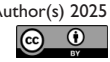
PhD Showcase

WES

Work, Employment and Society
1–22



DOI: 10.1177/09500170251373035
journals.sagepub.com/home/wes


The Gendered Flexibility Paradox and Remote-First Work: How Working Parents Reconcile Work and Care

Lauren Ryan
University of Melbourne, Australia

Brendan Churchill
University of Melbourne, Australia

Leah Ruppanner
University of Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

Recent technological advances and globalised distribution of work have accelerated the rise of remote-first organisations where everyone works remotely, yet the effects of this approach on working parents remain underexplored. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 25 mothers and 16 fathers from 31 remote-first organisations, this study examines the gendered impact of standardised remote-first flexibility on work–family reconciliation. Findings show that remote-first work enhances location and schedule freedom, allowing parents to sustain a dual devotion to work and family. Fathers used this flexibility to increase engagement with domestic tasks and caregiving, while mothers focused on meeting work demands (in addition to caregiving responsibilities). The use of remote-first working arrangements increased employee trust and empathy among working parents, reducing flexibility stigma concerns. While fathers resisted tendencies to overwork, the remote-first model perpetuated the gendered flexibility paradox for mothers, leading to increased labour expansion and self-exploitation in both paid and unpaid work.

Keywords

dual devotion, flexibility paradox, gender, remote work, work–family integration

Corresponding author:
Lauren Ryan, School of Social and Political Science, University of Melbourne, John Medley Building, Parkville, Melbourne, VIC 3052, Australia.
Email: lauren.j.ryan@outlook.com

Introduction

Working parents report struggling to manage the competing demands of work and family (Lott, 2020; Voydanoff, 2005; Williams et al., 2016). This has been shown to lead to burnout, exhaustion and feeling overwhelmed, which can negatively impact physical and mental health (Carlson et al., 2020; Kelly and Moen, 2020). Remote work is seen as one possible solution to these challenges (Hill et al., 2008; Voydanoff, 2005), offering employees reduced commuting times, increased productivity and enhanced work–family integration (Allen et al., 2013; Brumley and George, 2022). Recent technological advancements and a growing reliance on a globalised workforce have prompted organisations to adopt innovative ways of working, including the remote-first approach. Unlike hybrid work, which allows workers to periodically work away from a centralised office (De Souza Santos and Ralph, 2022), remote-first organisations universally adopt the use of remote work arrangements for all staff, facilitated by the use of cloud-based digital headquarters and no mandated in-office days (De Souza Santos and Ralph, 2022; RemotePass, 2021). Through this standardised approach, remote-first employees have choice and significant control over where and when they work (De Souza Santos and Ralph, 2022; RemotePass, 2021).

Extant literature indicates that when remote work is universally offered and normalised it can reduce the gendered stigmatisation commonly associated with flexible working arrangements (Chung, 2022; Kelly and Moen, 2020; Williams et al., 2013). By standardising remote work across all employees, remote-first work helps to decouple the association between flexible work and assumptions of reduced professional commitment (Kelly and Moen, 2020; Kelly et al., 2010). Nevertheless, standardisation of remote work has also been shown to inadvertently reinforce traditional gender roles, especially in contexts where women continue to shoulder the majority of caregiving tasks (Chung and van der Lippe, 2020; Fuller and Hirsh, 2019). Research suggests that women are more likely than men to use the flexibility afforded by remote work to manage household and caregiving duties, leading to an increased 'second shift' (Hochschild, 2012). Thus, when remote work becomes the norm there is a risk that women absorb additional unpaid labour in the home on top of additional work hours, further entrenching gender inequalities and exacerbating self-exploitative behaviours (Chung, 2022) as a way of expressing devotion to both work and family (de Laat, 2023).

Despite its increased utilisation, the effects of remote-first work on working parents' ability to reconcile the often-competing demands of work and family remain underexplored. There is limited scholarship on the impacts of remote-first work on fathers' engagement with unpaid domestic labour and care and mothers' expansion of labour in both the work and family domains. Collectively, these gaps leave unanswered questions about the impact of standardised models of remote work on the gendered experiences of remote-first working parents. This research addresses these gaps. Specifically, we ask the following research questions: (1) how does remote-first work enable mothers and fathers to reconcile their paid work and caregiving responsibilities?; and (2) how does remote-first work affect the flexibility paradox – having more resources yet experiencing greater self-exploitation – for working mothers and fathers?

In this research, we provide an overview of existing literature exploring the gendered usage and implications of standardised remote work. Second, we detail the article's

theoretical framework, drawing on de Laat's (2023) *dual devotion* to work and family and Chung's (2022) *flexibility paradox*, highlighting existing gaps in relation to the gendered implications of remote-first work. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 41 remote-first working parents (25 mothers and 16 fathers), the study finds that parents use remote-first work to maintain a dual devotion to both work and family that is gendered with increased family engagement for fathers and increased work engagement for mothers (de Laat, 2023). The study shows how remote-first work facilitates better reconciliation of work and family life, allowing fathers to maintain full-time and financially rewarding work while also devoting additional time and energy to their families and households. However, the study also evidences the persistence of the flexibility paradox among remote-first mothers, whereby mothers overcompensate for working flexibility by self-exploitation and overwork (Chung, 2022). The findings further highlight how mothers continue to experience the pressures of the 'always on' culture, suggesting that standardisation alone is not enough to stop the paradoxical outcomes of flexible working – or negate its unintended consequences.

Background

Gendered consequences of standardised remote work

The utilisation of remote work is often highly gendered. Previous studies have shown men are more likely than women to be offered remote work opportunities but are less likely to use them for caregiving purposes, preferring instead to use their spatiotemporal flexibility to enhance work performance (Chung and Booker, 2023; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001; Van der Lippe and Lippényi, 2020). Men's reluctance to use remote work for caregiving is explained in part by a fear of stigmatisation and negative career consequences imposed by ideal worker norms and masculine breadwinner stereotypes (Rudman and Mescher, 2013). Women work remotely to combine work and family responsibilities, despite being subjected to similar negative consequences as men, including workplace discrimination, career stagnation, reduced income and social stigmatisation (Chung and Van der Horst, 2018; Fuller and Hirsh, 2019; Lyttelton et al., 2022).

Studies demonstrate that the normalisation of remote work can diminish the gendered stigma often attached to flexible work arrangements, which were traditionally framed as exceptional concessions rather than standard practice (Chung 2022; Kelly and Moen, 2020). When remote work is standardised for all employees, it disrupts the linkage between flexibility and assumptions of diminished professional dedication (Kelly and Moen, 2020; Kelly et al., 2010). The reconfiguration has the potential to advance gender equality, as both women and men can adopt remote work without the reputational risk of being labelled as less ambitious or committed (Williams et al., 2013). However, such normalisation may also unintentionally reinforce existing gendered divisions of labour, particularly in contexts where women disproportionately carry caregiving and domestic responsibilities (Chung and Van der Lippe, 2020; Fuller and Hirsh, 2019). Evidence indicates that women are more likely than men to mobilise the flexibility of remote work arrangements to accommodate family and household demands, thereby intensifying their "second shift" (Hochschild, 2012). Consequently, while standardised remote work may appear egalitarian, it can in fact deepen gendered

inequalities by compelling women to manage heavier dual workloads and fostering self-exploitative patterns of overwork (Chung, 2022) as a demonstration of dual devotion to both work and family (de Laat, 2023).

Dual devotion to work and family

De Laat's (2023) theoretical concept of *dual devotion* builds on Blair-Loy's (2003) work on the conflicting work–family devotion schemas known to influence an individual's commitment to either work *or* family. In line with the broader division of labour, devotion to the distinct domains of work and family is traditionally gendered, with work devotion the purview of men and devotion to family largely the moral obligation of women (Acker, 1990; Blair-Loy, 2003; Williams et al., 2013). Dedication to these domains has been constrained by cultural factors and the physical and temporal boundaries of in-office work, making it impossible for parents to show devotion to both at once. However, with the rise of remote work, de Laat (2023) argues that men and women are increasingly embracing new schemas that allow for a dual devotion to both work and family, enacted through increased work–life integration. While Blair-Loy's (2003) original work identified a limited number of executive women who had managed to challenge gendered cultural devotion norms by combining family with part-time paid work, de Laat's (2023) findings present a significantly changed landscape in which the majority of households consist of dual-earner parents, and significant numbers of professional women are working not just full-time but substantially longer hours than contractually obliged. Heightened flexibility and autonomy offered by remote work enables women and men to engage in domestic and caregiving activities while maintaining an orientation to work, yet this is often achieved by hiding additional labour and arguably does little to challenge dominant cultural narratives around long work hours, work intensification and overwork (Chung, 2022; de Laat, 2023; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010).

From a gendered perspective, de Laat's (2023) research suggests that the spatiotemporal flexibility of remote work offers men increased opportunities to engage in childcare and domestic tasks while allowing women to increase their engagement with paid work, providing both with avenues for maintaining dual identities of 'ideal worker and perfect parent' (Beckman and Mazmanian, 2020: 9) that demonstrate devotion in both domains. Specifically, de Laat (2023: 151) argues that these 'idealized relationships with family time and work time [allow] them to enact identities that wider society has been slow to acknowledge: involved fatherhood for men, and career ambition for mothers'. However, she also cautions that idealised expressions of dual devotion by working parents may also contribute to unrealistic expectations around 'having and doing it all'. The internalisation of such narratives ultimately benefits employers, with women working longer hours (for the same pay) and men not reducing paid hours of work, despite increasing their unpaid labour (Chung, 2022; de Laat, 2023).

The (gendered) flexibility paradox

The extent to which remote-first working parents are prone to overwork and self-exploitative behaviours gives rise to our inclusion of Chung's (2022) *flexibility paradox* as a

second theory. The flexibility paradox denotes the conflict between employee aspirations for enhanced work–life balance and pressure to be consistently available to meet work demands. Modern employees are expected to be constantly contactable and attentive to work requests (Mazmanian et al., 2013) while simultaneously pursuing increased adaptability to address family and personal commitments (Worley and Gutierrez, 2020). The flexibility paradox maintains that while remote work offers employees increased spatiotemporal freedom and control to manage the conflicting roles of employee and parent, it simultaneously benefits employers/governments/society through frequent exploitation of employees' tendencies to overwork (Chung, 2022; de Laat, 2023). Chung (2022) observes that such work arrangements are deliberately used as a tool by both employers and governments to ensure the maximum exploitation of labour supply, without revisiting the social norms that prop up the male breadwinner model or adjusting the socioeconomic policies that support families. Consequently, seemingly generous offers of flexible work can often distract employees from questioning the problematic nature of the labour market, creating a falsehood of notionally satisfied workers who do not have to choose between work or family (Chung, 2022). This tendency towards expressions of satisfaction and gratitude for work flexibility is particularly strong for women, who must otherwise choose to sacrifice either work or family (Chung, 2022).

Building on these concepts, the flexibility paradox suggests that men are more easily able to use remote work to display work dedication than women due to women's traditional family responsibilities and demands (Chung, 2022). In this way, Chung (2022) argues that the flexibility paradox is gendered, suggesting that men use remote work to expand their work performance while women use it to maintain their family and caregiving roles. The gendering of the flexibility paradox is based on traditional ideal worker norms (Acker, 1990; Williams, 2000; Williams et al., 2013), which expect all employees to act as if they are wholly devoted to work and unencumbered by external demands. Chung (2022: 106) argues that the gendered flexibility paradox highlights a 'more contemporary enactment of traditional gender roles in that remote working enables women to carry out paid and unpaid work without disrupting the norm around who is responsible for housework/childcare nor the ideal worker norm', thus allowing for expressions of dual devotion without challenging gendered cultural norms.

Research rationale: Why study remote-first work?

While previous scholars have explored relationships between dual devotion and the flexibility paradox concerning parents' use of traditional flexible work arrangements (Chung, 2022; de Laat, 2023; Parry, 2024), how working parents use universally standardised approaches such as remote-first work remains underexplored. Offering standardised remote work arrangements is expected to create more equitable employment experiences by reducing the gendered flexibility stigmas found in the traditional workplace (Chung, 2020; Munsch, 2016; Williams et al., 2013). Furthermore, since remote-first removes the selection effect into remote work for both men and women, it may also reduce gendered risks tied to presenteeism and proximity bias (Cristea and Leonardi, 2019; Kelly and Moen, 2020), providing space for parents to challenge traditional roles and engage more across work and family domains. These gaps in our knowledge leave important questions

about the impact of standardised remote work on the gendered experiences of remote-first working parents, prompting the authors to ask the following research questions: (1) how does remote-first work enable mothers and fathers to reconcile their paid work and caregiving responsibilities?; and (2) how does remote-first work affect the flexibility paradox for working mothers and fathers?

Method

To answer these research questions, qualitative interviews with remote-first working parents were conducted. The following section outlines information about participant recruitment, data collection, the study sample and our approach to data analysis.

Data collection

Participants were recruited through the first author's LinkedIn posts calling for parents employed in remote-first organisations with children aged 0–18 years who lived at home to participate in the research. These posts were tagged, shared and commented on by individuals across the broader LinkedIn community, snowballing the reach of recruitment activities to a wider population. Those who indicated interest in the study were then contacted to schedule online interviews. Building on this preliminary list, the authors used additional snowball sampling to strategically broaden the sample and target participants from a range of different industries and with varied intersectional demographics including age, gender, relationship status and number and age of children (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This recruitment process provided a sample of 41 remote-first parents who participated in semi-structured interviews conducted by the first author.

Interviews took place throughout February to April of 2023. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom and lasted from 45 to 70 minutes. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions about topics ranging from structure and location of their work; challenges with work–family boundaries; strategies for work–family organisation; division of paid and unpaid labour within their households; experiences of work–family conflict/balance; and levels of organisational support for caregiving within their teams and workplace cultures. Saturation of meaning and themes became apparent after the first 32 interviews, but a desire to ensure reliability and validity (particularly across gender groups) and to expand the sample to include greater ethnic and relationship status diversity led to a total of 41 interviews being conducted (Hennink et al., 2017).

Study sample

Table 1 provides an overview of key demographic characteristics for the sample, distinguished by gender. The sample included 25 mothers and 16 fathers. Seven participants were single parents (17%), and the remaining 34 were in married or de facto heterosexual partnerships (83%). Respondents ranged from 31 to 50 years of age (average age was 41) and had between one and four children in the home (average number of children was 1.8). The majority resided in Australia (75%) and the remainder were located in the USA (17%), Canada (5%) and Switzerland (2.5%). The sample largely reflects the snowball

Table 1. Demographic information for the participant sample.

	Mothers	Fathers	Total
Total participants	25 (61%)	16 (39%)	**41 (100%)**
Age			
31–35	4 (9.8%)	0 (0%)	**4 (9.8%)**
36–40	4 (9.8%)	8 (19.5%)	**12 (29.3%)**
41–45	13 (31.7%)	5 (12.2%)	**18 (43.9%)**
46–50	4 (9.8%)	3 (7.3%)	**7 (17.1%)**
Country of residence			
Australia	21 (51.2%)	10 (24.4%)	**31 (75.6%)**
United States of America	2 (4.9%)	5 (12.2%)	**7 (17.1%)**
Canada	1 (2.4%)	1 (2.4%)	**2 (4.8%)**
Switzerland	1 (2.4%)	0 (0%)	**1 (2.4%)**
Race			
White	23 (56.1%)	13 (31.7%)	**36 (87.8%)**
South American (non-Hispanic)	1 (2.4%)	1 (2.4%)	**2 (4.9%)**
Asian	1 (2.4%)	0 (0%)	**1 (2.4%)**
South Asian	0 (0%)	1 (2.4%)	**1 (2.4%)**
Black	0 (0%)	1 (2.4%)	**1 (2.4%)**
Relationship status			
Married or de facto	20 (48.8%)	14 (31.1%)	**34 (82.9%)**
Single	5 (12.2%)	2 (4.9%)	**7 (17.1%)**
Number of children			
1	10 (24.4%)	5 (12.2%)	**15 (36.6%)**
2	12 (29.3%)	6 (14.6%)	**18 (43.9%)**
3	3 (7.3%)	3 (7.3%)	**6 (14.6%)**
4	0 (0%)	2 (4.9%)	**2 (4.9%)**
Age of children			
At least 1 child 0–5	14 (34.1%)	6 (14.6%)	**20 (48.7%)**
All children 6 and over	11 (27.0%)	10 (24.4%)	**21 (51.2%)**
Industry			
Software and tech	8 (19.5%)	6 (14.6%)	**14 (34.1%)**
Management consulting	2 (4.9%)	3 (7.3%)	**5 (12.2%)**
Recruitment	3 (7.3%)	1 (2.4%)	**4 (9.8%)**
Real estate services	1 (2.4%)	2 (4.9%)	**3 (7.3%)**
Community partnerships	3 (7.3%)	1 (2.4%)	**4 (9.8%)**
Legal	3 (7.3%)	2 (4.9%)	**5 (12.2%)**
Human resources	2 (4.9%)	0 (0%)	**2 (4.9%)**
Finance	2 (4.9%)	0 (0%)	**2 (4.9%)**
Fashion	0 (0%)	1 (2.4%)	**1 (2.4%)**
Education and training	1 (2.4%)	0 (0%)	**1 (2.4%)**
Location of organisation			
Global offices	14 (34.1%)	9 (22.0%)	**23 (56.1%)**
Australia	9 (22.0%)	4 (9.8%)	**13 (31.7%)**

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

	Mothers	Fathers	Total
United States of America	2 (4.8%)	3 (7.3%)	**5 (12.2%)**
Employment status			
Full-time	18 (43.9%)	14 (34.1%)	**32 (78%)**
9-day fortnight	1 (2.4%)	0 (0%)	**1 (2.4%)**
4 days	4 (9.8%)	1 (2.4%)	**5 (12.2%)**
3 days	1 (2.4%)	1 (2.4%)	**2 (4.9%)**
2 part-time jobs	1 (2.4%)	0 (0%)	**1 (2.4%)**
Partner work status			
Partner works from home	14 (34.1%)	10 (24.4%)	**24 (58.5%)**
Partner works outside home	4 (9.8%)	1 (2.4%)	**5 (12.2%)**
Partner doesn't work	2 (4.9%)	3 (7.3%)	**5 (12.2%)**
No partner	5 (12.2%)	2 (4.9%)	**7 (17.1%)**

Note: Data presented as number of participants (percentage of total participants).

sampling within globalised remote-first organisations and across international social media networks. Owing to high levels of international mobility, several participants were expats in their current countries of residence, having lived and worked in various locations throughout the world. These characteristics made specific cross-national observations on the basis of current location alone somewhat challenging, leading the authors to exclude a cross-national analysis of the data, choosing to focus instead on the gendered differences within the sample.

Participants were employed in 31 organisations across 10 industries, with most being employed full-time (78%) and all receiving fixed salaries. A total of 56% of participants worked for globally distributed companies with employees across at least two continents, with the remaining working for companies based solely in Australia (31.7%) or the United States (12.2%). Just under 60% of participants had partners who also worked remotely at least some of the time (56% of mothers and 62.5% of fathers), including in other remote-first organisations, with just five participants (two mothers and three fathers) reporting a partner who does not work. The majority of participants worked in organisations that had transitioned to remote-first work during the pandemic and then made an organisational decision to permanently implement the model. Consequently, many participants had not actively sought remote-first employment but rather transitioned into it alongside their employers. The exception to this was a small sample of parents (five mothers and two fathers) who had deliberately chosen remote-first employment as a work–family flexibility strategy. Tellingly, all participants stated that they now preferred this model of work organisation to in-office only employment, with several claiming that if forced to return to an office full-time they would seek employment elsewhere.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed using Dovetail analytical software and checked manually for accuracy. Participants were assigned a randomised pseudonym to preserve their anonymity throughout the research (Kvale and Brinkman, 2015). Research memos were completed by the first author at the end of each interview and a detailed database of demographic information including gender, age, marital status, number and age of children, employment status, occupation, industry, salary, breadwinner status and the employment status of partners was compiled throughout the interview process to assist with identifying trends across participant attributes. Data then underwent multiple open and focused rounds of flexible coding using Deterding and Waters' (2021) methodology for indexing, analytical coding and theoretical testing/refinement. Participant quotes were also analysed for language patterns and similarities of expression across the sample. This process resulted in the identification of four preliminary themes including: (a) the use of working from home and non-linear workdays to manage the demands of work and family, (b) increased engagement with housework and childcare, (c) expanded and non-standard hours of work to meet job requirements and (d) self-exploitative behaviours, including overwork in both paid and unpaid labour. These themes were then analysed across characteristics such as gender, marital status, age of children, partners' work status and presence of globalised employment to identify distinguishing trends and then collectively debated between authors (Deterding and Waters, 2021). Further consolidation allowed the authors to arrive at the two main contributions of the article by bringing together themes (a) and (b) to explain how working parents use remote-first work to reconcile their paid work and caregiving responsibilities and combining themes (c) and (d) to examine whether remote-first work reduces the gendered flexibility paradox.

Findings

This section presents empirical findings supporting the article's two main contributions. First, it shows that unique components of the remote-first model – such as high spatiotemporal flexibility, non-linear workdays and increased workplace empathy and trust – facilitate a dual devotion to work and family. Key to this finding is evidence that fathers use the benefits of remote-first work to engage more in family life, a shift not possible in traditional in-office settings. Second, it confirms that standardised remote work helps fathers avoid self-exploitative overwork, yet mothers still struggle to resist these demands, instead expanding their labour in both work and family domains. Thus, we find that remote-first work reduces the gendered flexibility paradox for fathers but reinforces it for mothers.

Remote-first work promotes increased reconciliation of work and family demands and enables a dual devotion to work and family for both mothers and fathers

Conceptually, remote-first work offers employees almost total flexibility, autonomy and control over where to locate their work activities. Employer statements encourage

employees to 'work from wherever you work best' (Spotify, 2022; also see Vista, 2021; Xero, 2022), offering the illusion of a life spent shifting work between bustling cafes, sunny parks or beaches and hip co-working spaces. Findings from this study suggest that, in reality, locational freedom is highly constrained by the presence of caregiving and domestic responsibilities. Most participants listed working from home as their regular work location, reflecting our sample of working parents, who commonly chose to co-locate work within the home to maximise opportunities for work–family integration. By choosing to work from home, parents reported feeling more productive and engaged in their dual roles as parents and employees.

Work–family integration and increased productivity. Compared with previous in-office employment, participants discussed how remote-first work meant they were able to regularly take children to and from school, attend daytime medical appointments and use micro-breaks throughout the day to stay on top of chores like laundry, dishwashing and cooking. Both mothers and fathers repeatedly noted the ease with which these domestic activities could be integrated into their workday, listing it as a major resource contributing to their successful management of work and family (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Jasmine (34-year-old product designer, married with one child) shared:

> Honestly, that's the benefit of remote working . . . I could put a load of washing on while I'm working . . . I can get a little bit more done during the week than I would if I was going into the office, coming home and then having to cram everything into my weekend.

Jasmine's satisfaction at being able to combine remote work and domestic labour was indicative of the value many participants placed on using remote-first work to succeed across both work and family domains. Connor (48-year-old workplace technology consultant, married with one child) similarly shared his increased satisfaction at being able to integrate certain remote work activities, like phone calls or webinars, while doing domestic chores:

> I spend a lot of my time when I'm on calls, I'll be walking back and forth putting laundry in, I'll be cleaning, emptying the dishwasher . . . I feel like I can do so much more by being in my house.

Consistent with displays of a dual devotion to work and family (de Laat, 2023), both mothers and fathers were careful to stress that this integration of work and domestic labour did not come at the cost of a reduction in performance or overall number of hours worked. In contrast, the co-location of work and home offered participants an environment they believed was more conducive to getting work done than the traditional office. Participants consistently reported feeling more productive when working from home and appreciating the ability to engage in periods of deep focus work that was otherwise difficult to achieve in the office. Catia (42-year-old HR manager, married with two children) shared: '*I'm more productive at home. I can achieve stages of hyper focus. It actually helps a lot and is very beneficial in terms of getting things done*.' A distraction-free home office environment and a reduction in unintended interruptions or conversations

with colleagues drove much of this increased productivity. Leo (43-year-old community programme manager, married with one child) reflected on feeling that '*I wasted so much time when I worked in an office because there's so many distractions and pointless meetings for no reason, and office politics. I just feel so much more productive now*.' Leo later reported that his location of work within the home also granted him space to engage in domestic activities like cooking and childcare throughout the workday, leading to an overall increase in work/life satisfaction, despite increasing his productive labour across both domains.

Temporal flexibility and non-linear workdays. In addition to spatial flexibility, both mothers and fathers reflected on how remote-first work offered them high levels of temporal flexibility, including greater autonomy and control over the timing and scheduling of work activities. Vincent (40-year-old technology executive, married with two children) remarked:

> Policy-wise, there's no strict [start and finish] times that you have to be online. We did agree on some core business hours in our time zone where everyone needs to be online, but other than that you can kind of organise your day in the way you like.

Participants used this flexibility to significantly reorganise their schedules to accommodate parenting and domestic responsibilities, typically leading to the adoption of a non-linear workday. Non-linear workdays encompassed expanded start and finish times and longer overall hours fragmented by periods of non-work activity. Catia demonstrated her use of a non-linear workday as an expression of her dual devotion when she shared:

> I work very flexibly with my time, and I tend to have some irregular hours. For example, this morning I started work at about six o'clock in the morning. And I did work for a few hours before my son wakes up and then I kind of get him ready for school, he has breakfast, gets taken to school and then I resume work around 9–9:15 a.m. And then it depends on the day. My son has got sports, swimming, rugby and all of the other things, so I might clock off early. But if I clock off early, I make up for the time here and there.

Similarly, fathers reported utilising the temporal flexibility offered by remote-first work to meet the dual demands of work and family. Frank (40-year-old technology executive, married with four children) split his 8–9-hour standard workday across a 16-hour window to accommodate the needs of his children and support his wife, who worked outside of the home:

> I work a non-linear workday . . . I wake up around 5 a.m. and I'm usually working 60–90 minutes before I cook breakfast and then see everybody off. It's probably 90 minutes of breakfast and school drop-off [6:30–8 a.m.]. The largest chunk of time that I work is probably from 8/8:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. and then it's picking up from school. We have school-aged children in two different schools, so it's probably an hour of just getting everybody back into the groove here and then there's some light [work] tasks or a meeting following that. And then I'd say two or three nights a week I'll spend probably in total another 60 minutes [working], but not in a solid chunk.

Like many participants, both Catia and Frank stressed that they were still devoted to their work by making up for traditional daytime hours in the early morning or evenings instead. This willingness to expand and fragment their workdays was crucial to sustaining the dual identities of ideal worker and perfect parent that many participants aspired to.

Tellingly, participants were happy to make these temporal trade-offs, especially if they allowed them to meet inflexible caregiving responsibilities throughout the day. Beth (39-year-old lawyer, married with three children) exemplified this when she shared her level of comfort with flexing her workday:

> [Working] evenings doesn't bother me so much as long as it's because I've shifted time to do other stuff. If I've had to finish a bit early to pick up the kids and take them to whatever activities, I'm completely fine with logging in at night to do time.

Using this hyper-flexibility also allowed fathers to engage with their children in ways that had been unattainable when working in the office. Ben (39-year-old recruitment executive, married with two children) remarked how his:

> home life's so much easier. There's no stressor around if we need to run somewhere, doctor, or swimming, you know. Especially with my wife's work typically starting quite early in the morning, it's been really good.

Ben's wife also worked from home but started earlier in the day than him. Later, when asked about possible work intrusions into non-standard hours caused by remote-first work, Ben shared: '*I don't feel tapped out, so doing half an hour to an hour and a half in the evening . . . it feels fresher*', signifying his willingness to trade working non-standard hours for a deeper engagement with his family during otherwise standard work times.

These experiences are novel insofar as previous research suggests men tend to use flexibility to enhance work performance, rather than increase caregiving engagement. Importantly, having a spouse who also worked remotely did not significantly influence remote-first fathers' increased involvement in childcare and domestic tasks. Nevertheless, consistent with previous research (Shafer et al., 2020), fathers with a full-time stay-at-home wife reported lower increases in actual task engagement than fathers with a working spouse. However, these fathers did report increased awareness of and appreciation for the amount of labour required to run a household now that they are home to see more of what goes on.

Open and empathetic workplace cultures as a key feature of remote-first work. One of the key reasons that remote-first working parents were so readily able to use their spatiotemporal flexibility and autonomy was because of the workplace culture of remote-first organisations, which empowered and entrusted employees (including working parents) to manage their own time and workloads. Moreover, employees were actively encouraged to be flexible. As a result, participants felt less need to hide their caregiving demands from their supervisors. Michelle (31, digital technology lead, married with one child) epitomised this feeling when she shared: '*I'm very, very comfortable. Like if I need to say*

I'm not working these hours or I can't make that meeting, I have to pick my son up, no issues.' Ronnie (40-year-old full-time software developer, married with three children) also felt '*super comfortable*', explaining that '*we are really, really lucky. Like it's a super mega human-centric organisation, which has been amazing*.'

For participants, the remote-first model helped to break down barriers and pre-existing stigmas about employees who combine caregiving with work (Kelly and Moen, 2020; Williams et al., 2013). Ben (39-year-old recruitment executive, married with two children) reinforced this when he shared how working remotely has '*been a positive thing. I think people have had more of a look into people's personal lives and I think they've probably found more empathy, far more common ground because of it*.' As a manager, Beth agreed:

> I think you actually get to know a lot about people's lives because you're literally seeing inside their houses, you're in it and we encourage people to be really open about the stuff that's going on. I wanna know if someone's volunteering at basketball or whatever, not for a business reason but because it's really great to have that little bit more of an insight into their lives.

By creating remote work environments embedded with cultures built on openness, trust and empathy, participants' experiences of the remote-first approaches used by organisations in this study suggest that remote-first work can reduce both structural and psychological barriers to the use of flexible work for the reconciliation of work and family demands. This has important implications for encouraging remote-first fathers' increased engagement with caregiving and remote-first mothers' increased workforce participation.

The flexibility paradox is reduced for remote-first fathers yet reinforced for remote-first mothers

Participants' utilisation of in-home work and non-linear workdays as part of remote-first work demonstrates how flexible working conditions can be used to accommodate a combination of family demands, parenting desires and sustained work performance. Much of this increased flexibility was expressed as a positive enhancement to participants' lives. However, further analysis of the language and experiences of some participants suggests the concurrent persistence of several negative consequences. Mothers in this study seemed especially prone to experiencing a kind of temporal 'job creep' caused by the excessive demands of their jobs. When asked about levels of work intrusion into non-standard hours, Michelle reported, in addition to a full day's work, '*on average it's one to one and a half hours a day, maybe sometimes two. It definitely intrudes. And then even today, which is my non-working day, I've already done about an hour's worth of work*.' Olivia (42-year-old HR executive, married with two children) experienced similar demands, sharing:

> If there's stuff that has to be done, which there usually is, then I just do it at night, you know, the stuff that you can't get to cuz you're in meeting after meeting after meeting and then you actually have to do some work! That means that by 5:30 p.m. I've usually got a hard stop, I've

> gotta eat dinner [with my girls]. Once the girls are in bed I usually log back on. And most nights, I'd probably say out of a seven-day week, I'm probably working four or five nights a week.

Unlike participants who used non-linear workdays to break throughout the day, Olivia's highly demanding job required her to work a full day, break briefly in the early evening to make time for dinner with her children, and then regularly return to work once they were in bed. The high-performance culture and flexible working hours of her organisation meant that Olivia also reported feeling pressured to respond to work that came through from her boss at all hours:

> When something comes through from the person that owns the company, doesn't matter what time it is, you do feel that you have to jump on it. And if they're sending you stuff at all hours, then that kind of creates that tension as well, and it makes it really hard. And I'm trying to improve on that. I don't think it'll ever improve at my level, to be honest.

These experiences are evidence of the flexibility paradox (Chung, 2022), with Michelle and Olivia's tendency to overwork suggesting that remote-first work may be creating new obligations and demands that see mothers maintain their demanding domestic roles while expanding their devotion to work in potentially self-exploitative ways.

Demands of a globally distributed workforce. Working non-standard hours was necessary to meet the job demands of the globally distributed organisations that many participants worked for. Georgia (48-year-old HR executive in a global tech firm, single with two teenage children) described how she regularly flexed her work hours to meet the needs of her international team:

> A typical working day starts at 7 a.m. and I'll usually finish up at about 3 p.m. or 4 p.m. with a lunch break in between. That'll probably be two or three mornings a week. Sometimes I'll pick up some calls in the evenings, maybe once or twice a week. When I start early, I'll usually finish early, but then sometimes I'll choose to do an enormous day where I'll start early, and I'll finish late. And that might be anywhere between a 10- and 14-hour working day, but then I save that time off for the rest of my working week.

In contrast to participants who used non-linear workdays to meet the needs of their families, Georgia's use of her temporal flexibility was driven by the demands of her job. While she reported intentions to claw back some of these additional work hours through time off during other parts of her work week, Georgia acknowledged that she often struggled with making this happen. In the absence of structured work hours, and in light of the globally distributed and highly demanding nature of her role, Georgia confessed being prone to overwork and self-exploitative behaviours: '*it's really up to you to figure out. Nobody is telling you to look at stuff. But nobody's also saying don't look at it. They expect that you are a grown up.*' Furthermore, consistent with the flexibility paradox, narratives around passion for work and a willingness to self-exploit were evident in comments made by Georgia later in her interview: '*it's very easy to get kind of sucked into working lots and lots of hours if you are somebody that enjoys doing what they do, which I do*'. She went on to say:

> It requires an enormous amount of discipline and particularly if you are very career driven. I think it's easier if you have a junior role or if you have a role that kind of is within a specific time zone and all your colleagues finish work, that's fine. But when we have a team like mine where you have people that are on always, it's really hard to switch off.

Placing the onus for self-regulation of hours and workload onto the employee, rather than the employer, created an illusion of autonomy and control that many participants struggled to fully obtain.

Research has shown that employees engaged in complex and largely open-ended knowledge work find it particularly hard to 'switch off' from work (Dumas and Sanchez-Burks, 2015; Perlow and Kelly, 2014). Given the high-performance cultures of many remote-first organisations, several participants, particularly mothers in managerial roles, reported struggling to resist self-exploitative work practices and overwork. Like Georgia, Rebecca (43-year-old technology executive, married with two children) managed a large team that worked across European, American and Australasian time zones. Though always careful to make sure that she encouraged healthy, flexible work practices in her direct reports, Rebecca struggled to adhere to them herself:

> I very much encourage my team to manage their boundaries, and I ensure that if they are starting normal time and working into the night, they take a two-hour lunch, go play tennis in the afternoon, whatever. But I suck at it personally.

Rebecca went on to confess: '*I worked probably 14-hour days last week, the week before and the week before. And I got to the point where I wasn't sleeping because I was so pumped full of adrenaline cortisol and I'm like, whoa*.' Though aware of the mental and physical dangers of such practices, Rebecca felt compelled to exploit herself through regular overwork to meet the demands of her job. Her support of staff taking time in lieu for expanded work hours is an important feature of effective remote work managerial practices and may help employees to manage issues such as burnout, exhaustion and overwork (Kelly and Moen, 2020; Schieman and Glavin, 2008). However, her inability to instil these practices within her own work behaviours speaks to internalised expectations of high performance and excessive work devotion that manifest through self-exploitation.

Fathers in this study also experienced tensions concerning the expansion of work into non-standard hours; however, they responded differently to mothers by managing to resist giving in to the demands of overwork. Johan (48-year-old IT specialist, married with two children) acknowledged that when you work at home '*you just feel like you're always a little bit working*', but then later went on to say, '*there's a danger of just working more but I didn't do it. I just ended up having more time for my family or domestic chores*.' Similarly, Marlow (45-year-old full-time management consultant, married with one child) shared how he had been able to make household chores a bigger focus in his life now, stating that, '*remote work definitely allows me to be more engaged at home. Before it was like, I want to do this, I should do this, but by the time I got home, I just would let it fall off*.' He went on to share how '*I just feel, as the father, I can be a lot more involved in the lives of others and a lot more involved in the daily operations of the household*.'

Crucially, fathers reported lower levels of work-related expansion of hours caused by the demands of globally distributed teams, which may reflect the smaller number of men working in globalised organisations within the sample. However, fathers were also more likely to report already being familiar with working long or non-standard hours. Vincent (40-year-old technology executive, married with two children) explained how he felt the trade-off between more flexibility during the day and working at night was more equally weighted under remote-first work than when he worked in an office, sharing that:

> I think it hasn't really changed in the shift. I think I was already doing sometimes work at night. Maybe now I'm doing it more on purpose – sometimes when I'm like, okay, I'm gonna spend an hour or two with the kids here in the afternoon and then do some work at night. In that sense it's a bit more spread. But I think it is probably the same in terms of hours worked.

Overall, these gendered differences suggest that while fathers were able to use remote-first work to expand their family engagement and resist demands to engage in excessive overwork, mothers struggled to do this, reinforcing the expectations of the gendered flexibility paradox that women working in flexible jobs will often expand their labour in (and devotion to) both work and family domains.

Discussion

This article considers how mothers and fathers use remote-first work to reconcile work and family demands. In investigating these practices, we also examine how the use of remote-first work impacts the gendered patterns of overwork and self-exploitation expected by the flexibility paradox. Findings suggest that remote-first work enabled parents to better reconcile work and family demands by providing opportunities to express a dual devotion to work and family (de Laat, 2023). In this sense, remote-first practices create space for both mothers and fathers to embody and enact dual identities as 'ideal worker and perfect parent' (Beckman and Mazmanian, 2020: 9). By enabling employees to work from home, remote-first work offered parents greater flexibility to manage their schedules in a manner conducive to attending to their children and domestic needs. Moreover, in allowing deviations from rigid nine-to-five schedules, non-linear workdays also gave parents the flexibility to structure their work hours around their familial obligations and accommodate family activities during peak hours of need. Nevertheless, findings suggest that access to these hyper-flexible work practices resulted in different outcomes for fathers and mothers, leading us to present the following two key contributions to the debates surrounding standardised remote work and the gendered division of labour.

Increased paternal engagement with domestic tasks and caregiving

Encouragingly, our findings suggest remote-first work offers fathers greater opportunities to actively participate in childcare and domestic duties. By working from home, fathers reported being more readily able to complete household tasks and engage in caregiving responsibilities, suggesting a shift in traditional gender roles and the creation of space for a transition towards a more equitable division of labour within their

households. These findings are novel insofar as they differ from previous gendered usage of remote work, which saw men use work flexibility for work expansion rather than family engagement (Chung and Booker, 2023; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001; Van der Lippe and Lippényi, 2020). Furthermore, contrary to other prior research (Carlson et al., 2020; Shafer et al., 2020), having a spouse who also worked remotely did not significantly influence remote-first fathers' increased involvement in childcare and domestic tasks. Instead, fathers reported that heightened exposure to family needs and increased flexibility in work hours and location enabled them to engage more readily. Heightened exposure to and awareness of the needs of the household and family has been shown to help motivate fathers to use remote work as a catalyst for increased engagement in domestic tasks and parenting (Carlson et al., 2020; Shafer et al., 2020). However, key to understanding this finding was also the increased levels of openness, empathy and trust reported within remote-first organisations that helped to humanise workers as parents and build mutually supportive relationships between employees (and their managers) that dismantle traditionally gendered stereotypes around fathers and caregiving (Kelly and Moen, 2020; Rudman and Mescher, 2013).

Previous research highlights the existence of a 'fatherhood bonus' for working men with children that manifests as increased pay, 'likeability' and access to flexibility and promotions when compared with men without children (Correll et al., 2007; Munsch, 2016). Munsch (2016) found this to be particularly true for fathers who combined the use of care-driven flexible work arrangements with an ongoing commitment to full-time work. Given the combination of higher status jobs, fatherhood status and care-supportive workplace cultures, it is likely that remote-first working fathers also benefited from a fatherhood bonus when it comes to successfully combining their full-time remote work with increased capacity to engage in caregiving and ability to resist expected temptation/demands to overwork. These findings offer a novel contribution to extant literature that has previously centred around men's almost exclusive use of flexible work for professional performance and career-enhancing motivations. They also extend our understanding of the impacts of retaining full-time work and combining it with the hyper-flexible work practices. Consequently, as a theoretical contribution, standardised remote-first work can be said to encourage fathers to use work flexibility to expand their engagement with unpaid care and domestic labour, potentially contributing to a more gender-equal distribution of both paid and unpaid labour in ways that are structurally unavailable in both hybrid and in-office settings.

Implications for the gendered flexibility paradox

Additionally, our findings suggest that within standardised remote-first contexts, the expectations of the gendered flexibility paradox (Chung, 2022) are reinforced for mothers, insofar as they expand their labour in both the work and family domains, but resisted by fathers, who use their new-found flexibility to lean into their parenting roles instead of merely expanding their paid work. Fathers in this study managed to resist giving in to the demands of self-exploitative overwork, redirecting their additional time and flexibility into a deeper engagement in family life instead. Mothers, on the other hand, reported still feeling pressured by work cultures that valorised

excessive work (Perlow, 2012) and shared how expectations of constant availability led to excessive work hours and self-exploitation, at times also heightening personal stress (Chung, 2022). These findings highlight how the flexibility paradox in the context of remote-first work presents a complex challenge for mothers, whereby the very flexibility intended to facilitate their dual devotion to work and family was shown to, at times, also exacerbate the demands of their professional and domestic responsibilities (Chung, 2022). However, unlike traditional expressions of the gendered flexibility paradox, which see mothers self-exploit more for the family than work (Chung, 2022), mothers in this study emphasised the significant expansion of their work hours over additional time spent with or looking after the family.

These results confound the expectations of the gendered flexibility paradox, thus requiring careful consideration. Gendered differences in the findings may be explained in part by the global distribution of mothers' work colleagues and responsibilities. Negative experiences associated with the flexibility paradox were particularly heightened for mothers working in globally distributed organisations, where the convergence of disparate time zones and the ubiquity of connectivity present challenges that can undermine the ability to maintain reasonable working hours (Mazmanian et al., 2013). With teams spanning multiple geographic regions, synchronous collaboration often necessitated accommodating meetings at unconventional hours, disrupting the traditional spatiotemporal demarcations between work and family (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000) and blurring boundaries that otherwise offered mothers opportunities to disengage from work (Schieman and Galvin, 2008). In this sense, globalised workforces created additional demands for mothers, particularly cross-national managers, highlighting the benefits of the remote-first model for employers (i.e. increased employee availability across time zones) and the potential costs for the employee (i.e. non-standard work hours and self-exploitation). However, consistent with expectations of the gendered flexibility paradox, findings also suggest that mothers use work expansion during non-standard hours as an external demonstration of their competence and gratitude for access to work–family flexibility (Chung, 2022). Viewed together, these findings suggest that the standardisation of remote work alone is not enough to relieve women's experiences of the gendered flexibility paradox. Challenging the valorisation of high-performance workplace cultures is also required to see a meaningful reduction in these burdens.

In contrast, fathers in this study were less likely to work across globally distributed teams, thereby reducing the impact of working across time zones as a significant determining factor in the prevalence of overwork. Furthermore, the universal standardisation of remote-first work across organisations, coupled with permission to flex work hours to suit family needs and increased levels of organisational trust and empathy, appeared to result in fathers feeling less afraid of the negative career consequences, discrimination and stigmatisation commonly associated with the use of opt-in flexible work for caregiving (Chung, 2020; Munsch, 2016; Thébaud and Pedulla, 2016; Williams et al., 2013). These findings contrast existing scholarship showing fathers engaged in hybrid work prefer time in the office over time at home and the persistence of gendered stigmatisation surrounding the care-driven use of work flexibility (Chung, 2020; Kelly and Moen, 2020; Munsch, 2016; Williams et al., 2013). In this regard, remote-first works provides a distinct structural context through which these relationships are negotiated.

Limitations and future research

There are some limitations to this research. First, self-selection into the study may have led to an overrepresentation of remote-first advocates and individuals who have largely experienced positive benefits. Individuals who have not had successful experiences may be less willing to speak to researchers or may have already self-selected out of the remote-first employment environment. Second, social desirability may have led to an overstating of the shifts in behaviours, especially for fathers, with previous scholarship suggesting men can be prone to exaggerating their household contributions in social research (Shafer et al., 2020). Future research that captures this data at a household/couple level may be useful in addressing this limitation. Third, the sample is largely White, wealthy and well-educated heterosexual participants, which limits our ability to speak to a more generalised experience. Further research with other populations, particularly those from more diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds and differing sexual orientations, is needed to better understand the remote-first work experiences of parents with broader intersectional characteristics. Finally, differences in the gendered experiences of men and women in this study may be explained to some extent by differences in job roles, responsibility and the global distribution of the organisation's workforce. Future research would do well to compare remote-first mothers and fathers in similar roles and organisational structures to better test the presence of gendered differences.

Conclusion

Findings from this study offer hope for the use of remote-first work as a strategy for assisting parents to reconcile their work–family demands and enact a dual devotion to work and family, particularly for fathers willing to increase their parental and household engagement while maintaining high workforce participation and performance. However, mothers' experiences suggest that the excessive use of remote-first work to meet the demands of high-performance work cultures and globally distributed teams remains a challenge. As women seek new ways to fully engage in the future of work and attain increasingly high-powered roles, organisations must be cognisant of the need to carefully manage work outside of standard hours and unrelenting expectations of high-performance 'always on and always available' cultures. As society collectively moves towards embracing new forms of flexible and remote work, addressing these challenges is increasingly important if working parents are to truly benefit from the work–family conflict-combatting tools that remote-first work can offer.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Lauren Ryan https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4013-724X
Brendan Churchill https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3625-4574
Leah Ruppanner https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6111-1914

References

Acker J (1990) Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: a theory of gendered organizations. *Gender and Society* 4(2): 139–158.

Allen TD, Johnson RC, Kiburz KM, et al. (2013) Work-family conflict and flexible work arrangements: deconstructing flexibility. *Personnel Psychology* 66: 345–376.

Ashforth BE, Kreiner GE and Fugate M (2000) All in a day's work: boundaries and micro role transitions. *Academy of Management Review* 25(3): 472–491.

Bakker AB and Demerouti E (2007) The job demands-resources model: state of the art. *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 22(3): 309–328.

Beckman CM and Mazmanian M (2020) *Dreams of the Overworked: Living, Working, and Parenting in the Digital Age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Blair-Loy M (2003) *Competing Devotions: Career and Family Among Women Executives*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Braun V and Clarke V (2013) *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*. London: SAGE.

Brumley KM and George MES (2022) Rules of engagement: flexplace and ideal workers. *Social Currents* 9(6): 573–591.

Carlson DL, Petts R and Pepin J (2020) Changes in US parents' domestic labor during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Sociological Inquiry* 2022; 92(3): 1217–1244.

Chung H (2020) Gender, flexibility stigma, and the perceived negative consequences of flexible working in the UK. *Social Indicators Research* 151(2): 521–545.

Chung H (2022) *The Flexibility Paradox: Why Flexible Working Leads to (Self-)Exploitation*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Chung H and Booker C (2023) Flexible working and division of housework and childcare: examining the divisions across occupational lines. *Work, Employment and Society* 37(1): 236–256.

Chung H and van der Horst M (2018) Women's employment patterns after childbirht and the perceived access to and use of flexitime and teleworking. *Human Relations* 71: 47–72.

Chung H and Van der Lippe T (2020) Flexible working, work-life balance, and gender equality: Introduction. *Social Indicators Research* 151(2): 365–381.

Clark SC (2000) Work/family border theory: a new theory of work/family balance. *Human Relations* 53(6): 747–770.

Correll SJ, Benard S and Paik I (2007) Getting a job: Is there a motherhood penalty?. *American Journal of Sociology* 112(5): 1297–1338.

Cristea IC and Leonardi PM (2019) Get noticed and die trying: signals, sacrifice, and the production of face time in distributed work. *Organization Science* 30(3): 552–572.

de Laat K (2023) Living to work (from home): overwork, remote work, and gendered dual devotion to work and family. *Work and Occupations* 52(1): 130–165.

De Souza Santos R and Ralph P (2022) A grounded theory of coordination in remote-first and hybrid software teams. In: *2022 IEEE/ACM 44th International Conference on Software Engineering (ICSE)*, Pittsburgh, PA, USA, 21–29 May 2022, pp.25–35.

Deterding NM and Waters MC (2021) Flexible coding of in-depth interviews: a twenty-first-century approach. *Sociological Methods and Research* 50(2): 708–739.

Dumas T and Sanchez-Burks J (2015) The professional, the personal and the ideal worker: pressures and objectives shaping the boundary between life domains. *The Academy of Management Annals* 9: 1–69.

Fuller S and Hirsh CE (2019) "Family-friendly" jobs and motherhood pay penalties: The impact of flexible work arrangements across the education spectrum. *Work and Occupations* 46: 3–44.

Hennink MM, Kaiser BN and Marconi VC (2017) Code saturation versus meaning saturation: how many interviews are enough? *Qualitative Health Research* 27(4): 591–608.

Hill E, Grzywacz J, Allen S, et al. (2008) Defining and conceptualizing workplace flexibility. *Community, Work and Family* 11(2): 149–163.

Hochschild A (2012) *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home*. London: Penguin Books.

Kelliher C and Anderson D (2010) Doing more with less? Flexible working practices and the intensification of work. *Human Relations* 63(1): 83–106.

Kelly EL and Moen P (2020) *Overload: How Good Jobs Went Bad and What We Can Do About It*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kelly EL, Ammons SK, Chermack K, et al. (2010) Gendered challenge, gendered response. *Gender and Society* 24(3): 281–303.

Kvale S and Brinkman S (2015) *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Lott Y (2020) Does flexibility help employees switch off from work? Flexible working-time arrangements and cognitive work-to-home spillover for women and men in Germany. *Social Indicators Research* 151(2): 471–494.

Lyttelton T, Zang E and Musick K (2022) Telecommuting and gender inequalities in parents' paid and unpaid work before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 84(1): 230–249.

Mazmanian M, Orlikowski WJ and Yates J (2013) The autonomy paradox: the implications of mobile email devices for knowledge professionals. *Organization Science* 24(5): 1337–1357.

Munsch CL (2016) Flexible work, flexible penalties: the effect of gender, childcare, and type of request on the flexibility bias. *Social Forces* 94(4): 1567–1591.

Parry A (2024) The flexibility paradox and spatial-temporal dimensions of COVID-19 remote work adaptation among dual-earner mothers and fathers. *Gender, Work and Organization* 32(1): 15–36.

Perlow LA (2012) *Sleeping with Your Smartphone: How to Break the 24/7 Habit and Change the Way You Work*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.

Perlow LA and Kelly EL (2014) Toward a model of work redesign for better work and better life. *Work and Occupations* 41(1): 111–134.

Rudman LA and Mescher K (2013) Penalizing men who request a family leave: Is flexibility stigma a femininity stigma? *Journal of Social Issues* 69(2): 322–340.

RemotePass (2021) Remote First: Optimizing the workplace culture for a superb team. Available at: https://www.remotepass.com/blog/remote-first-optimizing-the-workplace-culture-for-a-superb-team (accessed 12 September 2025).

Schieman S and Glavin P (2008) Trouble at the border? Gender, flexibility at work, and the work-home interface. *Social Problems* 55(4): 590–611.

Shafer K, Scheibling C and Milkie MA (2020) The division of domestic labor before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada: stagnation versus shifts in fathers' contributions. *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie* 57(4): 523–549.

Spotify (2022) Work from Anywhere. Available at: https://www.lifeatspotify.com/being-here/work-from-anywhere (accessed 12 November 2022).

Sullivan C and Lewis S (2001) Home-based telework, gender, and the synchronization of work and family: perspectives of teleworkers and their co-residents. *Gender, Work and Organization* 8(2): 123–145.

Thébaud S and Pedulla DS (2016) Masculinity and the stalled revolution: how gender ideologies and norms shape young men's responses to work–family policies. *Gender and Society* 30(4): 590–617.

Van Der Lippe T and Lippényi Z (2020) Beyond formal access: organizational context, working from home, and work–family conflict of men and women in European workplaces. *Social Indicators Research* 151: 383–402.
Vista (2021) Work where you work best. Available at: https://careers.vista.com/remote-first/ (accessed 14 November 2022).
Voydanoff P (2005) Consequences of boundary-spanning demands and resources for work-to-family conflict and perceived stress. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 10(4): 491–503.
Williams JC (2000) Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do About It. Oxford University Press.
Williams JC, Berdahl JL and Vandello JA (2016) Beyond work-life 'integration'. *Annual Review of Psychology* 67: 515–539.
Williams JC, Blair-Joy M and Berdahl JL (2013) Cultural schemas, social class, and the flexibility stigma. *Journal of Social Issues* 69(2): 209–234.
Worley JA and Gutierrez KJ (2020) Hope for the (new) ideal worker: resolving the flexibility-availability paradox. In: las Heras Maestro M, Chinchilla Albiol N and Grau Grau M (eds) *The New Ideal Worker: Organizations Between Work-Life Balance, Gender and Leadership*. Cham: Springer, 9–23.
Xero (2022) Choose your own career adventure. Available at:https://blog.xero.com/product-updates/choose-your-own-career-adventure/ (accessed 14 November 2022).

Lauren Ryan is an independent gender and social performance consultant and researcher affiliated with the Sociology Department at The University of Melbourne. Her research focuses on remote-first work practices and the gendered division of paid and unpaid labour, with broader expertise in gender and development, women's economic insecurity, caregiving and the future of work. Her consulting work focuses on helping organisations improve their diversity, equity and inclusion approaches, policies and outcomes. Lauren is also the Co-Founder and CEO of The Global Women's Project, a non-profit organisation supporting women globally to access the knowledge, tools and resources required for economic empowerment.

Brendan Churchill is Senior Lecturer in Sociology in the School of Social and Political Sciences at The University of Melbourne. His research focuses on the changing nature of work and employment, including the growth of underemployment and the gig economy, for people on the margins of the workforce – young people and women. Brendan is a co-director of the Work Futures Hallmark Research Institute at the University of Melbourne; he is an associate editor of *Health Sociology Review* and sits on the editorial board of *New Technology, Work and Employment*.

Leah Ruppanner is Professor of Sociology and Founding Director of The Future of Work Lab at the University of Melbourne. Professor Ruppanner is a leading expert on COVID-19 and its impact on gender inequality in the US and Australia. Her book *Motherlands: How States Push Mothers out of Employment* (Temple University Press, 2020) provides a typology of childcare and gender policies and how their relationship to mothers' employment varies across US states. Ruppanner's research is published in *Demography*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Sociological Methods and Research*, *European Sociological Review* and *Social Science Research*.

Date submitted January 2024
Date accepted July 2025