

# Gender, careers and flexibility in consultancies in the UK and the USA

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**Gender, careers and flexibility in consultancies in the UK and USA:  
A multi-level relational analysis**

Increasing attention is being paid to gender regimes in organisations defined as the structures, practices and cultures that influence policy development and segment men and women into different tasks and positions (Acker, 2006a). These regimes often lead to gendered careers and flexibility that disadvantage women, the extent to which is likely to be moderated by the intersecting balance between national- and organisational-level policies and the characteristics of an occupation. However, the relational influence of each of these variables on careers as well as flexible working remains under explored, particularly beyond traditional types of work and professions (see, for example, Denissen, 2010; Gonäs and Karlsson, 2006).

Numerous authors claim that knowledge work is illustrative of new, more progressive and egalitarian working arrangements (Perrons, 2006; Huyer and Hafkin, 2007), which are becoming internationalised in nature (Ackers, 2006b; Ailon, 2006; Flanagan, 2006). Yet we do not know the degree to which occupational norms along with national and organisational HRM policies shape gender outcomes in relation to careers and flexible working in this category of work or the extent to which related patterns can be discerned across firm and/or national boundaries.

This article seeks to enrich our understanding by providing an original multi-level relational insight into the role of gender in influencing career and flexible working outcomes in a classic type of knowledge work – management consultancy – in the UK and USA. In particular, the analysis presented explores the following primary research question. To what extent do national (macro) and organizational (meso) policies on gender and flexible working influence individuals' micro-level career experiences in management consultancy? The role of these

policies and associated occupational norms in reinforcing or counterbalancing gendered outcomes is examined firstly with respect to careers and secondly flexible working.

Primary data were collected through case studies of the UK and US branches of two international firms. This focused research architecture provided the scope to compare relevant policies and management consultants' experiences of these policies in different countries within the same firms. The findings cast light on the role of macro- and meso-level policies together with the characteristics of the occupation and its client-focus in gendering careers and flexibility. These outcomes point to the need for the structures and policies supporting women and flexible working in these types of firms to be modified accordingly, particularly given that these firms make recommendations to clients nationally and internationally.

### **Gender, careers and flexibility in management consultancy: The adoption of a multi-level perspective**

The salience of the male breadwinner model in traditional professions such as law and accountancy is well documented in existing empirical literature (Barker and Monks, 1998; Roberts and Coutts, 1992; Whiting, 2001; Smithson et al., 2004). In these professions, women's representation is typically 'skewed' using Kanter's (1977) terminology and classification schema. Firm- and profession-level analyses reveal that men tend to dominate high-status privileged positions such as partnership, with women concentrated in low-level roles, experiencing more moderate and protracted career progression (King et al., 2010). Such working environments are therefore typically gendered as hierarchical positions and tasks are often unevenly distributed between men and women due to systematic disparities between genders in relation to 'power and control over ... workplace decisions such as how to organize work [and] opportunities for promotion and interesting work' (Acker, 2006b: 443).

A number of explanations have been adduced, including the presence of well known mechanisms of gender inequality – such as glass ceilings and old boys’ networks – impeding women’s integration and advancement in the workplace (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008). Women’s vertical segregation and pay levels are also in part linked to long working hours in law and accountancy and the gendered take-up of part-time and flexible working arrangements (Barker, 2009; Epstein et al., 1999; Smithson et al., 2004; Williams and Calvert, 2004). This is because in such professions, men often see flexible working as the preserve of women, especially those who are mothers, due to the widespread division between work and childcare in domestic life (Lyonette et al., 2011). Such norms are arguably constructed and maintained by firms as well as related professional bodies and communities of practice.

In light of this, the adoption of flexible and part-time working arrangements can create anxieties, as the nature and volume of the work performed by those working flexibly may not provide the basis for progression into senior corporate roles (Ford and Collinson, 2011). Consequently, a long hours culture often predominates, fuelled by the links between professional image and promotion with traditional male working hours, and the increasing pressures exerted by organisations on employees’ time and loyalty (Smithson et al., 2004).

In contrast, these types of patterns are depicted as being less pronounced in knowledge-intensive forms of work such as management consultancy (Perrons, 2006; Huyer and Hafkin, 2007). This is because male career norms and the role of bureaucracy and rationality in underpinning male power and identity are supposedly less prominent in this field of work (Kossek and Lambert, 2005). Indeed, as Walby (2007) points out, practitioners and management theorists who support this line of argument, often depict knowledge-intensive work and occupations as being characterised by flattened hierarchies and enhanced flexibility.

Set within this kind of environment, structure and agency potentially offer women greater opportunities to circumvent traditional parameters shaping their career development (Kelan, 2008). The scope for this is supported by advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs), which can serve to emancipate workers through the reconfiguration of conventional rules, modes and patterns of work (Wajcman et al., 2008).

Management consultancy is an archetypal form of knowledge work, which involves the use of tacit and codified knowledge to generate solutions to complex problems that are of a non-routine nature (Jemielniak, 2012). The UK and the US constitute the two leading national markets for management consulting and many of the largest firms in the world are headquartered in either the USA or UK. There are nearly one hundred thousand management consultants in the UK as compared to over half a million in the US, with revenues and employment forecast to grow significantly across each country over the coming years (BLS, 2011; MCA, 2012). Indeed, consultancies in and from these two countries play a key role in shaping policies and practises more broadly, because the largest firms from these national contexts exercise global reach and are widely emulated by other organizations (McKenna, 2006).

It is important therefore to gain insight into whether careers and knowledge work are being organised in a more flexible way, whether changing gender relations or the nature of the work/occupation are driving this flexibility and how the take-up of flexible working is influenced by gender. The literature surveyed below begins by reviewing the role of national policies on gender and flexible working in the UK and USA and organisational interventions in influencing: (i) careers and (ii) flexible working. Across these sections, the impact of

occupational norms is discussed, as these norms transcend but are also filtered to some extent by national and organisational context.

***(i) Gender and careers: macro- and meso-level influences affecting consultants' experiences***

The UK and USA are widely characterised as adopting liberal approaches to employment and social policy measures, including those aimed at achieving gender equality (O'Connor et al., 1999). Both countries have developed long-standing policy frameworks aimed at enhancing gender equality in employment through tackling sex discrimination and underscoring the principle of equal pay. In the US, this stems from federal laws such as the Equal Pay Act (1963) and Civil Rights Act (1964), as well as common law and state-specific laws. In the UK, gender equality legislation is also derived from the interaction between Acts of Parliament and common law. Gender equality was introduced into law in the 1970s, with the Equal Pay Act (1970) and Sex Discrimination Act (1975). Together with other anti-discrimination legislation, these laws were replaced with a single Equality Act in 2010 to provide greater harmonization. For details on these respective national policies, please see the US Department of Labor (2013) and the UK Government Equalities Office (2013). These policy architectures should support women's representation in consultancy firms, but may also generate variation in women's vertical and horizontal integration in consultancy firms in each national setting.

Due to the nature of the occupation, management consultancies typically demonstrate strong demand for staff with high-level knowledge and education (Alvesson, 2004). Drawing on the knowledge-based view of the firm, this human capital contributes positively to a firm's competitive advantage and success (Kang et al., 2007). In many fields of higher education, women outperform men, which potentially provides them with a favourable platform for success in these firms (Walby, 2007). This is because the quality of this knowledge is likely to

enhance their value to knowledge-intensive organisations, underpinning the need for HR policies to attract, retain and support women.

Indeed to enhance the participation and representation of women, many consultancy practices have established women's networks, along with other interest groups to assist in meeting their diversity objectives. The outcomes of these initiatives are however likely to be subject to individual and subjective interpretation (Acker, 2006a). Yet our insight into the impact of these types of measures and consultants' interpretations of these mechanisms is currently limited.

The analysis above highlights the need to gain a deeper multi-level insight into the role of national setting and organisational policies in moderating the interaction between gender and career experiences in consultancy. At firm level, it is unclear to what degree the HR policies implemented by consultancy practices support not only female participation and integration, but also the strategic interests and objectives of these organisations. Moreover, it may be that these practices are subject to international variation even within the same organisation due to the challenges presented in managing HR practices in these firms across borders (Boussebaa, 2009).

*(ii) Gender and flexible working: national policies and the working environment in consultancies*

The link between national-level gender equality and flexible working policy is underscored by a number of authors (e.g. Hegewisch, 2009; Smithson et al., 2004). Policy divergence between the UK and US with respect to flexible working has become starker and more extensive since the late 1990s (Hegewisch, 2005), with EU policy agendas exercising a greater influence on policy development in Britain (Rubery et al., 2009). This is exemplified by the introduction of

measures such as the Part-Time Workers Regulations (2000) designed to prevent the less favourable treatment of part-timers, the majority of who are female. Indeed, OECD (2012) data demonstrates that country variation is strongly evident in the take up of part-time working. In the UK, 22.9% of all employees work part-time, 40% of women work part-time and they account for 82.1% of all those working part-time. While in the US, 12.6% of all employees work part-time, 18% of women work part-time and they account for 68.1% of all those working part-time.

This variation in the incidence of part-time working may also be because employees in the UK with young or disabled children who have completed over 26 weeks continuous service have been given the formal right to request changes to their working patterns (Employment Act 2003), with this right extended to cover those with dependant care responsibilities (Employment Act 2006). Such requests can include but are not limited to switching to flexitime, job-sharing and remote- and part-time working arrangements (Croucher and Kelliher, 2005). While flexible working is taken to incorporate part-time working under this policy, these are viewed as distinct arrangements for the purposes of this study, in order to avoid confusion over the interpretation and application of these terms. The implementation of these requests is subject to business needs, but this right could lead to national differences in the nature and degree of non-standard working arrangements offered to staff and the gender composition of those adopting such arrangements. However, national labour market data on flexible working lacks detail and is not directly comparable on an international basis.

Similarly, variation is likely to be evident in relation to parental leave. In the UK, women who are employees are able to take up to 52 weeks maternity leave (UK Government, 2013a). This comprises 26 weeks of ordinary maternity leave with the employer required to offer the individual the same position on returning to work, followed by up to a further 26 weeks



additional leave, in which case the employer is only required to provide appropriate similar employment when the individual returns to work. Statutory maternity pay is paid at 90% of the mother's earnings for the first 6 weeks, followed by 33 weeks at a flat rate. As of April 2013, this was £136.78 per week (UK Government, 2013b). On top of this, employers may offer enhanced leaves and associated levels of pay.

Fathers meeting the specified entitlement criteria in the UK are able to take up to two weeks consecutive leave at the statutory rate noted above. The scope to extend the leave available to fathers was increased in 2011, with mothers given the option of transferring 2-26 weeks of their additional maternity leave to the father.

In the US, flexible working and parental leave rights are more limited and patchy in comparison to the UK. Flexible working initiatives stem from an organisational- rather than national-level (Kelly et al., 2008), driven primarily by litigation rather than legislation (Hegewisch and Gornick, 2008).

Until the early 1990s, the availability of health, family and care leave was determined by the confluence between state laws, collective bargaining agreements and organisational policies (Lissa and Lenhoff, 2008). Under federal law, the Family and Medical Leave Act was introduced in 1993 to enable eligible employees to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid job-protected leave for care and/or parental reasons or due to serious ill-health in any 12 month period. To qualify, an employee must have worked for their employer for more than 1250 hours over a 12-month period, and work in a business location where the firm employs 50 or more employees within 75 miles (Lenhoff and Withers, 1994). In some cases, companies may offer payment during this absence. Leave beyond this period and for those employees who do not meet these criteria is commonly achieved through the combined use of leaves available

within firms to go somewhat towards meeting their needs (e.g. sick leave, vacation and personal days and unpaid family leave).

The above Act can be used to accommodate parental leave but this is often unpaid. Indeed, the US is the only advanced economy without countrywide paid maternity leave (ILO, 2010). However, the availability and duration of parental leave does vary by state and employer. Paid maternity leave is available to eligible employees in a small number of states (NY, NJ, RI, DC, CA, HI and PR). The rights across these states provide between 6 to 8 weeks leave, ranging from 55 to 100% of salary. State-set paid paternity rights are less widely available. Only California and New Jersey offer fathers up to six weeks leave at 55% of their salary, with variation beyond this influenced by employer and collective bargaining. In other states, paid paternity leave is determined by these parties or not extended at all.

This would suggest that strong differences are likely to be evident across the forms of leave and flexibility discussed above, but it is unknown how these variations influence particular fields of work such as management consultancy. Comparative research on professionals in the UK and USA suggest that workers exhibit shared attitudes towards working time flexibility (see Lyonette et al., 2011), so it may be that this assuages differences along these lines.

In the UK and USA, many consultancies actively promote flexible working arrangements as recruitment and retention tools. The availability of flexible working arrangements is likely to contribute towards improving gender equality to some extent, because such arrangements can moderate barriers to women's participation and advancement to senior levels, depending on context (Kelan, 2008). The nature, adoption and impact of such arrangements are likely to vary according to national, organisational and occupational context. However, this has not been adequately examined through empirical research.

The frequently recited aphorism of ‘time is money’ is likely to hold true for consultancies and their workers and so it may be that this compromises the introduction and operation of flexible working policies in practice. Therefore we need to investigate the role of macro-level policy divergence between the UK and US, combined with meso-level policies and the nature of the occupation in shaping flexible working arrangements in consultancy practices. This is because these factors are likely to influence the integration, retention and advancement of women in this important form of knowledge work.

## **Methods**

The study detailed in this paper sought to shed light on consultants’ views and experiences of careers and flexible working in consultancy practices in the UK and USA. This was because the acquisition of such an insight is of increasing importance given that the number engaged in this form of work has been growing, they constitute key actors in the knowledge economy and they play a direct role in propagating changes in working patterns and arrangements (McKenna, 2006).

An inductive approach provided a strong match with the exploratory nature of the study’s research questions, as stated in the introduction (Creswell, 2003). Correspondingly, a qualitative case-study research design was chosen to meet the aims of the study and to enable the collection and analysis of multiple forms of data (Yin, 2009).

The case study sampling strategy adopted centred on examining two consultancies operating in both Britain and the USA to enable national variations in these organisations to be observed. To enhance the focus of this relatively broad sampling frame, the researcher sought firms with

a leading position in each country on employee well being, including the extension of equal opportunities and flexible working. The firms targeted for the research consistently featured in top employer lists in both national settings (The ‘Sunday Times Best Companies to Work For’ in the UK and Fortune’s ‘100 Best Companies to Work For’ in the US) as well as those specifically taking into account gender, such as The Times’ ‘Top 50 Employers for Women’.

Each of these firms offers an extensive array of client services, generating multi-billion dollar annual revenues on a global basis. Both operate in over a hundred countries and employ more than 150,000 staff through the dispersed network membership structures that these practices adopt. It could be argued that the size of these firms is likely to influence their interaction with national employment laws and policies relative to smaller practices. However, the firms were selected on the basis of their treatment of employees as noted above rather than their reputation for circumventing or subverting national minimum standards.

Partners in each of the firms in the UK were contacted about the research and they agreed to extend access to their own consulting departments and to facilitate access to the same departments in the American-sides of the firms through their counterparts in the US. Because of the complex, decentralised and independent nature of the ownership structures adopted by these firms, the researcher was only able to gain access to the areas facilitated by the gatekeepers, despite exploring the possibility of broadening the study. This limited the size of the available sample, but enabled the researcher to minimise variation by service line or department.

The research design and sampling frame do not allow for generalisations in relation to consultancy in either country to be made. However, this was not the objective of the study nor

would this have been possible given the degree of heterogeneity evident among these types of firms in terms of their size, focus, culture and HRM practices (Malhotra and Morris, 2009).

### *Participant sampling and data collection*

Within the boundaries of the access available to the researcher, sixty consultants from the case study firms were selected for interview on the basis that they either worked flexibly or provided a reflective multi-level insight into the views and experiences evident in two firms due to their status or tenure. These individuals were HR consulting specialists and from comparable departments in each country and firm. Of these, forty-eight agreed to be interviewed (Firm 1 – UK12/US12, Firm 2 – UK13/US11). These interviews were conducted in successive batches; twenty followed by a further twenty-eight, thereby enabling the researcher to benefit from time to reflect on the data collected before expanding the data collection. Males and females were included in the sample to limit the potential for a biased or one-sided view of the gender regime(s) in operation to be obtained (F28/M20). The mean age of the participants was 37.5 ranging from 22 to 64 years of age. The sample included junior-level consulting staff through to partners. Each of the interviewees was at least degree educated and of UK or US nationality. Please see table 1 for further demographic information.

[Table 1 near here]

A semi-structured interviewing strategy was adopted in order to enable the consultants to express their views and experiences in their own terms, while also allowing the researcher to probe their responses. In line with this objective, an interview schedule was developed to explore the consultants' experiences and perceptions of careers and flexibility in the firms in which they worked in the UK and USA. The formulation of this schedule was pilot tested on a

small sample of the target population to check that the questions asked were valid and relevant and would generate reliable data. Any confusion in the line of questioning was identified and the comments provided were used to revise the interview guide.

The interviews ranged from 45- to 90- minutes in duration. The participants were asked about their views and experiences of careers and flexibility in consultancy and the context surrounding their responses. The interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed. These transcripts were then carefully reviewed. Where the need for further data from participants was identified, including during the analysis of the data outlined below, this was obtained from individuals via telephone or email.

The interview data was supplemented with relevant policy documents from each case study firm and national context. These documents detailed relevant diversity, leave and flexible working schemes and so also allowed variations in policy and practice to be examined. Access to archival data was requested, including details relating to hiring and promotion pathways and decisions as well as reported cases of gender discrimination, but this was denied due to privacy and confidentiality reasons.

### *Data Analysis*

The data collected was analysed using a thematic approach (Creswell, 2003). This was operationalized through the use of a template-based system, because it provided a suitable method for the analysis of individuals' qualitative accounts and offered the scope for iterative refinements in the coding process (King, 2012). As the first stage of this process, an initial template was established to reflect the *a priori* themes highlighted in the literature and investigated in the study. This involved the identification of higher order themes – gender,

careers and flexibility – along with related subcategories framed by the focus of the research questions and data. This preliminary coding was tested using the transcripts to enable the suitability of the coding to be assessed, with revisions applied as appropriate. Experienced colleagues were asked to review the coding before the final template was produced and administered across the entire data set using Nvivo 9 (Bazeley, 2009). This continuous process enabled the researcher to verify and refine the coding and interpretation of the material and to tease out any nuances as well as identify any deficiencies in the analysis performed.

To verify that the analysis resonated with the interviewees, an overview of the key findings was relayed back to the participants, enhancing the researcher's reflexivity. In addition, as the sampling of the firms' consultants could have introduced a degree of participation bias and in doing so skewed the data collected, the findings were reviewed with firm members who were not directly involved in the research. They did not feature in the original sample due to the limitations of the access extended to the researcher and did not work flexibly, but were interested in learning about the outcomes of the study.

## **Findings**

The findings have been distilled into two sections in line with the research questions investigated in this paper. The first examines the nature and degree of female representation and segregation in the case study firms and the role of gender in shaping consultants' career experiences at a national and organizational level. The second section then explores the incidence and impact of the flexible- and part-time working arrangements operating at the practices and their influence on individuals' careers.

The sample findings revealed broad national and organizational consistency with respect to the gendered nature of careers and flexibility and the impact of policies aimed at counteracting gender segregation at a national and organizational level, which can be attributed to the influence of occupational norms, which are discussed across the two sections below. Where variation along these lines was identified, this is highlighted in the text.

It is important to note that the findings represent the views and experiences of the consultants themselves. The participant quotes presented are reflective of the experiences and views identified in the analysis of the interview data (Rynes and Gephart, 2004). Where the views of individuals or a small number of participants are expressed, this is flagged in the text.

***(i) Career patterns in the firms: National, organisational and occupational influences***

The gender profiles of the case study firms were relatively consistent by firm and national context. Across each firm and country, the gender composition was relatively balanced. However, this was largely due to the high concentration of females in junior- and support-level positions. Women accounted for around a third of managerial roles and 11-16% of firm partners in each firm and national context. More exact gender disaggregated data was requested from the case study firms, but this was not provided by the research participants or HR departments in these firms nor published in the policy documents or reports they supplied.

The research participants from each firm and national context emphasised the relatively balanced gender intake at the case study firms. Indeed, gender equal recruitment had been in operation in each country and national context for nearly a decade. Yet this balance was largely confined to the more junior levels of these firms, with the proportion of women occupying senior manager, director or partner roles diluting at each level up the hierarchy. One of the



partners from Firm 1 in the US referred to the aim of viewing the firm's structure as a lattice rather than a ladder. However, the accounts of the other participants in this firm indicated no evidence that the hierarchies in operation were actively being flattened. Instead the hierarchies in place across the case study firms were firmly embedded and male-dominated (King et al., 2010; Walby, 2007). The comment featured below is illustrative of the accounts provided by the interview sample:

'I go to group meetings ... and it's astonishing how few women there are [particularly in senior positions], bearing in mind we recruit equal numbers. In that situation, I think it's unrealistic to think that I could possibly have much of an influence on what's going on' (Female Manager, UK Firm 2).

Unsurprisingly, the degree of gender imbalance across each of the roles stated varied by office and department. However, the participants stated that women were more strongly represented in particular roles, which were perceived to be less demanding and reflective of the gender regime in operation (Acker, 2006a), as exemplified by the following interview excerpt.

'I don't know the exact proportion of males to females [at the firm] but certainly within the technical areas, there is a low percentage of women ... most are concentrated in areas like HR' (Male Consultant, UK Firm 2).

Gender, role, department and office potentially influenced these perceptions. Yet these views were consistent across the case study samples. The male and female participants commonly attributed the limited presence and visibility of women in high-level positions to the impact of having a child. This was because on returning to work following childbirth, women's progression and participation could be affected due to the difficulties encountered in

reconciling childcare with the nature and volume of the work associated with hierarchical progression.

‘There’s a lot less women at the top ... a lot want kids and want to be home with their children. As you move up, the expectations increase, your clients are more demanding, and some women just don’t wanna have to deal with all that’ (Female Partner, US Firm 2).

The male and female research participants all relayed the presence of ‘*standard*’ women’s support initiatives, including mentoring, leadership and development programmes as well as targets designed to ensure balanced project teams (see table 2). Indeed, each of the female partners interviewed were active members of women’s groups promoting these measures both within and outside their firms. Most of these women, including the other female research participants were generally supportive of these groups and their activities. Examples included initiatives such as awards, networks and forums for women, ‘bring your daughter to work days’ and sports and social events.

[Table 2 near here]

However, while these measures supported the integration of women, they also served to highlight gender divisions from the perspective of the research participants, which served to counteract their intended purpose. The impact of these initiatives was typically reported to be moderate, achieving little in terms of rebalancing the percentage of males to females in senior positions. Furthermore, most of the male and female consultants from both national contexts did not expect to see a real difference in the short to medium term, because such gendered views and patterns were deep-seated both organisationally and occupationally and so any

change effected was expected to be gradual and uneven as the gender balance shifted, particularly in senior positions.

Twenty one of the female participants from the UK and US stated that their permeation into male-dominated fields of consultancy and their advancement into more senior positions were to some extent influenced by the nature and demands of this work and these roles, but also obstacles such as the continuing salience of so-called old boys' networks operating across the occupation and these firms. The interview data revealed that the degree to which these barriers were apparent was shaped by hierarchical status, an individual's experiences and motherhood.

The female participants' views and experiences were however diverse. Three of the female interviewees stated there was no explicit old boys' club or glass ceiling in place, but instead that many held the belief that it would not be possible to combine a higher level position with having a family, because the degree and nature of the work associated with such a role could not be performed in three days rather than five if they needed to reduce their hours. These research participants therefore argued that it was these assumptions that led many to leave the occupation, without even exploring whether their employer would be willing to accommodate any changes in their working patterns, which according to one of the participants were often likely to be positively received in practice depending on organisational context.

The above findings reveal that national-level policies generated limited variance in terms of women's representation and progress into senior positions from a cross-country perspective. The meso-level policies in place were comparable across firms and national contexts and served to reproduce rather than counteract the role of occupational norms in shaping consultants' gendered career views and experiences. Furthermore, the gender distribution in the firms was influenced by role specialisation, the negative impact of the female-child nexus

on career progression and the limited effect of support initiatives on women's representation across all levels.

*(ii) Flexible working in the firms: National, organisational and occupational influences*

In terms of the impact of national policy interventions on flexible working, each of the US participants were mindful that they had no to limited entitlements, while the UK participants were aware of the right for parents with young children to request flexible or part-time working arrangements. However, the UK interviewees stated that such requests were sometimes rejected due to business reasons, which were vaguely defined and inconsistently applied. From an internationally comparative perspective, the data would suggest that this formal right produced limited variation between the US and UK samples in terms of the availability, form or gendered take-up of flexible and part-time working. This is exemplified in the text below, while table 2 highlights the only national and organisational differences identified.

This was because the analysis of the interview and documentary data revealed consistency in the nature and range of flexible working arrangements by national context. This included the organisation of part-time working, flexible working around core hours of the same length, the duration of available career breaks and the availability of job sharing and remote working. Indeed, the participants indicated that these types of arrangements were widely available across large firms and the occupation more broadly. Details on the meso-level leave and working policies available to the research participants across the two national contexts can be found in table 2.

Of note, the length of maternity leave available to the consultants in the UK was considerably longer than that available to the US consultants and many were reported to be increasingly

taking a full 52 weeks leave (see table 2). What is interesting however is that many of the US participants reported that it was common for women to effectively supplement their entitlement with a career break that would often take them up to 12 months, particularly those with the support of a domestic partner.

Fully paid paternity leave was substantially more generous in the US-sides of the firms (see table 2), although the UK participants were given the scope to take more extensive leave. Nevertheless, the take-up of paternity leave was not widespread in either national context. Where it was taken in the UK, most took two weeks but this was similar to the duration of leave taken by fathers in the US-sides of the firms using a combination of the leave policies available to them.

In each national context, the firms offered a range of work-life reconciliation policies. These are summarised in table 2 above. The interview and documentary data revealed that part-time working was not widely prevalent in the organisations in which they worked, but was much more common in the UK and among female rather than male members of staff, with the proportion working part-time thinning out at each level up the hierarchy. This was adduced to the difficulties presented in performing senior roles on reduced hours.

‘I don’t know of any senior managers who work part time. Whereas I do know of managers, but that was because I needed to find that out ... I don’t know about directors or partners ... I don’t know many women in those roles’ (Female Manager, UK Firm 2).

Indeed, full-time working was often deemed to be the only option for some roles. ‘I needed to go back to full time in order to do this role. It was take the role and go full time or don’t take

the role' (Female Senior Manager, UK Firm 1). Part-time working was typically organised on a three- or four-day basis, but all of the interviewees stated that those working reduced days effectively compressed their full-time contracted hours into these days. The number of full-time hours performed varied by rank, but was typically in the region of 45 hours per week, although some reported working 80 hours.

Job-sharing was technically available across each practice and national context. However, the male and female participants from each firm and country indicated that in practice this was difficult to operationalize. This was due to the limited availability of same-level counterparts with the required knowledge/experience for client projects wishing to also work part-time in an individual's particular office or department. Blurred working hours between sharers were also a problem, thereby adding to their contracted hours. In addition, job-sharing was undermined by the emphasis placed by the firms on the need for clients to have a single point of contact. Indeed, although individuals worked in teams, which could have assisted in facilitating shorter hours or job-sharing, the nature of the work performed was often highly individualised and the environment in which they operated was competitive internally as well as externally. Moreover, when working part-time client demands, pressures and performance targets were not adjusted accordingly.

'At the end of the day you're still responsible for your clients, so whether you work part time or full time ... you're still putting in the same amount of work' (Male Manager, US Firm 1).

Part-time members of staff therefore effectively took a pay cut to perform the same level of work so that they could reduce their working days. The burdens placed on members of each firm and national context were comparable regardless of contractual status and so therefore

they effectively had the right to be paid part-time rather than work part-time. For this reason, many were reported to be very reluctant to seek or support requests for part-time working arrangements.

‘If a woman or man were to come to me and say they wanted to work part-time ... I would ask if there were any other way they could get the flexibility, because they would be taking less compensation for a reduced workload but would still be putting in just as many hours ... you end up working at night and weekends ... and if that’s what works for you, I think more power to you, but don’t take less compensation for that’ (Female Partner, US Firm 1).

The interview data also revealed that occupational norms influenced these attitudes toward non-standard working patterns. For example, the participants stated that part-time arrangements were not widely encouraged or adopted in consulting and that this was reflected in the incidence of part-time working in the firms examined below. This was because such arrangements made it difficult to deliver services to clients demanding full-time service provision and so part-timers often had to perform work on their days off to meet these expectations or had to move into internal or less demanding consulting roles with more limited promotion opportunities.

As a result, part-time working was perceived to stall and even stifle an individual’s career progression. When promotion opportunities arose, part-timers were perceived to be at a disadvantage relative to their full-time peers because they were less visible to colleagues and were not able to take up the full range of development opportunities or perform the type of high-profile work associated with full-time hours. They were also often less geographically mobile, creating challenges for being on site at a client’s business, particularly on an

international basis. Similarly, they also faced difficulties in meeting their business development objectives, because of their reduced working hours and the limited scope for them to attend networking events outside work. Those choosing not to condense a long hours full-time working week into their part-time schedules therefore encountered greater obstacles in achieving performance and advancement objectives.

‘I’ve been with [XY] eight years and I was promoted after two when I was working full time ... My constraints are not just that I’m only available three days a week, I just can’t do the extra hours that is the norm ... I’m making a personal choice to put my children to bed. I could pay somebody else to do that, but I’m not prepared to do that. That’s unusual. Others ... wouldn’t take that decision’ (Female Manager, UK Firm 2).

Consequently, the male and female research participants typically favoured flexible working opportunities to avoid the glass cliff of part-time employment. Although an increasing proportion of males were reported to be working flexibly or part-time, the take-up of these opportunities was very much female-dominated and tailed off further up the hierarchy. Formalised flexible working opportunities were reported to be widely available by the research participants in each national context. The nature of this available flexibility however primarily centred on enabling individuals to work around the demands of their work rather than facilitating a reduction in working hours. The quote below from a female interviewee was illustrative of the broader sample’s views and experiences.

‘All business models have certain imperatives ... our imperative is that people put in an awful lot of hours, and that’s why we’re commercially successful. So why



change things? ... After all, it would be hard to find a successful business model that would support anything else' (Female Senior Manager, UK Firm 1).

The form and level of flexibility was often steered by clients' demands and expectations, as a number of the participants stated that they often had to clear flexible working with their clients as well as their employer, because they effectively had more than one boss. If changes or reductions in working hours could not be agreed with a client, the consultant may have to stick to their working pattern or another consultant could be requested or assigned to the project depending on firm and client needs. Such changes were also complicated and shaped by the need to be present at clients' premises on a national and/or international basis as required, rather than performing a nine-to-five desk-based role. The research participants indicated that the flexible working schemes in operation effectively enabled them to work around their commitments rather than achieve reductions in their working time.

'You can work flexible hours which makes your work-life a bit easier, but you've still got to get all your work done and make sure that your clients are happy. You don't get to work any less hours' (Male Manager, US Firm 2).

The impact of maternity leave on their relative career progression was considered to be justified and acceptable by both the male and female participants from each national context. In part, this was a product of the gendered work, career and domestic regimes in place.

'After having a child, you can't expect to come back and still be on the same level as your peer group. From that point of view, it's very fair that it does slow you down by however long you've taken off. It does not restrict your opportunities to advance though' (Female Senior Manager, UK Firm 1).

‘If you are not fully mobile then that counts against you, because women have children and so are not as inclined to be mobile’ (Female Assistant Consultant, UK Firm 1).

This is not to say that the female participants with children wished to be defined by their role as mothers. However, the gender regime in operation combined with the nature of their work and domestic arrangements impacted on their tenure and scope for progression.

As a consequence, the impact of national policies on gender outcomes in relation to leaves and flexibility was nominal. Such findings support the need to investigate the globalising nature of these patterns in internationalised forms of work like consultancy (Ackers, 2006b; Ailon, 2006; Flanagan, 2006). The take-up of the flexible working arrangements that were available to the research participants at a meso-level were gendered, which runs counter to expectations for this form of work in the literature (Huyer and Hafkin, 2007; Lyness and Kropf, 2005; Perrons, 2006). This was due to consultants’ personal career decisions as well as norms and pressures stemming from the firm, clients and the features of the occupation. These norms and pressures served to stifle enhanced or gender neutral flexible working in the firms and instead reinforced the ideal of a gender-disembodied worker able to meet their own individual needs and objectives as well as those of their clients and employer.

## **Discussion**

The research presented in this paper aimed to investigate the interaction between gender, careers and flexible working in consultancy firms in the UK and USA through gaining insight into consultants’ views and experiences (Kvande, 2005; Walby, 2007). The findings revealed

that women in each firm and country setting suffered at a micro-level from problems related to macro- and meso-level policies and occupational norms characterised by discriminatory cultures and unfriendly working hours, despite the extolled support and backing for women's enhanced representation at both a horizontal and vertical level.

Variation by national context was limited despite divergent gender equality and flexible working policy frameworks. National differences identified included the higher incidence of part-time working in the UK case study firms and the nature and duration of available leaves. These variances could be attributed to macro-level policies. However, the gender composition of the firms, the vertical and horizontal segregation of women, the gender profile of flexible workers, client and occupational pressures and meso-level flexible working arrangements and the impact of women's groups were consistent across national settings. This greater evidence of similarity lends support to the notion of internationalised firm and occupational norms in consultancy, but to varying extents and with exceptions.

Developments in the UK may lead to change in this regard with respect to flexible working, as the coalition government has signalled that it plans to extend the statutory right to request flexible working to all employees, with or without care responsibilities, which may impact on incidence of flexible working relative to the US at a national level, as well as play some role in tackling barriers and divisions in take-up. However, it is unlikely that this will enhance or create a more balanced take-up of flexible working in forms of work like consultancy due to the imperatives driving consultancy firms, the dominance and resilience of the male breadwinner ethos, and the link between billable time, pay and promotion.

Indeed, Kvande (2005) argues that knowledge-intensive organisations are becoming increasingly 'greedy', requiring workers to put more and more time into their work. She

contends that increasing flexibility is double-edged for these types of workers, especially women. This is because working time is becoming boundless, with ever-greater levels of commitment demanded from staff. As a corollary, the ideal worker is required to perform longer non-standard working hours, without taking into account the consequences of gender differentiation (Craig and Powell, 2011; Ford and Collinson, 2011). Kvande (2005) argues that in this context, knowledge-intensive organisations extend autonomy and flexibility merely as a new way of controlling employees.

These features are shared with professions such as law and accounting and so it may be that this inhibits the scope for this form of knowledge work to accommodate the kind of new or more egalitarian working arrangements envisaged by Perrons (2006) and Huyer and Hafkin (2007). It may also be that because of the association and interaction with these professional services, particularly in large practices housing a wide array of service types, the working cultures in these professions are to some extent replicated in consultancy. However, this line of inquiry was beyond the remit of this study.

With respect to the case study firms, one option may be to support a range of different career paths to accommodate differences in consultants' priorities and objectives. Yet, if interconnected gender divisions in pay, career progression and flexible working are to be effectively confronted, the business model adopted by consultancies would have to be fundamentally restructured and it is unlikely that an organisation or set of organisations will do so in isolation due the impact on competitiveness and profitability. Consequently, the business case for counteracting gender-based differences is essentially outweighed by the advantages offered by the retention of this business model for those with a vested interest. It may be that the changing profile of client workforces will exert an increasing influence on the gender

composition of consultancy teams. However, the degree of this pressure for change is likely to be moderated by clients' needs in relation to work deadlines and on-demand contact.

Women's integration and advancement at the case study firms was impacted by the inflexibility and negative implications associated with non-standard working arrangements in the firms and occupation. This was because of the confluence between the gendered nature of careers and the separate but related issue of flexible working. For example, the not only gendered but also limited take-up of part-time working can be attributed to the disincentives associated with these arrangements, which even in the case of the UK, were not mitigated by the Part-Time Workers Directive. Instead, individuals in each national context were presented with the choice of facing a fulltime workload and associated pressures on a reduced wage or maintaining their full-time status with flexible working hours. This may account for the low take-up of part-time working in consultancy, but broader-scale research would be required to investigate this. Those working flexibly or part-time tended to perform internal consulting and/or work that was of a low profile and prestige level, leading to gendered development and advancement opportunities and creating and sustaining a gender pay gap (see Smithson et al., 2004).

#### *Implications for theory and practice (policy makers, organisations and women)*

Flexible working policies are claimed to play a role in facilitating gender equality (Kelan, 2008). However, the flexible working arrangements in the organisations in which the research participants worked did not automatically lead to more women/equality in the case study firms, but instead generated inequalities by means of the disembodied ideal worker (Craig and Powell, 2011; Kvande, 2005). This standard was reinforced by the individualised nature of not only the work performed by the participants, but also their (in)flexible working arrangements

and client relationships. This could have been counteracted by the introduction of structures to allow for greater flexibility in the case study firms (Ford and Collinson, 2011). For instance, subject to firm and worker requirements, individuals could work full-time but benefit from additional vacation time during breaks between projects to facilitate part-time working on an annualised rather than weekly basis to reduce some of the negative consequences associated with a reduced working. In addition, ICTs could be used more creatively to transform or redesign relationships and the modes and location of work (Wajcman et al., 2008).

Without such flexibility, the working patterns in place merely had a limited impact in terms of achieving gender equality and were expected to continue to do so from the perspective of the research participants. This is because of the dominance of male interests and power across these settings, including old boys networks, which embed and sustain inequalities (Acker, 2006b). It may be that a greater gender balance is likely to be protracted goal as a much larger proportion encounter difficulties/barriers in scaling organisational hierarchies than those able to break through the glass ceilings in place. This study provided a snapshot perspective and so did not allow for changes over time to be tracked. Subsequent longitudinal studies could examine the extent of the impact of these programmes as well as any changes, because it is unlikely that gender inequalities will remain entirely static.

The findings generate implications for knowledge-intensive organisations and the knowledge-based view of the firm (Kang, et al. 2007). This is because they reveal that the value, rarity, inimitability and substitutability of a firm's human resources are not only guided by the nature and degree of an individual's knowledge but also their social capital, which is enhanced through working time and access to colleagues, clients, networks and projects. Each of which are strongly shaped by gender, agency and structure and affect women's experiences of consultancy and the configuration and value of an organisation's resources.

In addition, the findings reveal that measures implemented in consultancy firms to support women can actually serve to generate and reinforce multifaceted and interconnected gender divisions, with implications for women's tenure and success in consultancy. These patterns were found to be relatively consistent across the samples examined in each country, with national institutional differences diluted by features of the occupation and consultancy practices. Indeed, the interview data pointed to a degree of consistency across a number of lines, including the representation of women and the nature and level of gender segregation as well as experiences and perceptions of flexible working. National and organisational policy interventions would appear to be having a limited impact and so disadvantage by gender is likely to remain persistent. These policies need to be supported rather than undermined by occupational norms. Therefore, it may be that change is required at this level, but the salience of trade unions and professional bodies for management consultancy in the UK and USA is low.

## **Conclusions**

The findings from this study may have been influenced by the sampling strategy, the composition of the sample, the national contexts, firms and forms of consultancy examined in this study. While this is acknowledged, the objective of this study was not to generalise across consultancy due to the infeasibility of this goal (Malhotra and Morris, 2009). Instead the aim was to examine women's experiences of careers and flexibility in consultancy and how these experiences are influenced by gender and national context. Such a perspective contributes to our understanding of the gender regime in consultancy, why gender segregation remains prominent and how barriers to the further integration of women can be tackled. The presence and resilience of these factors may extend across other related professions, particularly as

consultancies act as vectors of developments in management policy and practice. However, investigation of this would have to be the focus of future studies and analyses.

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