

THE FLEXIBILITY STIGMA:

WORK

DEVOTION

vs.

FAMILY

DEVOTION





The good news is, more and more workplaces are embracing flexible work arrangements. The bad news is, employees aren't. Here's why.

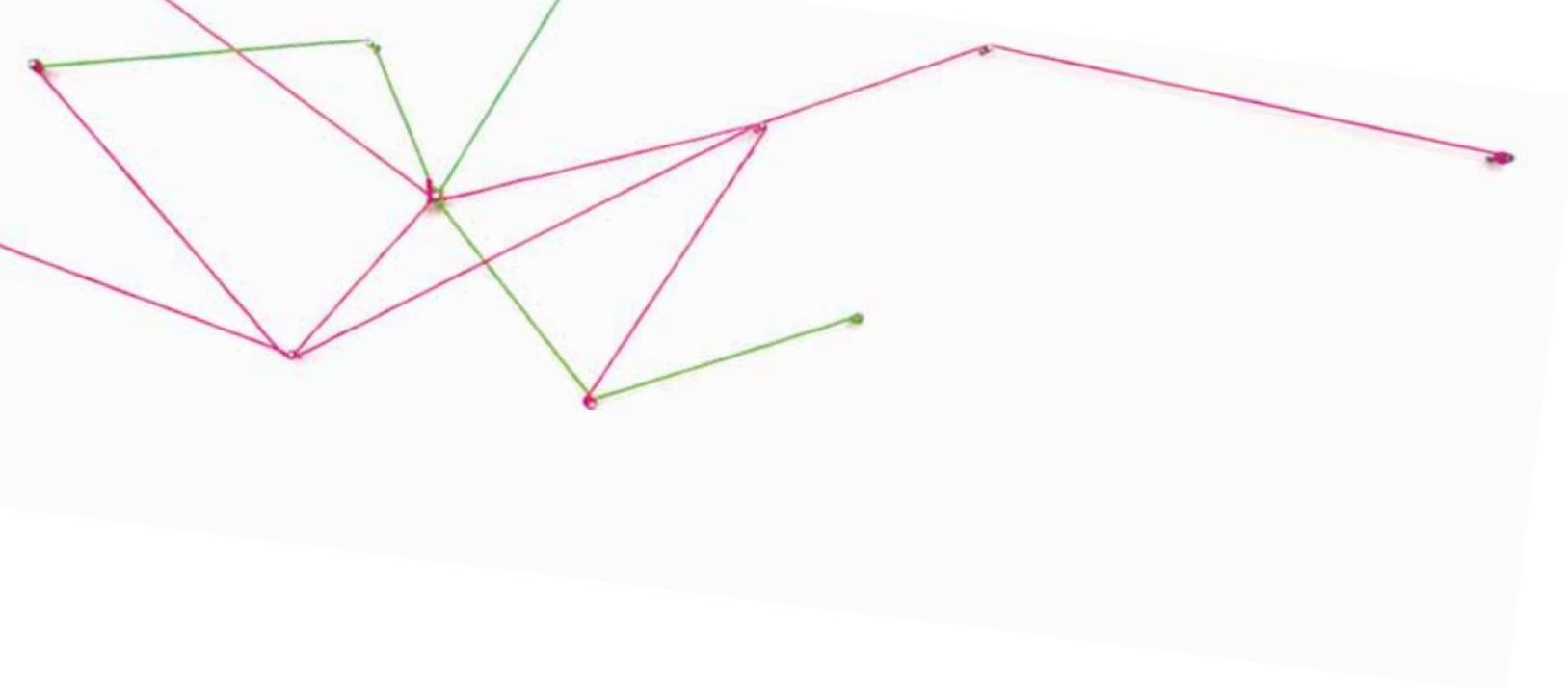
by **Joan Williams**, **Mary Blair-Loy** and **Jennifer Berdahl**

THE EVIDENCE IS IN: organizations are embracing flexible working arrangements. According to a recent study, 79 per cent of U.S. firms allow some of their employees, and 37 per cent allow all or most, to periodically change starting or quitting times. But while flexibility programs have become widespread, their usage rates remain low: only 11 per cent of the full-time workforce has a formal agreement with their employer to vary their work hours, while another 18 per cent have an informal agreement.

The reason for the low usage rates? Fears of negative career repercussions — fears that appear to be well founded: the use of flexibility policies has been shown to result in wage

penalties, lower performance evaluations and fewer promotions. As a result, some flexibility programs appear to be merely 'shelf paper' — offered for public relations reasons but accompanied by a tacit message that workers use them at their peril.

Formal flexibility policies may recognize the realities of today's families — in which 70 per cent of children live in households with two adults in the labour force — but informal practices appear to stigmatize the use of these policies, and the result is a failure to meet the needs of the workforce. In this article we will explore the nature of the 'flexibility stigma' and show how it affects employees who make their caregiving responsibilities salient at work.



Work Devotion vs. Family Devotion

We believe the roots of the flexibility stigma lie in the ‘work-devotion schema’, which specifies the cognitive belief, moral commitment, and emotional salience of making work the central focus of one’s life. The work-devotion schema is both coercive — in that many workers feel forced to comply with it — and seductive, in that workers may also believe that a strong work ethic helps form their sense of self and their self-worth. The use of flexible work arrangements can be interpreted by superiors, co-workers, and even the employee herself as a signal that she is violating the work devotion schema and is therefore somehow morally lacking.

The work devotion schema competes with a second moral understanding of a worthwhile life: the ‘family devotion schema’, which promises an intimately rewarding and financially secure life for women who dedicate their lives to caring for provider-husbands and vulnerable children. This schema features expectations of trust, obligation, care, and mutual dependence. Even when women are employed full-time, many sacrifice sleep, leisure, and professional advancement to live up to these expectations during their hours off work.

Class and gender are two important categories of analysis for understanding both work devotion and the flexibility stigma. For men, work devotion provides the moral rationale for a felt need to play the breadwinner role, and a justification for men’s continuing entitlement to the flow of domestic services from women that is required to perform as an ideal worker who is always available for work. The breadwinner’s family devotion is typically expressed by staying at work in order to be a good provider; and being a good provider is seen as an integral part of being a good father. Men who fail to demonstrate work devotion, by requesting family leave or workplace flexibility,

are typically seen as failing in their role as men.

For women, the flexibility stigma operates differently because the work devotion schema fits uneasily with cultural expectations for motherhood. The ‘good mother’ (but not the good father) is seen as someone who is ‘always available’ to her children. Thus a woman who takes family leave or requests workplace flexibility will often be seen a good mother, and for the same reasons, she is sanctioned for her failure to be (seen as) an ideal worker. Research suggests that, regardless of a woman’s actual productivity, motherhood status *per se* triggers a presumed inability to meet the work devotion mandate — an assumption that is often called the ‘maternal wall bias’.

How the Stigma Differs by Class

In addition to differing by gender, the stereotypes that drive the flexibility stigma also differ by class, which is hardly surprising given that the organization of work also differs by class. Furthermore, workers’ ability to fulfill workplace norms and expectations is often dependent on their arrangements for family caregiving — which, again, differ strikingly by class.

The first step in understanding the influence of class is to define relevant class groupings. In this context, one of the authors [Prof. Williams] has argued that the relevant groups in the U.S. workforce are professionals, the poor, and those who are neither rich nor poor — a group she calls the ‘missing middle’. Professionals make up the 13 per cent of families who work in managerial or professional jobs in which at least one family member has graduated from college; poor families are defined as those with incomes in the bottom third of the income distribution; and the missing middle is that 53 per cent of families who are neither poor nor professionals. Let’s examine the challenges facing each, in turn.

PROFESSIONALS. In professional families, men often work very long hours: the typical upper-middle-class man spends 55 hours a week at work or commuting, spending 8 am to 7 pm away from home each weekday and working at least one day each weekend. Only 14 per cent of professional mothers work this schedule, placing the remainder on the ‘mommy track’ (despite the fact that the rate of stay-at-home motherhood fell sharply among married professional mothers, from 35 per cent in the late 1970s to 20 per cent 30 years later.) *One in five* mothers in professional-managerial families still is out of the labour force, and many others work part time—which in many traditionally-male professions means the 40-hour week that is commonly defined as full time.

During the same period in which the hours worked in professional jobs were spiraling upwards, so was the time intensity involved in childrearing. In the families of the 1960s, children would return from school only to be sent out to play. By the late 20th century, the same economic anxiety that led to longer working hours had also led to ‘helicopter parenting’, or as sociologists have called it, ‘concerted cultivation’ as the model of good parenting. Parents were expected to develop every nascent talent in their children to assuage their fear of failing in a winner-take-all society, where the alternative to a high-paying job, increasingly, is a low-paid, dead-end one. Sociologist **Annette Laureau** has documented the trek of upper-middle-class children from enrichment activity to enrichment activity, as exhausted parents and children speed from tutoring to tuba to Tae Kwon Do.

The consequences of the flexibility stigma in the professional-managerial context are both reputational and concrete. When caregiving constraints become salient at work, three things happen:

1. The quality of work assignments suffers, which alone can doom a career, given that career development is highly dependent on highly specialized training;
2. It becomes difficult to find mentors and sponsors, which is vital for career progress in elite jobs; and
3. There are artificially high penalties associated with taking a career break — penalties completely out of proportion to the deterioration of human capital.

Widespread anecdotal evidence, particularly in Law and the sciences, documents professionals (typically women) literally unable to get a job after they take a year or two off to care for children, despite elite credentials. In a conference co-organized by the lead author, a Harvard law graduate was told that no headhunter would want to take her on as a client because she had taken off a single year to raise a child. Until recently, Science careers have been formally organized to make taking even a few years off a career-ender — although happily, this is changing. It

should be noted that the flexibility stigma in elite careers differs by field, with Medicine being much more open to both flexibility and part-time work.

THE POOR. The face of work-family conflict among the poor is very different. In this context, the key problem, typically, is not having too many hours to work, but too few. Low-wage jobs have shifted away from the steady job with benefits towards part-time jobs without benefits.

Even when low-wage employers offer only part-time hours, they often insist on full-time work devotion. Fully 94 per cent of store managers in a study of a retail chain reported that they try to hire workers with ‘open availability’—that is, a willingness to work anytime the store is open. “The sales associates have to be flexible. They signed on for ‘whatever’—they agreed to this when they were hired,” said one manager. For half (49 per cent) of all jobs that do not require a college education, workers’ willingness to work odd hours or to be available whenever the employer needs staff weighs heavily in the hiring decision. This encourages workers with child care and other family challenges not to be forthcoming about their needs; instead, they hang on as long as they can, then they simply stop showing up.

The shift to ‘just-in-time schedules’ has complicated matters. If fewer customers than expected appear at a restaurant on a given day, a waitress reporting for work may well be sent home; and if a hospital ward has fewer patients than expected, nurses’ aides (who may have taken three buses to get to work and already paid for child care) may be sent home with no hours. In industries where these schedules are common — notably retail, hospitality and health care — supervisors typically are judged chiefly on whether they ‘stay within hours’ — that is, on how well they match the labour supply with labour demand.

Moreover, just-in-time schedules typically shift from day to day and week to week; workers often get little notice of their schedule for the next week—three days’ notice is commonplace. In one recent study nearly three-fourths of workers said their schedules were posted only one week at a time. Shifts are routinely extended if business is brisk or if work is not completed by the end of a shift.

The schedules of hourly workers are not only unpredictable, they are also rigid. Hourly workers are assumed to be in need of close supervision because of a presumed lack of work ethic. Thus jobs available to the poor tend to be rigid jobs where showing up late, or leaving in the middle of a shift, garners ‘points’ in a progressive discipline system where too many points leads to discipline, and then dismissal.

Not surprisingly, the scheduling of hourly jobs fits very poorly with low-wage workers’ family lives. Two-thirds of low-income families are headed by single parents, who typically rely on a fragile network of family and friends for child care — people

THE FLEXIBILITY STIGMA FOR WOMEN

- If the flexibility stigma for men stems from gender-*non-conforming* behaviour, the flexibility stigma for women stems from gender-*conforming* behaviour. When women request family leave or workplace flexibility, they are doing what women are expected to do: limit their work obligations in favour of family commitments.
- In one study of highly qualified professional women, once women went part time, their status fell sharply, as did the quality of their work assignments.
- Bias against mothers is of a different order of magnitude than the glass-ceiling bias against women in general. One study found that mothers were 79 per cent less likely to be hired, 100 per cent less likely to be promoted, offered an average of \$11,000 less in salary, and held to higher performance and punctuality standards than identical women without children.
- While the flexibility stigma is similar for professional and middle-class women, it is quite different for poor women. Employers commonly attribute sky-high levels of absenteeism and attrition to poor mothers' lack of a work ethic and fundamental irresponsibility.
- Whereas more affluent women who encounter the flexibility stigma may be seen as good mothers but bad workers, when low-wage women's caregiving responsibilities become salient, their employers often interpret this as evidence that the women were irresponsible to have children in the first place.

whose schedules are often as unstable as their own. Moreover, child care is not only an issue for women and men of childbearing age: the fastest-growing household type is grandparents as primary guardians for their grandchildren. Indeed, in some U.S. inner cities, grandparents are the primary guardian for 30 to 50 per cent of children under 18.

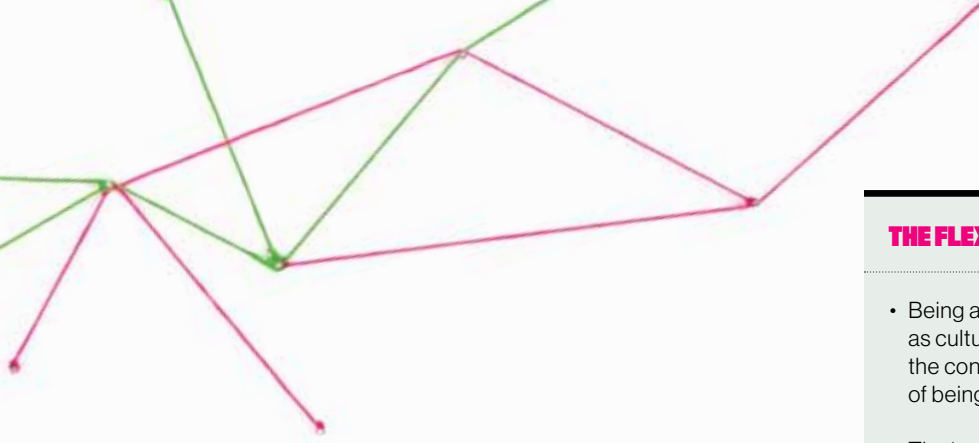
Low-income families also have a higher load of other types of family care than does the average family: they are more than twice as likely as higher-income families to provide more than 30 hours of unpaid assistance a week to aging parents. A majority of workers providing elder care say they have had to go to work late, leave early, or take time off during the day to provide care. In addition, low-income families are much more likely to be caring for ill family members: one study found that nearly one-third of welfare-to-work mothers are caring for children with chronic illnesses, and two-thirds of the low-wage parents interviewed for another study were caring for a child with either a chronic health condition or a learning disability.

The interaction of rigid and unstable workplace schedules and low-wage families' heavy burden of family care produces

sky-high rates of absenteeism and turnover that are frustrating and costly to employers. Consequently, low-wage workers have sharply lower rates of job tenure than do more affluent workers: among those who earn less than \$25,000, over three-fourths of the men and nearly half of the women have been at their jobs for two years or less.

Managers often interpret low-wage workers' high turnover and absenteeism as evidence of irresponsibility. For example, a Milwaukee manager claimed that 'massive absenteeism' is "usually linked to other irresponsible-type behaviour". This is a different flexibility stigma than exists for managerial-professional workers. To the extent that the poor are not 'trusted workers', the flexibility stigma may reflect employers' stereotypes that the workers are 'gaming' the system by asking for leave or flexibility they do not really need, or trigger an employers' beliefs that they should not encourage or reward 'irresponsible' behaviour with flexibility. Thus, not only the triggers for the flexibility stigma, but also the content of the stigma, differ by class.

THE MISSING MIDDLE. Much less information exists about families who are neither rich nor poor — those with a median income of \$65,000. In the U.S., the rate of stay-at-home motherhood in this group fell by nearly as much as it did among women in professional families, to only 23 per cent by the late 2000s. These families are almost as likely as professional ones to be two-parent families in which both work full time (51 vs. 57 per cent); yet, unlike professional families, these families cannot afford to purchase expensive services that help workers juggle work and family responsibilities, such as nannies, housecleaning services, summer camps, and frequent restaurant meals. The time squeeze is acute, particularly since roughly a quarter of middle-income



men work 50 or more hours a week. As a result, these families are more likely than elite families, but less likely than poor families, to rely on parents or relatives for child care.

The jobs held by this group are less likely to have just-in-time schedules than are jobs held by low-wage workers, although mandatory overtime produces schedule instability for some. Severe work-family conflicts result because one of the chief forms of child care is ‘tag teaming’, which means that if one parent is ordered to stay overtime at short notice, the family may have to choose between mom’s job and dad’s job in a context where they need both jobs to pay the mortgage. Even in families that don’t tag team, middle-income families are almost as likely as poor ones (and much more likely than professional-managerial workers) to rely on relatives for child care—relatives who often will have schedules as rigid as their own.

A few middle-income jobs, chiefly unionized ones, have stable career tracks, although this may be becoming rarer as unions wither. These middle-income jobs, like low-wage jobs, tend to be rigid and highly supervised. Occupants of these jobs, including technicians, administrative personnel, construction workers and factory workers, typically have rigid hours, and lack the flexibility commonplace in professional-managerial jobs. Workers in this category face tough choices when a child or elder gets sick, or when a child has a school event. Thus the triggers for the flexibility stigma in the missing middle typically are more similar to those faced by poor families than professional ones.

In closing

Despite the increased availability of flexible work arrangements on the books of many employers, there is widespread underutilization of these arrangements on the part of workers — despite

THE FLEXIBILITY STIGMA FOR MEN

- Being a good father, unlike being a good mother, is not seen as culturally incompatible with being a good worker. Quite the contrary: being a good provider is seen as an integral part of being a good father.
- The ‘work devotion schema’ means that upper-middle class men typically attach great importance to success-related traits such as ambition and a strong work ethic. The flexibility stigma for professional men thus stems in part from the sense that a man who makes caregiving responsibilities salient on the job is less of a man.
- In some workplaces, gender wars are emerging about the right way to ‘be a man’, as the breadwinner ideal is contested by a newer ideal of nurturing fatherhood. The rise of the ‘nurturing father ideal’ may help to explain why men now report greater levels of work-family conflict than women.
- Among stably employed blue-collar men (part of the missing-middle category), a man who makes his caregiving responsibilities salient on the job often meets with similar messages that he is not a real man.
- Whereas professional men’s sense of personal growth is intertwined with their career success rather than the quality of their family life, non-elite men are more likely to see their jobs as a means of supporting their families. One study comparing Emergency Medical Technicians (missing-middle men) and physicians showed that the EMTs were far more involved in their children’s daily care than were the physicians.

a strong desire for such flexibility. It is our hope that this article will spur further dialogue about the reasons behind the failure of the modern workplace to successfully adapt to the realities of the workforce. Only by continuing to reveal, understand, and make these social and cultural forces public can we do something to address them. **R**



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