I saw many people, changing teams. So, for example, then going rather to **internal positions**, or we have many internal projects, as well, [...].” (Interviewee 1)*

A common theme here is the interviewees' perception that having children whilst attempting to pursue a career means having one at the expense of the other. The first and last quote above in particular exemplify the discrepancy in the respondents' thinking: They start their sentence by affirming that having children and a career can co-exist, and move on to stating you will have to choose one over the other. Interviewee (1) naturally assumes women will leave their consulting jobs and move to an internal position once they become mothers. This almost seems like a knee-jerk reaction, as if she is conditioned to relate one with the other. By doubting remaining a consultant if she had children, interviewee (7) demonstrates the same thought patterns. Essentially, their assumption of reaching a point where they will need to choose between the role of a mother and the role of a business woman blatantly shows how strongly gender stereotyping implicitly affects them. It is worth noting at this point that the only mother among our interviewees followed this implied career path, as she switched to an internal position after returning from parental leave. In addition, they feel as if a decision to have children involves some form of justification:

*"[...] constantly arguing if I can do this job with kids or not. So, it's **definitely easier if you do not have children**, but I would not say it's impossible. I always wanted to have children but at the moment I have the feeling **there is so much at stake** actually, that **I'm not sure if I'm willing [...]** to give this up." (Interviewee 1)*

The notion of having to justify such a decision implies that it is something out of the norm, an anomaly that needs further explaining. Thus, it involves extra effort on the women's side and paints the option of focusing on their career as the easier, more attractive one. As the interviewee (1) stated, it suggests that there are high stakes involved and indicates a high amount of risk, hence asking women to carefully consider if having children is worth it.

This section of the analysis shows that despite explicitly dismissing the idea of gender stereotypes and implicit bias having any effect on their own careers, all of the interviewees, without exception, are convinced that there will come a point in their near future where a choice will have to be made: career or family.

4.2. Organizational Measures reinforcing Stereotypical Thinking

Throughout our interviews, two particular measures aimed at supporting women at work were mentioned repeatedly: the implementation of women quotas and company-wide initiatives, such as trainings or networking events. Whilst attempting to gauge their effectiveness, we discovered that they are perceived to primarily reinforce gender stereotypes, in particular that of women being the weaker sex and caregivers, and men being superior to women, implying that women require special treatment.

4.2.1. Quotas - Women as the Weaker Sex

As was noted by various interviewees, The Consultancy makes use of quotas in their hiring and promotion decisions to ensure women are represented in higher management positions. However, we had the impression that they are not seen as truly supportive by women and instead appear to undermine their confidence in their own skills:

*“I also have the feeling with the promotions that women may have it easier when they’re competing against other men because we **need to fulfil certain numbers**. And if you only promote men next year, people will question that, [...] and this is why I think it becomes a bit tricky because I think all of **the women working in our company, they are there for a reason**. [...] they do a great job [...], but **they should not only be promoted just because they’re a woman**, and they need to promote some women right now. [...] they should be promoted because they did a great job, and they **fulfil all the criteria of being promoted**. And [...] I think it’s **nowadays way easier to climb up the ladder** a bit faster than maybe a few years ago. Because **they have to fulfil those numbers**.” (Interviewee 1)*

While the interviewee recognizes that quotas can help women climb the career ladder faster, it is obvious that she struggles with the implications. This conveys that women are hired or promoted because of their gender instead of their performance, which in turn leads to self-doubt and the feeling of not being good enough. Furthermore, quotas imply that there are not enough women that are good enough to rise up in their career if left to their own devices, but rather they need help: similarly interviewee (1) said, they are supposed to make it easier for women. Hence, the message

that is being sent is not ‘we value and appreciate your work and want to help you progress despite the difficulties you face due to gender stereotypes’, but ‘unlike your male colleagues, you do not have the necessary skills to make it on your own, so we will help you in your career’. Whereas technically quotas are aimed at quality, meaning their purpose is to ensure women’s work is appreciated as being just as worthy as that of men, the interviewee’s repeated reference to numbers indicates otherwise. Rather, what is actually conveyed and sticks with women is that this measure mainly revolves around quantity, reducing women to numbers, and serves to uphold merely the appearance of gender equality. In short, quotas do not fight gender stereotypes, they reinforce them, particularly that of women being the weaker sex.

4.2.2. Initiatives - Women as Caregiving and Men as Superior

Another frequently stated approach at The Consultancy is carrying out development programmes and women initiatives. These are specifically designed to raise awareness, educate and support women in regards to issues they might face caused by gender stereotypes and implicit bias. The Diversity Manager gave some insights on specific events and trainings The Consultancy has put into practice so far:

*“[...] we offer different training programmes for female colleagues. So, it's **leadership programmes** that are especially designed for women, and **only women** can sign-up for them. [...] it's about [...] **how to progress your career as a woman**. Then [...] we have different **network setups**, [...]. [...] a speech about gender diversity and how important networking is. And then we had an actual workshop on **how do you network strategically**, so not just to talk to somebody, think about “Okay, who do I have to talk to pursue my career? [...] **how do I want to be seen and called?**” [...], so also a bit of **self-branding** things. [...] So, programmes and workshops are **around unconscious bias and inclusive leadership** but it's both so we call it “From awareness to action”. So, raise awareness for unconscious biases, but also define what is inclusive in our actions. So how can we actually **be more inclusive** and on a day to day basis?” (Interviewee 8)*

While the interviewee describes a large variety of initiatives and programmes that are in place at The Consultancy, the impression arises that these organizational measures serve simply as a trend to help women deal with problems they encounter throughout their career ‘as a woman’. It implies that ‘as a woman’ you have to worry about which box you are put in, as if there is a broad choice

of labels to pick from, with women having to act according to the label they want to be versus the one they have been branded with. The latter, if applicable, would indicate a belief of women generally being the weaker sex and being reduced to this belief by others. Even if it were up to women ‘branding’ themselves, it shows a certain necessity of explicitly communicating and acting according to one specific image, thus, excluding the possibility of embodying a variety of identities (e.g. being caring and firm). While the initiatives, training and networking events are initiated with good intentions and most interviewees demonstrated a personal interest, all interviewees, except for the Diversity Manager, still had rather negative connotations. All seemed to have good reasons to not be able to attend such women initiatives and training. Among the explicit reasons were non-availability due to restrictions at lower hierarchy levels and most commonly, due to limited time:

*“[...] it's really hard to say, okay, on a Friday, I now have joined this for four hours. And even though **it doesn't give me any payoffs**, you know, it would be **good for yourself** [...] and then we don't really join it because we feel like if I join this now **then I have to work on the weekend**.” (Interviewee 2)*

Despite seeing a personal benefit in such initiatives, the extra time required for attending such events means women have to choose between adding even more hours to their work, or enjoying their weekend like everybody else. Essentially, initiatives aimed at helping women actually put them at a disadvantage compared to their male colleagues, as any time they expand on these measures is time they are unable to dedicate to their job. As such, the cost involved seems to outweigh the potential personal benefits. For one, this means the initiatives elaborated on actually fail their purpose, being the support for women at work. Secondly, they reinforce the stereotype of women being caregivers as the underlying expectation is that if they want to improve their situation, they have to take care of any career-obstructing difficulties themselves. In addition, by offering only initiatives and programmes for women and none for men, the two genders are separated. In particular, it is implied that women are in need of special treatment. This potentially leads to a decrease in motivation to make use of these offers as it could label the participating women as being incapable of succeeding in the business environment without support.

Albeit phrased differently, a criticism that was expressed by several interviewees was the fact that most programmes and initiatives on gender stereotypes and implicit bias are available for women only:

*“It's **just for women**, yes. So, I think that's because they **[men] are not invited**. They don't really, like, think about it too much.” (Interviewee 2)*

As a consequence, awareness is mostly raised among women, indicating that the issues discussed only concern them and that men, not being invited, do neither feel addressed nor deem it necessary to get involved, or even feel partly responsible for unequal treatment and career opportunities. However, after we dug deeper, the Diversity Manager explained that this limitation to women is to help create a certain environment. From her statement, we derived that in some situations a somewhat safer and homogenous environment is appreciated by the participants:

*“For example, they get training on [...] communication style. [...] **women communicate differently**. And also, I don't know if you see that sometimes the dynamic in a **mixed environment is different** than the dynamic in a, yeah, a female group, because [...] **in business environment female colleagues are most of the times the minority**. So, it's nice to be in an environment that is different sometimes.” (Interviewee 8)*

Pointing out that compared to men, women communicate differently and thus benefit from being in an all-female environment implies they need protecting, which in turn clearly indicates the belief that special treatment is required. Further, it shows that the communication style by men is the norm and that women have to adapt to this norm if they want to be understood better and taken seriously. As we learned, The Consultancy does include men in some initiatives, in the form of ‘male sponsors’ or a ‘male friend’. However, the Diversity Manager continued to explain the necessity to open up the debate more and include men in the dialogue:

*“I think the **whole debate** is a lot centred and **focused on women**. So just engaging women, you have to **open up the debate for actually men as well**, because otherwise you won't change anything.” (Interviewee 8)*

This statement demonstrates the acknowledgement that the discussion regarding gender stereotypes and their negative effects on women should involve both genders, as well as the understanding that the male involvement thus far is insufficient. Women inviting ‘male sponsors’ to give speeches on female leadership implies that they have no part in the gender imbalance and further signals a superiority to women because men know better how to get ahead in a career in the man's world. There is little evidence that there is a female world within the male world, but rather it appears to exist outside of it and needs to be assimilated in order to adapt to the male dominance. Furthermore, inviting a ‘male friend’ to an initiative imposes the notion of him occupying a

supporting role instead of being a fully engaged and responsible actor in this issue. Thus, these two possibilities of men participating and contributing to organizational initiatives aimed at helping women ultimately reinforce the belief that the challenges women face are not issues where men play an active role. Women have to take care of their own issues, no matter what the roots of the problems are.

4.3. It's not just about Women

One interesting finding we came across during our interviews was a reversal of our thesis topic of sorts, the effect of stereotypes on men. One interviewee pointed out that men also suffer from the common perspective on gender and the respective expectations concerning behaviour. In particular, she argued that some men might not fit the stereotypical ideal and are consequently under pressure to exhibit certain traits:

*“[...] **men have also problems** with that so because they say, ‘[...] why do I have to be always **the strong and dominant guy**? Why do I have to like act in a certain way because people presume that I act or behave in this way.’” (Interviewee 8)*

It is a fair point to raise within the discourse of gender stereotypes that while women are usually depicted as the ones suffering, the same can be said for men acting in a way that would potentially be considered feminine. Reversing what interviewee (8) said, this would imply that men who step outside their stereotype will be perceived as weak, because like the women referred to earlier, whose voices and stature enforce the stereotype of the weaker sex, men behaving counter-stereotypically do not fit the ideal inferred by traditional masculinity.

Another interviewee (9) supported this other side of the coin by describing her male colleagues in HR as a bit more “soft”. However, this indicates stereotypical thinking on the interviewees’ side: since they work in Human Resources, a commonly female-intensive department, and according to their interviews are surrounded by mostly women, they seem to subconsciously associate the few guys working with them with typically female characteristics. This bias seems to extend to the hiring process:

*“I mean, at the end, if you really want to hire someone, [...] I asked all managers [...], **why do we hire so many women** [...], we need some more men and [...] she tries but to be honest,*

*women just **fit better to the qualities** we're looking for. [...] So I believe at the end, we hire the person who fits the best also in regards to qualification.” (Interviewee 1)*

The lack of men being hired for her team is explained as a result of hiring based on qualification, a criterion that women seemingly fulfil better. However, due to the interviewee (1) working in HR, the qualities her manager is looking for might well be typically female ones. As such, it would decrease the possibility of a man being hired significantly, unless he shows behaviour that might be considered female or “soft”. In referring to qualification as the criterion based on which hiring takes place, the interviewee poses an explanation for her own stereotypical thinking.

In light of this perspective on gender stereotypes affecting men as well, one interviewee provided an interesting point of view:

“It might be the stereotype that they have not the same opportunities.” (Interview 8)

She argues that the overarching stereotype might be in thinking that there are differences in career opportunities between men and women, thus colouring our thinking when approaching the issue of gender stereotypes and implicit bias. Hence, the question is, are women actually at a disadvantage when it comes to career progression, or is that simply what we assume?

4.4. Chapter Summary

In the process of crafting the analytical part of our thesis, we were able to group our findings into two categories. For one, we found a discrepancy between the explicit and implicit statements given. Respondents acknowledged the existence of stereotypes and the resulting potential disadvantages for women, as they had witnessed it on several occasions. However, these instances were exclusively in reference to other women, while the interviewees emphasized not being affected by gender stereotypes or implicit bias themselves. Interestingly, during the analysis we found that their perspective on women’s career progression, pertaining both to others and themselves, is indeed coloured by gendered thinking. We further discovered that this discrepancy might stem from generational differences in the perception of gender stereotypes, specifically implying that due to the respondents being millennials and having matured in a world where women working and pursuing careers is much more common, they struggle to unite their explicit beliefs with their implicit thinking. In our second category, we discussed how organizational measures might

reinforce stereotypical thinking, hence being part of the problem instead of the solution. In particular, we focus on women quotas and initiatives as those were referenced by our interviewees. Pertaining to quotas, we found that the general perception was rather negative, mostly seeing them as not valuing women for their contributions but instead reducing them to their gender and supporting the stereotype of women being the weaker sex. As for organizational initiatives, responses have been more positive, with the respondents regarding them as useful. However, related issues are accessibility as it turns out that in order to participate, women have to make additional time. Thus, we found that whilst superficially helpful, initiatives actually reinforce the stereotype of women as caregivers, as the implication is that making sure they have equal chances at a career is their responsibility in the end. Moreover, the lack of involvement and participation of men in such initiatives have the implication of them not being part of the problem, hence positioning them as being superior to women and not requiring special treatment to succeed in their career.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the empirical material presented in the previous chapter served to explore our research question firstly by illustrating how female professionals at The Consultancy perceive gender stereotypes and the effect on their career opportunities, specifically showing a discrepancy in their explicit statements and implicit beliefs. Secondly, our findings illuminate the role of The Consultancy in this matter, particularly in reference to organizational measures aimed at supporting women. Since the purpose of this thesis is to enrich the discourse on gender stereotypes by focusing on the perspective of women, in this chapter, we will discuss our empirical findings in relation to the literature outlined at the beginning.

5.1. Perception vs. Reality - Gender Stereotypes affecting Women in their Career?

5.1.1. Gender Stereotypes - An Obstacle in a Women's Career?

In this part of the discussion, we would like to point towards the most important finding of this thesis, which is the discrepancy between explicit statements and implicit beliefs as surfaced during the interviews. The respondents actively acknowledged the existence of gender stereotypes and were able to give concrete examples of women suffering from the consequences, yet they still argued not being affected personally. However, in particular their view on women in leadership and their chances at progressing in their career whilst having children are evidence for the impact of gender stereotypes on their thinking.

In light of the study by Diekman and Goodfriend (2006) outlining a tendency to accommodate for any change in social roles, implying that the stereotypical perception of women can change over time if the associated social role does as well, the discrepancy in implicit and explicit statements found in our analysis might be because we are in a phase of change. Arguably, the female gender stereotype is in the process of being adapted to new social roles, where the most recent generation grew up with the new role and thus already considers it normal, whereas the older generations still hold traditional views. In addition, the latter are the ones who shaped organizations to date, which might explain why millennials do not explicitly see themselves affected by stereotypes, but their

implicit beliefs in terms of career progression are still coloured by the traditional view on gender roles embodied by the older generations. It stands to debate whether millennials will adapt their future norms to their explicit convictions, or if the beliefs held by older generations will end up shaping said norms, as they have done for generations in the past. Otherwise, the conversation around gender stereotypes would have produced an equal playing field for women decades ago.

Considering the respondents' consensus of a lack of female representation at the top coupled with their insistence of skills being pivotal in promotion decisions, their belief that women seldom have the necessary skill set for leadership positions was obvious. This belief was further solidified by the apparent conviction that acting in a stereotypical female fashion would undermine any woman's chances at reaching a leadership position due to a misalignment with leadership stereotypes. As such, this goes to show that the paradigm of 'think manager - think male' discussed by Schein and Mueller in 1992 is still valid. The underlying tendency to consider managerial roles as more masculine due to leadership traits being based on stereotypical male qualities is clearly still at play in the interviewees' implicit beliefs, and thus explains the significantly lower numbers of women occupying leadership positions (Schein, Mueller et al., 1989; Schein & Mueller, 1992). Throughout our interviews, this is suitably illustrated by the comparison of a woman exhibiting leading behaviour as 'not welcome', while a man doing the same is referred to as 'taking ownership' (taken from quote by interviewee 6, see section 4.1.2., p. 35). It also indicates that the traits associated with leadership are stereotype-relevant words related to the concept of man (Lenton, Sedikides & Bruder, 2009). Interestingly, despite the suggestion of Lenton, Sedikides and Bruder (2009) that changes around the female gender role have positively affected the stereotype-relevant words associated with it, this does not seem to extend to leadership. Furthermore, the example of how leadership behaviour is evaluated differently in men and women is in line with the findings of Eagly, Makhijani and Klonsky (1992), who discovered that especially in cases where women demonstrated typically male leadership approaches, they are evaluated more negatively than men. Considering their study is almost twenty years old, it seems not much has changed in the past two decades.

While we also found that physical appearance can prove a further hindrance for women in leadership, we do not have explicit literature to support this. However, both the fact that women are punished for showing leadership behaviour commonly regarded as male, and our data support the notion that women who look very female (e.g. short stature, high voice) are in an even more challenging position. Either way, evidence provided by the analysis of our interviews clearly shows

that gender stereotypes negatively affect the way women think about leadership and their own aspirations to climb up the career ladder.

On the topic of women combining a career and children, the most poignant take-away of our analysis is the comparison of having children with being seriously ill. Not only does this show a seriously negative image of having children, more importantly, it illustrates that starting a family is something that should be avoided at all costs for any woman aiming to progress in her career. It does, however, align with O’Leary’s (1997) assertion that problems women face in their career advancement are all related to motherhood: maternity leave absences, the definition of parental roles or workplace discriminatory constraints. The interviewees held the perception that having children whilst attempting to pursue a career means having one at the expense of the other. In particular, they assumed that women, once they have become mothers, will leave their jobs and move to an internal position. This sentiment is shared by Ely and Padavic (2020), who found that especially in cultures of overwork, women were encouraged to suspend their career progression by switching to part-time or assuming less demanding internal positions. The authors further argued that it forces women to choose between undermining their career or undermining their perception by others of being ‘good’ mothers (Ely & Padavic, 2020). This assumption of eventually reaching a point where they will have to choose is evidence for how strongly the interviewees are affected by gender stereotypes. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that they drew a comparison of a unicorn with a mother in a higher managerial position, considering the obstacles that discourage them from aiming for both.

Connecting this discussion with the equation³ for female leadership created by Cantor and Bernay (1992 cited in Denmark, 1993) and based on our findings, we believe women nowadays are adept at thinking positively and opportunistically in regards to their career advancement, thus fulfilling part of the attributes describing the ‘Competent Self’. However, as this thesis illustrated, there is a discrepancy when it comes to realizing the implicit effect of gender stereotypes on the thinking of millennials, which suggests a weak self-awareness and provides an area of improvement. As for ‘Creative Aggression’, our findings imply that women are being punished both for embracing stereotypical female behaviour and for demonstrating stereotypical male behaviour. It appears they are simultaneously expected to be both and neither, whereas men can just be men. Finally, ‘Woman Power’ is exhibited by those women who managed to occupy leadership positions and are thereby

³ *Leadership = Competent Self + Creative Aggression + Woman Power* (Denmark, 1993)

leading by example for others, such as the respondents in our interviews for whom female managers served as inspiration.

5.1.2. Gender Stereotypes - A Generation Gap?

As we elaborated on in our analysis, it became apparent during the interviews that there might be generational differences in the perception of gender stereotypes. Considering that there are several generations employed in the majority of organizations these days (Twenge & Campbell, 2008), these differences might impact the career progression of women, depending on which generation is involved in the hiring and promotion processes. Some of our interviewees expressed their belief that gender stereotypes are not as relevant in their generation as they used to be for their parents, and implied that while their mothers stopped working once they had children, the same would not apply to themselves. In other words, millennials hold less traditional views on gender and women in the workplace. This sentiment is supported by Cichy, Lefkowitz and Fingerman (2007), who found that there are generational differences in relation to traditional attitudes held about child-rearing. Specifically, they discovered a tendency for daughters, in their study aged 22 to 49 and thus overlapping with the age range of the millennial generation, to expect more gender equality at home (Cichy, Lefkowitz & Fingerman, 2007). While it was not part of their study, it appears a reasonable assumption that this tendency extends towards the workplace as well, being in line with our interviewees' point of view.

Furthermore, our interviewees perceived not only a difference between generations, but also between genders. It appears to be the expectation that particularly men of the older generation are prone to hold gender stereotypes, but not women of the same age group. Moreover, it appears that among millennials the traditional views on gender roles and gender stereotypes are less so apparent. This may be loosely related to the study by Twenge and Campbell (2008) on the generational differences of psychological traits. In particular, the expectation of women managers upholding the counter-stereotypical belief of women being able to raise children and have a successful career could stem from the shift towards more agentic and assertive women as well as their emphasis on work-life balance (Twenge & Campbell, 2008).

While none of the interviewees explicitly remarked on how their managers lead, we do think it is likely that the younger ones, in their thirties and forties and thus overlapping with Generation X, execute some form of the leadership style described by Sessa et al. (2007). Leading whilst focusing

on creating and providing conditions for others to contribute hints at an element of inclusivity, which we assume creates an environment where gender stereotypes play less of a role than in the ‘command-and-control style’ (Sessa et al., 2007, p. 54) implemented by the older, ‘Silent Generation’. Especially since the latter revolves around power and authority (Sessa et al., 2007), which are attributes that are at the origin of male gender stereotypes (Diekmann & Goodfriend, 2006).

5.2. Are Organizational Measures and an Overwork Culture reinforcing Stereotypical Thinking?

5.2.1. Quotas - Just Numbers or an Enabler?

As was mentioned by a number of interviewees, The Consultancy uses women quotas in their hiring and promotion decisions. Despite their proven effectiveness (Natividad, 2010; McKinsey & Company, 2007), none of the interviewees were able to report any benefits apart from the subsequent guarantee that a selected and random group of women will be able to progress faster in their careers. Rather, any statements given supported the view on quotas as described by Lewis, Benschop and Simpson (2017). For one, they indeed had the feeling of being promoted or hired due to their gender, not their skills, leading to self-doubt and questioning their abilities. The negative impact of quotas on women’s self-esteem appears noteworthy and should be considered in organizations’ hiring and promotion processes. Similarly, our interviewees were aware that they might be chosen over better qualified men just because of their gender, a fact that troubled them both because it grated on their pride, and because it clashed with their sense of fairness. Moreover, our analysis shows that the primary implication is that women are not good enough to make it on their own, but instead need help to counteract their lack of strength, which aligns with the assertions of Lewis, Benschop and Simpson (2017). Here, the perhaps most significant result in light of our thesis topic was that the underlying messages of quota systems and the use of ratios strongly convey and reinforce the gender stereotype of women being the weaker sex. To put it lightly, it is rather counterproductive that a measure aimed at helping women in their career (Natividad, 2010) actually undermines their validity.

5.2.2. Overwork Culture and Initiatives - Reinforcing Gender Stereotypes and Inequality or Driving Change?

Our interviews have shown the overwork culture at The Consultancy to be a significant factor in the career path of women. As argued by Alvesson (2012) and Armbüster (2006), the expensive overtime and intense travel activities combined with high expectations in performance constitute a major component in consultancy work, leading to a trend of high turnover in consulting firms. As many other consulting firms, our case company offers flexible working models and measures to improve the work-life balance of their employees (Wynn & Rao, 2019). Similar to the discoveries of Wynn and Rao (2019), the majority of our interviewees confirmed the fear of falling behind in their career when working part-time or taking parental leave. As long as they stay on track in their career, invest many hours in their work and perform, our interviewees believe that they have the same career opportunities as their male colleagues, hence not being affected by any sort of stereotypical thinking in career-critical decisions made by higher positioned managers.

According to Ely and Padavic (2020), women are less represented in the higher management positions not because they are falling behind in their career, but due to them struggling with their work-life balance. Like our interviewees, they actually have trouble with the idea of distancing themselves from their career. However, women from the study (Ely & Padavic, 2020) constantly felt reminded and pushed to make use of policies and initiatives aimed at supporting their work-life balance and follow their stereotypical role as mother and housewife. The question arises if organizations should have programmes in place that also support men's work-life balance, for instance to enable them to take part in family life, thus shifting the focus from women to both genders. Some prospective career paths described by our interviewees confirm a female-centred organizational impact, as nearly all stated that they would switch to an internal position, work part-time or even quit being a consultant entirely when one day having children. In fact, it seems rather paradox that organizations intend to support women in their career due to, for instance, the existence of stereotypical thinking and implicit bias that affect their career advancement, and at the same time offer various flexible work policies to enable them to reduce their work time and take care of their children, all this while expecting high performance, rapid career progression and

wanting gender equality. With these push and pull factors at place, it is not surprising that women find themselves in the dilemma of having to choose between pursuing a career or having a family.

What seems necessary is a change of mindset in equality of men and women, particularly regarding gender roles and who ought to step back in their career to take care of the family and children. The encouragement of organizations to use offered policies and initiatives targeting first and foremost women shows and supports an unequal view on gender roles and career opportunities, as it thereby privileges men. In fact, as discussed in our findings, mentioned women initiatives seem to reinforce stereotypical thinking as it comes with a connotation of women requiring extra support to thrive in their career and men not needing this special treatment, making them seem to be superior to their female colleagues. As mentioned by several of our interviewees, men are not involved nor do they participate in such women initiatives, conveying the perception of them not feeling addressed or even partly responsible for gender inequality. Since our group of interviewees focuses on women and their perception, we cannot say for sure that men actually do not feel the necessity to participate and contribute in such initiatives. However, the interviews drew strongly on their non-engagement and missing contribution to reaching gender equality.

According to Sherf, Tangirala and Weber (2017) “attempts to improve gender parity at workplaces are more effective when organizations mobilize their entire workforce, including men, to participate (i.e., speak up with ideas, volunteer, or serve as champions) in gender-parity initiatives” (p. 193). However, it is yet so often observed that men hesitate to participate in mentioned initiatives (Sherf, Tangirala & Weber, 2017), as also taken from our interviews, and that consequently, organizations fail to achieve their set diversity goals (Schoon, 2015). Why men often stay on the side-lines of such engagements is commonly explained with them feeling threatened, thus reacting with biased attitudes (Leslie, Mayer & Kravitz, 2014). A further explanation suggests “that men often do not participate in gender-parity initiatives because they believe they do not have *psychological standing*, a subjective judgment of legitimacy to perform an action” (Miller, Efron & Zak, 2009 cited in Sherf, Tangirala & Weber, 2017, p. 194). In their study, Sher, Tangirala and Weber (2017) highlight the necessity to “enhance participation of men in gender-parity initiatives by affirming their sense of psychological standing on such initiatives” (p. 207). We agree with the authors that despite the acknowledgement of a more positive and successful impact when men

participate in gender equality initiatives, there is still little academic research on how to better involve men and increase their contribution. We believe that only when organizations introduce initiatives and development programmes not only revolving around women, and when all employees, women as well as men, engage in such, only then the influence of gender stereotypes and implicit can be reduced to a minimum.

5.3. The other Side of the Coin: Are Men affected by Gender Stereotypes?

As already indicated in the last section of our analysis, as feminists we find it important to briefly point out the other side of the coin, that being if men are also affected by gender stereotypes. One interviewee pointed to the fact that men might also face behavioural obstacles, meaning that if they naturally have traits associated with femininity, for instance caring and communal, they might feel pressured in a male-dominated workplace to fit the stereotypical male, that being strong and dominant. In another interview, it was further noticed that male colleagues from Human Resources were rather associated with stereotypical female characteristics, implying a gender bias of only women working in Human Resources. Moreover, the dominance of female employees in the Human Resources department indicates a certain gender bias towards men not being able to fulfil certain criteria to work in this field.

An interesting study on this topic by Steffens et al. (2018) found that typical female stereotypes, such as being communal, are rather associated with a gay man than a heterosexual man, whereas masculine stereotypes are rather ascribed to heterosexual men than to gay men. This implies that depending on the industry, work field and required skills, it could happen that either gay or heterosexual men might be discriminated and denied a work possibility due to gender bias being at place (Steffens et al., 2018). Based on these findings, one can assume that men working in the Human Resources department and therefore being ascribed to feminine characteristics as in our interviews, could potentially be thought of being gay or not suitable for this department. The consequences of such biased thinking could then lead to discrimination of men working in fields that are traditionally associated with women.

In conclusion, we want to emphasize this other side of the coin because in matters of gender diversity in organizations the focus lies primarily on women and how they have to adapt their behaviour, while men might also face challenges caused by gender stereotypes and implicit bias that are often neglected. We therefore would like to propose to organizations and researchers to consider to not just focus on women, but to also include men in gender initiatives and workshops on gender stereotypes. For one, because as mentioned above they might face discrimination or pressure to adapt to a masculine ideal as well. Secondly, based on our interviews and literature research it has become obvious that men also play a significant role in tackling gender inequality and overcome stereotypical thinking, wherefore their involvement and participation, regardless of them being personally affected by gender stereotypes, is essential.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Key Findings and Conclusion

In accordance with the aim of our thesis, we challenge the obvious and often proven negative effects of gender stereotypes on women's career progression and explore the current state of this issue by focusing on the perception and experience of women working at a consultancy. Through the conducted interviews, we were able to identify implicit meanings and complexities of dealing with gender stereotypes, which existing literature tends to miss in its extensive research on gender equality and effects of gender stereotypes in the business career progression. As per our structure in chapter five, we identified two key findings with related subordinate findings.

Our first key finding concerns a discrepancy between the explicit and implicit statements given by our respondents. They generally acknowledged the existence of gender stereotypes and potential disadvantages for women, as some recalled examples of other women facing such career-obstructing consequences. Despite this acknowledgement, their explicit perception of having the same career opportunities as their male colleagues remained. However, further along in the interviews, we found that our interviewee's statements implied a contradicting belief. More precisely, we found that their perspective on women's career progression, pertaining both to others and themselves, is indeed coloured by gendered thinking, as almost all of the interviewees believed in having to step back in their career once they have children. We felt this is mainly due to the performance-driven approach prevalent in consultancy firms, as the resulting overwork culture leads to women feeling the necessity of having to choose between a career as a consultant and being a mother. Research confirms that women are often indirectly encouraged by the organization to switch to part-time or to an internal position, making it infeasible to meet the performance expected from managers to be considered for a promotion (e.g. Ely & Padavic, 2020). Consequently, they are put into a dilemma of having to choose between a career and motherhood due to gender biases on part of the organizations and thus, of the managers deciding on career-critical steps. This phenomenon matches our findings and emphasizes the degree of severity of this internalized dilemma.

A subordinate finding to our first key finding pertains to why our interviewees do not feel affected by gender stereotypes or disadvantaged by being a woman. Some of them traced it to there being a

difference in generations when thinking in stereotypes as it seems more prevalent in the older generation and less so in younger generations. In fact, it seems as if it were acceptable or even expected by women that especially male managers of the older generation think in gender stereotypes and have a traditional view on gender roles. Moreover, a solidarity among younger women to break gender stereotypes is expected. Due to research having found that there is indeed a difference in norms and preferred leadership styles among the generations and what effects this implies (e.g. Sessa et al., 2007; Twenge & Campbell, 2008), there are indications in our interviews towards a difference in stereotypical thinking between generations. However, thus far there is no profound academic literature that explores gender stereotypes held by different generations and how they might affect women and men in their career advancement.

Our second key finding pertains to how organizational measures might reinforce stereotypical thinking, and thus are part of the problem instead of the solution. Particularly regarding the use of quotas, we found that the general perception of our interviewees was rather negative, mostly seeing them as not valuing women for their contributions but instead reducing them to their gender and supporting the stereotype of women being the weaker sex. As for organizational initiatives focusing on women, responses have been more positive, with the respondents finding them rather useful. However, besides issues of visibility and accessibility beneath higher hierarchies, when participating in such initiatives, women have to make additional time which in a culture of overwork is of high value. Moreover, taken from our interviews, the observed lack of involvement and participation of men in such initiatives have the implication of them not being part of the problem, hence positioning them as being superior to women and not requiring special treatment to succeed in their career. Thus, whilst superficially helpful, we found that initiatives actually reinforce the stereotype of women as caregivers and lacking necessary competences that men naturally have, as the initiatives from women to women imply that making sure they have equal opportunities in a career is their responsibility in the end. According to Alvesson and Sveningsson (2016), “there is a need for a strong sense of ‘we’ in change work” (p. 190), which implies a necessary involvement of all core groups of an organization, for instance men and women in the change of gender inequality through organizational initiatives (Sherf, Tangirala & Weber, 2017). Therefore, our finding of the explicit focus on women requiring support and development to break stereotypes might actually have the opposite effect.

In sum, our study sheds light on the effects of gender stereotypes on women’s career opportunities, specifically taking on female professionals’ individual and micro-level perspectives whilst

focusing on conditions prevalent at a consultancy. We contribute to existing literature by identifying a discrepancy in women's explicit statements and implicit beliefs regarding their career being affected by gender stereotypical thinking. The awareness of this discrepancy displays a deeper complexity which organizations ought to address in a more insightful and effective way. Although not fully examined, the potential generation gap in stereotypical thinking and perspective on gender roles that we identified presents a potential area of study that could help organizations improve their actions pertaining to gender equality. In particular, our finding of organizational measures and initiatives for gender equality reinforcing gender biases contributes to existing literature by emphasizing the need to rethink some approaches that aim to support women in overcoming inherent gender stereotypes. Especially the overwork culture prevalent at consultancies confronts women with the dilemma of having to choose between advancing in their career and having children, where the latter is often encouraged by policies and flexible time models benefitting work-life balance but not women's career progression in a demanding profession, such as a consultant. The identified lack of involvement and participation of men in women initiatives conveys the impression of them not being part of the cause as well as being superior to women since they do not require special treatment to succeed in their career. Therefore, we contribute to existing literature that a focus solely on women creates silo thinking and reinforces gender biases. More significantly, in order to reduce gender stereotypes to a minimum and advance towards gender equality in organizations, an inclusion of all genders from all levels of an organization's hierarchy is required.

6.2. Suggestions for Future Research

As stated at the beginning of our thesis, we focused solely on the perception and experience of women working at a consultancy. Thus, we consider it to be of interest for future research to study the effects of gender stereotypes in other industries and from the perception and experience of exclusively mothers as well as of men. We thereby suggest looking into how different work conditions, organizational cultures, performance expectations as well as a different gender distribution in higher positions might affect the existence of gender bias. Furthermore, we believe it would be of interest to study potential effects of gender stereotypes and implicit bias on heterosexual and non-heterosexual men and their career, as this has been only examined very little so far.

Regarding our finding of a potential generational gap in the perception of gender stereotypes and the subsequent effect on the workplace and career, we see it as significant to explore this in more depth, as for now the literature focuses on generational differences in norms, needs and preferred leadership styles and what effects these imply. More precisely, we believe it to be of great value to organizations, if these were studied, because an acknowledgement and awareness of a generational gap could potentially help them address gender inequality and effects of gender stereotyping more effectively.

6.3. Afterthought

Our research implies that how organizations approach gender diversity and particularly who they involve in initiatives to support gender equality at all hierarchy levels, depends on the awareness and understanding of all members that have an influence and are affected by influences of gender biases. For historical socio-structural reasons, women suffer from negative sanctions especially in male-dominated environments until today. However, as also derived from the views of our young, ambitious and confident interviewees, we believe that the focus should rather lie on the goal of becoming diverse workforces and organizations, rather than just focusing on the minorities and their need to adapt to fit into an organization and have a successful career. Or as one of the interviewees put it:

“I'm hoping that one day a partner with children or female partners with children, it's not this unicorn anymore [...].” (Interviewee 1)

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Part 1: Introduction

Who the interviewers are:

- Name, origin
- Study programme, university

Our thesis focus:

- How women perceive gender stereotypes affecting their career opportunities at a consultancy, and
- how a consultancy addresses gender stereotypes and gender inequality.

Confidentiality concerns:

- We make sure to inform the interviewee about the anonymization of the content shared in the interview. No personal information that could be traced to a specific person will be distributed, used or published without consent of that person.
- Specific characteristics (e.g. age) will be generalized to an extent that it cannot be traced to a specific person.

General characteristics of the interviewee:

- Position, hierarchical level, employee management, affiliation with case company
- Age, marital status

Part 2: Questions relevant to thesis research

1. Which steps brought you to where you are now / How did you start your career at The Consultancy?
2. How would you describe the female / male gender stereotypes in the business environment?
 - Which characteristics/skills do you associate with each of them?
3. How do you think the general understanding of the female gender stereotype has an influence on career opportunities for women today, or do you think there is no influence?
4. Which characteristics would you say are necessary for your job?
5. Would you say you have the same career opportunities as your male colleagues?

- Why/why not? How do you cope with it?
6. In the beginning, you said you were XY years old and single / taken / married and have / do not have children. How do you combine this with your career aspirations?
 - Do you feel like you experience backlash / are being shamed for not wanting to have children?
 7. If you have female / male subordinates: how do you support them in balancing their work and private life/ in their career?
 8. How does The Consultancy support women striving for leadership positions?
 9. Are there specific measures that spread awareness regarding the understanding of gender stereotypes?
 10. What other things would you wish for your company to do in order to further support women in their careers?

Follow up questions:

- Is there an example you could share with us?
- Do you have other examples showing the same / the contrary?
- Have you experienced it yourself?
- Do you mean that ...?
- Could you tell us more about ...?

Part 3: Conclusion

- Do you have anything you feel you have not mentioned yet and would like to share?
- Do you have any last questions?
- Thank you very much for your participation.