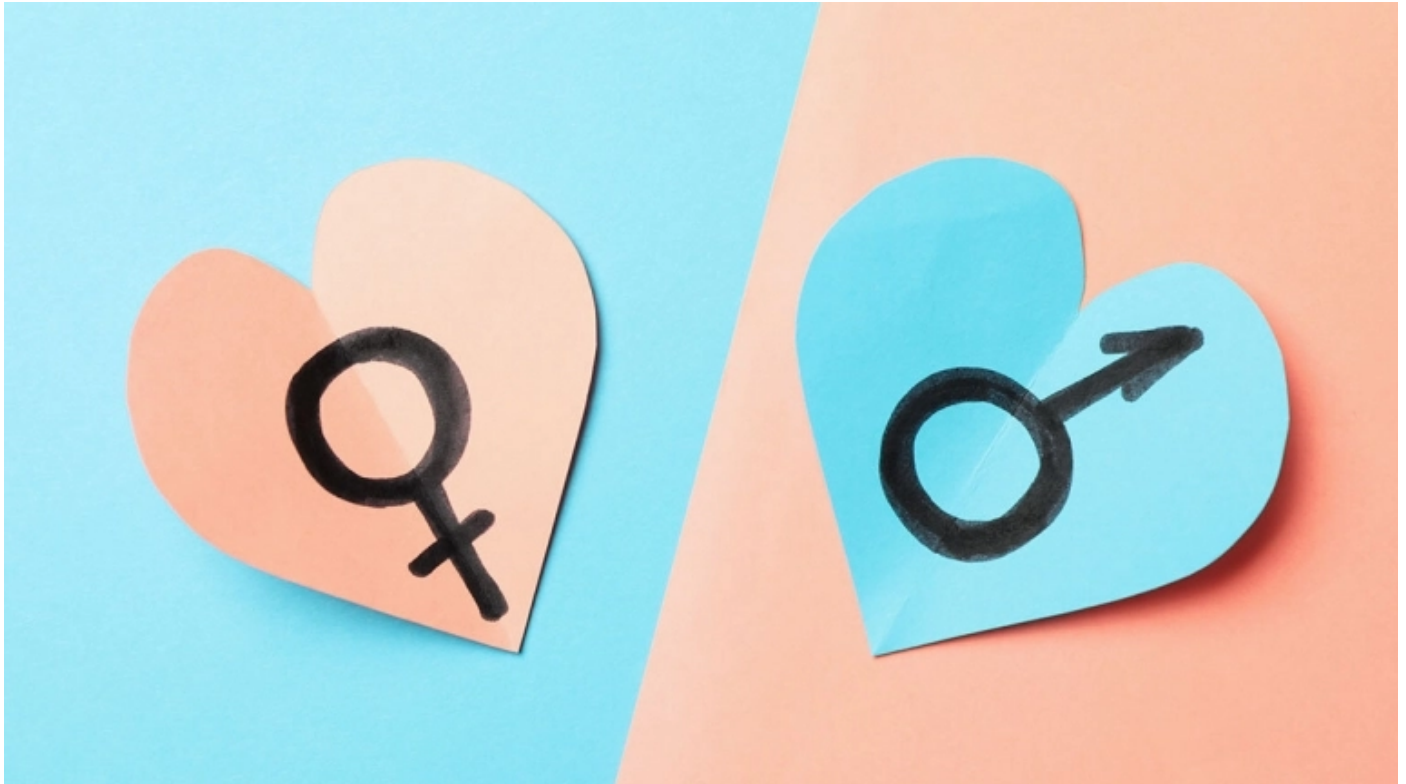


Does COVID-19 Redefine Flexible Working Arrangements (FWAs) for Women?

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This article discusses the emergence of flexible working arrangements (FWAs) for women, noting that while they have worked well for female workforce participation, they have largely failed so far in moving women into the top rungs of professional and corporate life. The writers point to the possibility of more progress possible. Despite the setbacks caused by the global pandemic in the short term, the system is more capable of beneficial change than might have seemed possible even two years ago.

Introduction

Flexibility in the workplace allows employees to make a choice about when and where they perform their work. Common examples of flexible working arrangements (FWAs) include flexible scheduling, remote work (e.g., working from home), part-time work, split shifts/ job sharing, and so on). While workplace flexibility benefits employees in regard to making a balance between work-related responsibilities, personal obligations and family commitments, it also offers benefits to employers including talent retention and cost-saving (arising from increased employee productivity and lowering the cost of workplace facilities) ([Business Queensland 2020](#)). In Australia, although anyone is eligible to request FWA on reasonable grounds, the Fair Work Act offers a legal entitlement to certain employees such as those who are working with the employer for at least 12 months, and long-term casual workers if they meet some criteria (e.g. a parent of a school age or younger child, a carer, have a disability, aged 55 or older, experiencing domestic violence, or providing support for someone one lives with, who is experiencing domestic violence ([The Fair Work Ombudsman 2021](#)).

Unfortunately, the gendered pattern of career progression and the gender discrepancy in the way FWAs are operationalised have always been an issue for women's career progression ([Chung & Lippe 2020](#); Hewlett & Luce 2007). Nevertheless, since the 1990s, many policies which could potentially provide this flexibility were introduced into Australian organisations and championed by the government as a way to increase women's labour force participation ([Strachan, Burgess and Henderson, 2010](#)). There is an emerging body of academic and non-academic

evidence indicating that COVID-19 has considerably reshaped the concept of workplace flexibility and how it is operationalised. The aim of this paper is to explore the pertinent question: Does COVID-19 redefine flexible working arrangements (FWAs) for women? To address this question, first we have reviewed the pre-COVID progress in gender equity in the Australian context.

Pre-COVID FWAs and Women's Career Progression

As noted in the 2018-19 [Annual Report of Workplace Gender Equity Agency \(WGEA\)](#), during the last three decades there has been a noticeable improvement in gender equity initiatives by employers in Australia. A large increase in the number of organisations with an overall gender equality policy and strategy supports this observation. The report by WGEA further mentions that many organisations have implemented targeted strategies to support gender equality in relation to succession planning, talent identification, retention, and promotion. There has also been action on pay equity, FWA policies, support of employees with caring responsibilities, parental leave, family or domestic violence leave, and sexual harassment. Nevertheless, the Annual Report suggests that workplace gender inequality still exists and there is much room for improvement. For example, vertical segregation (segregation by level in organisations) by gender persists in the Australian workplace, and the gap is wider the more senior the management position; only 38.4 per cent of all managers, 16.5 per cent of CEOs, and 29.7 per cent of key management personnel (KMP) are women ([WGEA 2019](#)).

Scholars suggest that while FWAs policies help allow women to combine career and family, they do not address the existing impediments to women's career progression (i.e., moving them into senior positions) ([Strachan, French, & Burgess 2014](#); [Chung & Lippe 2020](#)). Most other studies show the continuing existence and persistence of the linear masculine career model which operates on a full-time basis without any significant career breaks (the male breadwinner model). As [Pocock \(2016, p. 151\)](#) states:

'Ongoing, contemporary policy approaches that see working women still as strangers to workplace norms, fostering new propositions that subtly refresh and remake discrimination against women. Things are resistant to change, and perhaps, increasingly difficult to call out because they are subtle.'

This indicates the pre-COVID FWAs for women were largely effective in retaining women in the workplace, especially those who were seeking a balance between career and family responsibilities, but the flexibility support did not contribute much to those who would like both participating in childrearing and proactively pursuing career progression. The next section looks at the post-pandemic FWAs scenario and its impact on women's career progression.

Lesson Learned From COVID-19 to Redefine FWAs to Support Women's Employability and Career progression

There is a general agreement that COVID-19 has been explicitly more detrimental to women's career aspects as the pandemic has added to their family responsibilities ([Power 2020](#); [United Nations, 2020](#)). Juggling work commitments with an increased care burden have made women more vulnerable to job loss. On the other hand, given the impact of COVID on many female-dominated industries including the tourism, hospitality and food sectors, many former female employees are unable to look for new jobs largely due to unpaid care responsibilities ([Bhatia 2020](#); [United Nations, 2020](#)).

However, the pandemic also provides valuable insights into deep-rooted gendered roles with implications for women's employability and career progression. Many companies in various sectors have already shifted to flexible work arrangements and telecommuting options and the new model of working appears to be effective in terms of allowing both male and female workers balancing their work and family responsibilities ([United Nations, 2020](#)). Research suggests that these changes are likely to exist in the post-COVID period ([Alon et al. 2020](#)). Interestingly also, the opportunity to work from home enabled men to assume primary or shared caregiver roles for children, individuals with a disability and older persons. This potential redistribution of care responsibilities between men and women should encourage employers, policymakers as well as the greater society to reflect on the existing gender stereotypes, power relations between men and women and FWAs ([Alon et al. 2020](#); [Power 2020](#); [United Nations, 2020](#)).

Conclusion

As the pandemic illustrates, workplace arrangements can change quickly when there is a crisis. While women overall have done worse as a result of the pandemic so far, it is also true that alternatives to the "linear masculine career model" also suddenly seemed more desirable and more possible.



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