

Comparative Analysis of Workplace Flexibility, Work Stress, Work-Family Conflict, Emotional Exhaustion, and Mental Well-being Among the American Workforce: A Multi-mediating and Moderating Model

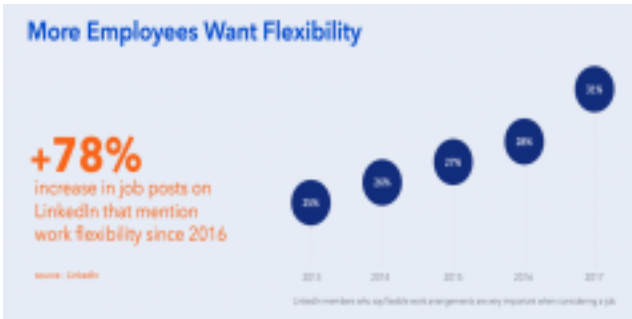
Dr. Ramya Thangavel
Visiting Scholar,
Gender & Women Studies
Univ of Wisconsin, Madison
Email: rthangavel@wisc.edu
Mobile: (414) 241 2564



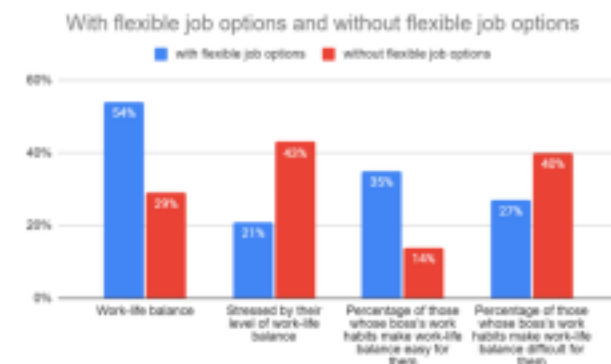
In early 2020, the impact of corona virus (COVID-19) spread that affected all over the world created economic and social shock, which specifically in the organization world reshaped the way people live and work and the way industries and organizations operate. Among the many long-lasting impacts of the pandemic has been a fundamental change in the workplace: Where they work, when they work, and complex new challenges of balancing work and home life, but also new opportunities as well (Kramer and Kramer 2020). In the case of the American society which has changed dramatically over the past half century, Women comprise nearly one half of the labor force and all adults are working in more than 60 percent of households with children. And yet, children and elderly parents still need care. We know that women especially working mothers and caregivers, have historically been the primary seekers of accommodation and have faced pay and career discrimination as a result. Although a smaller number of men seek similar arrangements and may also face discrimination, they are more likely to advance in their careers. Work-place flexibility has long been gender-siloed, seen

as a “women’s issue,” with women bearing the brunt of its effects on career and pay across occupations. This was especially true during the pandemic. These and other changes have caused many women professionals to face conflicts between their work and personal lives. These changes also inspire the need and desire on the part of female workers for more flexibility in the workplace.

Many companies are giving employees the option to work from home, or in office or a combination of both (Fedakova and Istonova 2017). This change is something we must all navigate. This research will analyze all the perspectives on workplace flexibility and its impact on work life balance for men and women professionals in USA. The research will be carried out in two phases. The first phase will look more closely at some of the changes in the U.S. workforce that underlie the need for increased flexibility in work arrangements with special reference to Women professionals. More and more families have all parents working, and caregiving needs will continue to increase and these trends raise the value of flexibility in the workplace as it helps women balance work and family responsibilities.



Tracking these changes and related surveys has always been the need of the hour, and the shift over the last three years has been significant. Perhaps most importantly, we've seen women leave the workforce in droves, as they often became the primary caregivers in their households and struggled with competing professional and personal demands. A flexible workplace, however, encompasses many ways of accommodating the diverse needs of women professionals in order to maximize performance. To find out more about how workplace flexibility has impacted the work life balance for women professionals following the pandemic, the proposed research will focus on these work culture in organizations.



Source: FlexJobs's research from 2022

Also, researches show lack of flexibility was one of the top-cited reasons for women who chose to leave their employer in the past few months. And many don't feel able to ask for

flexible working arrangements, with an overwhelming majority of women feeling that doing so would affect their career

progression. Meanwhile, women continue to have a significant workload at home, with the majority of women bearing the most responsibility for household tasks. This leaves us with various questions. While diving deep into these questions this research will attempt to find out,

Do Women really want more flexibility?

Around where they work, When they work?

Are women getting what they want or need from their employer?

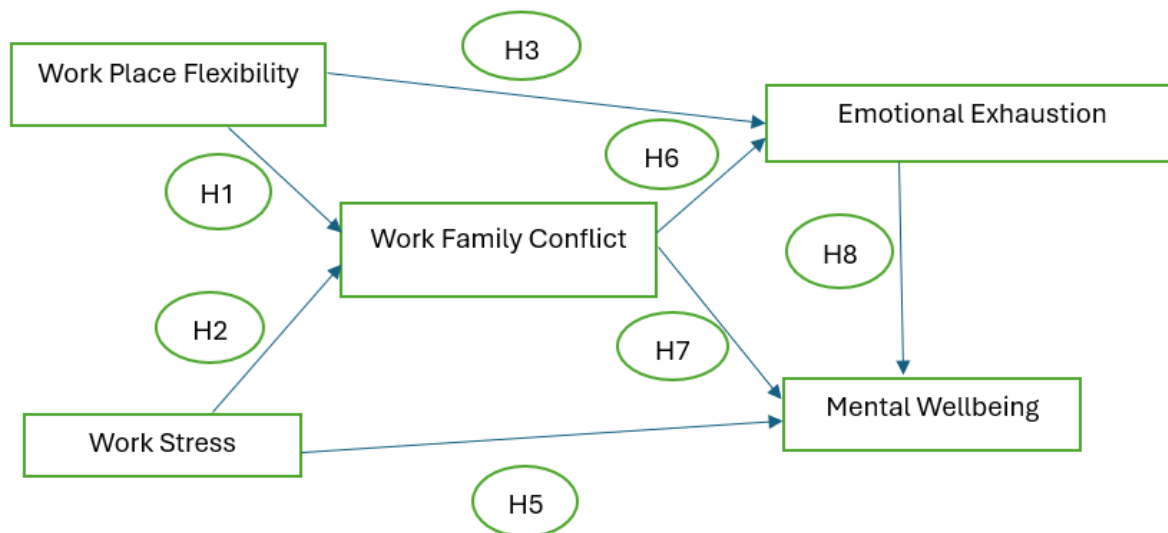
Are they clear on what will make a difference in helping them thrive at work?

what actions they will take if they don't receive what they need?

Does this have an impact on women's wellbeing ?

Much of the discussion around workplace flexibility has centered on where work takes place. But for organizations that want to retain and engage women in the workforce, *when* work takes place is emerging as one of the new priorities. Many in the workforce today value the benefit of flexibility, including better work-life integration, improved mental health, and less stress over potential barriers. However, they still feel that to get ahead professionally they must conform to traditional work settings to avoid stigma. From our study we will discover what today's working women professionals are looking for to work without fear of consequence.

The second section will examine the current state of flexible work arrangements , work stress , work family conflict and its impact on emotional exhaustion and mental well being among working professionals in US. The possibility of working from home has been considered as the means of increasing an individual's work life balance because work from home provides an opportunity to take care of family members (Ammons and Markham 2004; Johnson et al. 2007). The working from home policy has some potential advantages and risks at the same time that must be considered. Working from home is effective to improve the quality of life (Azarbouyeh and Jalali Naini 2014), employee happiness, work satisfaction (Kazekami 2020), and openness to creativity that will lead to innovation (Ellis and Webster 1998).The below figure explains the proposed conceptual model of this research.

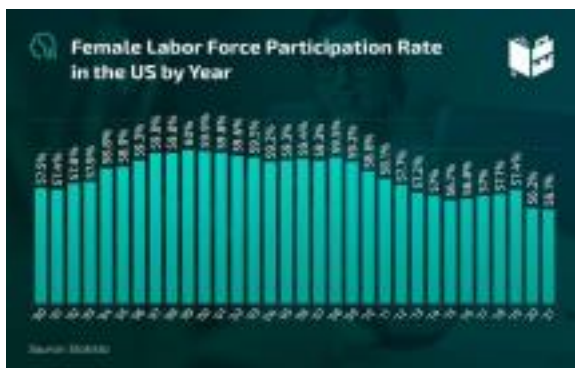


Conceptual Model of the study

The non-work responsibilities of the typical American worker have changed dramatically post COVID. While four decades ago women spent much more time performing nonmarket work, taking care of children and older family members, and keeping an organized and efficient home and men primarily performed market work, but now, the household division of labor has blurred. As a result, the fraction of households where all of the parents work full-time has nearly

tripled, and the percentage of full-time workers who are parents in full-time working families has increased substantially. As a result, many workers report difficulty juggling their work and family responsibilities. American workers increasingly need to balance employment with other responsibilities, but to what extent does the workplace accommodate these needs? This research will also focus on the work family conflict and how critical it is to the careers and lives outside of work for

men and women. A large part of striking this balance relies heavily on flexibility in the workplace. A lack of flexibility will likely lead to a lack of productivity and overall employee engagement. At the same time, a flexible environment contributes to higher retention and engagement and overall happier employees who get more accomplished and positively contribute to the company's bottom line.



Work Life balance is described as achieving a balance between employees' family or personal life and work lives (Jyothi and Jyothi 2012). The concept of work-life balance is built on the idea that work life and personal life complement each other in presenting perfection in one's life. Furthermore, men and women employ flexible working in various ways, resulting in varied outcomes in terms of well-being and work-life balance (Chung and van der Lippe 2020; Lopez-Igual and Rodriguez-Modrono 2020). Work Life balance can affect employee performance both positively and negatively. An imbalance between work and personal life can have an impact on low productivity and decreased performance of a person for an organization and can lead to work family conflicts (Konrad and Mangel 2000; Cohen and Liani 2009). Work Stress is a condition that affects the emotions,

thought processes, and the thinking process. The gap between the demands of work with the existing resources will cause work stress and make people negative and dissatisfied. Work Stress, in this current situation may cause role ambiguity, over work role conflict, and time pressure during working from home, which can reduce job satisfaction (Kim et al,2019).

The balance between work and family life has always been a key factor influencing employee well-being. In a hybrid or flexible work model, while some employees may benefit from the ability to manage both work and family responsibilities, others may struggle to maintain a boundary between the two, leading to work-family conflict. A 2023 study by the Journal of Applied Psychology found that 45% of working parents report experiencing significant work-family conflict, with mothers being particularly affected by the demands of both work and caregiving responsibilities. In particular, employees working from home often face competing pressures, including child or elder care, housework, and the expectation to be "always on" due to flexible work hours. This constant juggling act can lead to higher levels of emotional exhaustion and mental distress.

Emotional exhaustion, a core component of burnout, is a major consequence of both work stress and work-family conflict. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines burnout as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed, with emotional exhaustion being one of the key indicators. According to research by Maslach & Leiter (2022), emotional exhaustion is prevalent

among workers who feel they cannot effectively balance work and personal responsibilities. The study found that 30% of employees in high-stress industries (e.g., healthcare, education, and tech) report high levels of emotional exhaustion, which in turn leads to diminished job performance, absenteeism, and turnover. The multi-mediating model in this research reveals that workplace flexibility has a dual effect on emotional exhaustion. For some, the ability to control work hours and environment helps reduce stress and burnout, while for others, the lack of structure and boundary blur contributes to emotional fatigue. Thus, while flexibility can potentially reduce burnout, it requires careful management to avoid exacerbating stress and emotional exhaustion.

The ultimate measure of the effectiveness of workplace flexibility is its impact on employees' mental well-being. A 2023 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research showed that employees who have access to flexible work arrangements report higher levels of overall mental well-being compared to those in rigid, office-bound roles. These workers are better able to manage work-related stress, avoid burnout, and maintain a healthier balance between personal and professional lives. However, the key to maximizing mental well-being lies in addressing the negative aspects of flexibility. Organizational support, clear expectations, and the availability of mental health resources are critical to ensuring that employees benefit from flexible work arrangements without succumbing to stress or burnout. Flexible work policies must be designed to offer true autonomy, rather than being a veneer that masks increasing expectations and workload.

This comparative analysis underscores the complexity of the hybrid work model and its effects on the American workforce. While workplace flexibility offers significant benefits, it is not a panacea for work stress, work-family conflict, and emotional exhaustion. A multi-mediating and moderating model provides a more nuanced view, revealing that the relationship between flexibility, stress, and well-being is contingent on factors such as role clarity, organizational support, and individual coping mechanisms. To create healthier, more resilient workplaces, organizations must not only offer flexibility but also provide resources for managing work-related stress, setting clear boundaries, and promoting mental well-being. Ultimately, the future of work lies in creating environments that balance flexibility with support, fostering a culture of empathy and understanding, and ensuring that employees have the tools they need to thrive both professionally and personally.

Exploratory design will be adopted for the study and the data will be collected from working men and women in USA through structured questionnaire. The proposed research on gender and flexible work will survey men and women US professionals exploring the value of workplace flexibility, while also providing insight into what leaders must do to get on the same page as their workforce. The data will be statistically analyzed and the outcome of the study will throw light on how workplace flexibility impacts and improves overall work-life balance and mental well being among employees and aims to share the benefits of

implementing flexible scheduling within any organization. As organizations continue to evolve their hybrid and flexible work strategies, they will need to consider how leadership styles and employee support structures can be adjusted to align with these ways of working. The findings of this research will provide employers with rich and valuable insights into the experiences of working men and women and enables them to take much-needed action to truly embed gender equality in the workplace. The outcomes of the research will be published in reputed journals

Keywords: *Work Place Flexibility (WPL), Work Life balance (WLB), Work Stress (WS), Emotional Exhaustion(EE),Mental Wellbeing (MW), Working men and women.*

References:

- Ammons, Samantha K., and William T. Markham. 2004. Working at Home: Experiences of Skilled White Collar Workers. *Sociological Spectrum* 24: 191–238.
- Azarbouyeh, Amir, and Seyed Gholamreza Jalali Naini. 2014. A Study on the Effect of Teleworking on Quality of Work Life. *Management Science Letters* 4: 1063–68.
- Chung, Heejung, and Tanja van der Lippe. 2020. Flexible Working, Work–Life Balance, and Gender Equality: Introduction. *Social Indicators Research* 151: 365–81.
- Cohen, Aaron, and Efrat Liani. 2009. Work-Family Conflict among Female Employees in Israeli Hospitals. *Personnel Review* 38: 124–41.
- Ellis, Selwyn T., and Robert L. Webster. 1998. IS Managers' Innovation toward Telecommuting: A Structural Equation Model. *Proceedings of the Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* 4: 161–68.
- Fedáková, Denisa, and Lucia Ištáňová. 2017. Slovak IT-Employees and New Ways of Working: Impact on Work-Family Borders and Work-Family Balance. *Československá Psychologie (Czechoslovak Psychology)* LXI: 68–83.
- Johnson, Laura C., Jean Andrey, and Susan M. Shaw. 2007. Mr. Dithers Comes to Dinner: Telework and the Merging of Women's Work and Home Domains in Canada. *Gender, Place and Culture* 14: 141–61.
- Jyothi, Sree V., and P. Jyothi. 2012. Assessing Work-Life Balance: From Emotional Intelligence and Role Efficacy of Career Women. *Advances in Management* 5: 332.
- Kazekami, Sachiko. 2020. Mechanisms to Improve Labor Productivity by Performing Telework. *Telecommunications Policy* 44: 101868.
- Kim, Jaeseung, Julia R. Henly, Lonnie M. Golden, and Susan J. Lambert. 2019. Workplace Flexibility and Worker Well-Being by Gender. *Journal of Marriage and Family*.
- Konrad, Alison M., and Robert Mangel. 2000. The Impact of Work-Life Programs on Firm Productivity. *Strategic Management Journal* 21:123.

Kramer, Amit, and Karen Z. Kramer. 2020. The Potential Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Occupational Status, Work from Home, and Occupational Mobility. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 103442.

López-Igual, Purificación, and Paula Rodríguez-Modroño. 2020. Who Is Teleworking and Where from? Exploring the Main Determinants of Telework in Europe. *Sustainability* 12: 8797.

Survey link:

https://uwmadison.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9ov4lY0U2ntfTiS

Survey QR:

