

Flexible enough? The gender gap and the uptake of flexible work

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Author: Saleem, S.; Pan, A.; Burns, S.; Seward, B. & Dhuey, E.

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Excerpted from introduction

Over the past seventy years, women have entered the workforce at an unprecedented rate, a trend that has brought with it the anticipation of greater gender equality and empowerment for female workers. However, these ambitions have consistently been interrupted by traditional gender norms that task women with fulfilling the demands of multiple roles and managing the often conflicting expectations of their work and home lives.

Fortunately, flexible work arrangements (such as remote work, variable scheduling, variable work hours, and shorter work weeks/hours) have been identified as one way to remedy conflicting work-family demands and can also increase women's satisfaction with their work-life balance.¹ A recent survey of female workers across nine countries found that 29% of working women reported that the lack of flexible work arrangements caused them to question their career progression. Almost half of the surveyed women felt that creating flexible working options would be the most beneficial action their organization could take to retain them long term.²

However, stigma surrounding flexible workers can create barriers to utilizing flexible work options. That is, there is a prevalent belief among managers and colleagues that workers who utilize any kind of flexible work arrangements are less invested and productive in their roles.³ Furthermore, flexible work more often plays out as employees' decisions to work part-time, rather than formally-supported full-time arrangements. It is therefore problematic that prior research has identified that part-time schedules are highly gendered, with men and women demanding and using these arrangements in different ways and for different reasons.⁴ In 2020 alone, there were nearly twice as many women than men who were working part-time jobs—jobs that have been found to be associated with fewer opportunities for career advancement.⁵ Many believe that persistent expectations around child rearing and familial responsibilities drive much of the trend, with women adjusting the amount of time that they work to achieve the requisite work/life balance of parenthood.

Region: Canada [4]

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