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Job Flexibility Enhances Working Mothers' Career Aspirations and Reduces Gender Gaps

Julia B. Bear, PhD

The gender gap in pay is a vexing problem across industries. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, women earned 82% of what men earned on average and across industries in 2020. In the real estate industry, specifically, the gap was substantially larger: among real estate brokers and sales agents, women earned only 69% of what men earned.¹



Greater flexibility at work is one antidote to these persistent gaps given that gender gaps in pay (and career advancement) increase as people, especially women, have greater caregiving responsibilities.

Unfortunately, however, asking for—and using—flexible work policies is often stigmatized, or frowned upon, at work.² Yet this stigma, which often translates into companies having flexible work policies that are on the

books but remain unused, also seems unfounded. In fact, we all know people who are ambitious about both their careers and their caregiving—who work tirelessly and also devote a great deal of time caring for others.³ Perhaps offering flexibility actually can *enhance* ambition at work, especially for women.

In “Forget the ‘Mommy Track’: Temporal Flexibility Increases Promotion Aspirations for Women and Reduces Gender Gaps,” I investigated whether temporal flexibility (meaning control over and flexibility in scheduling work hours) would be associated with greater career aspirations, particularly among women.⁴ Despite the derogatory notion of the “mommy track,” I predicted that temporal flexibility would lead to greater aspirations for a promotion among women, because they would anticipate less work-family conflict (and women tend to anticipate greater work-family conflict compared to men⁵).

Findings from Two Studies

I tested my predictions in two studies: In the first study I used archival data, meaning existing data from a national survey, the General Social survey (GSS), which is conducted every two years across a wide swath of the U.S. population. I explored whether the degree of flexibility in one’s job is positively correlated with promotion aspirations and whether the correlation varies

by gender. In other words, is flexibility positively related to career aspirations, especially for women?

I analyzed data from the 2016 survey, which included items related to temporal flexibility (e.g., questions about control over work hours, how difficult it is to take time off if necessary) and career aspirations (a question about the importance of advancement at work). I also controlled for a variety of variables that could influence the results, including age, marital status, and usual number of working hours per week. Based on data from 381 respondents (56.2% women, the mean age was 46) who reported being employed and having at least one child, I discovered a significant statistical interaction between gender and job flexibility on career aspirations. In other words, for women, flexibility was significantly and positively related to career aspirations, whereas the effect was the opposite for men.

These results were encouraging, but they were correlational. Although job flexibility and career aspirations had a positive relationship for women, I couldn't conclude that flexibility *influenced* career aspirations for women. So, next, I used an experimental method to randomly assign people to read about a flexible or non-flexible job that was a potential promotion. I investigated whether the degree of flexibility influenced aspirations for this promotion.

In this second study, I conducted an experiment online among almost 400 working parents. First, all participants read about a promotion opportunity involving more responsibility, a larger number of direct reports, and a higher salary, but also longer working hours, more travel, and the expectation of availability outside of regular work hours. Next, participants assigned to the flexible job condition read, "In addition, you would have a great deal of flexibility with your working hours. And you would have plenty of control over your schedule." In contrast, participants assigned to the non-flexible job condition read, "In addition, you would not have much flexibility with your working hours. And you would not have much control over your schedule." Subsequently, participants in both conditions rated how much work-family conflict they anticipated in the new job and their aspirations for the promotion.

Not surprisingly, in the non-flexible job condition, men reported significantly higher promotion aspirations compared to women. However, in the flexible job condition, women and men did not differ in their promotion aspirations—there was no gender gap! Interestingly, both men and women reported significantly higher promotion aspirations in the flexible compared to the non-flexible condition. I also found that anticipated work-family conflict mediated, or explained, the interactive effect of flexibility condition and gender on promotion aspirations.

Implications for Reducing Gender Gaps in the Real Estate Industry

Results from these two studies indicate that temporal flexibility—control over and flexibility with one's time at work—enhances women's promotion aspirations, particularly in the context of a time-intensive position. This effect is due to decreased concerns about work-family conflict.

Ultimately, reducing gender gaps in promotion aspirations can help to reduce the persistent gender gap in pay.

As mentioned above, the gender gap in pay in the real estate industry is larger than the average gender gap across industries. There are also stark gender gaps in career advancement to top leadership positions in the real estate industry, especially in commercial real estate.⁶ Although some positions in the real estate industry are known, in fact, for offering flexibility, such as residential brokerage, corporate positions, as well as positions in commercial real estate, they could still benefit from the findings reported here. Overall, these results indicate that flexibility enhances, rather than detracts from, women's career aspirations. Let's retire the demeaning "mommy track": Highlighting flexibility and schedule control increases promotion aspirations among working mothers, an important implication for managers looking to recruit and promote female employees and who care about chipping away at these persistent gender gaps.

Recommend Reading

Bear, Julia B. (2021), "Forget the 'Mommy Track': Temporal Flexibility Increases Promotion Aspirations for Women and Reduces Gender Gaps," *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 45(3), 294-307. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03616843211003070>

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For a discussion of temporal flexibility, see: Goldin, C. (2014). A grand gender convergence: Its last chapter. *American Economic Review*, 104(4), 1091–1119. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.104.4.1091>
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About the Author

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Dr. Julia Bear (PhD – Carnegie Mellon University) research focuses on the influence of gender on negotiation outcomes, as well as conflict management in organizations. In her research, she investigates what factors, both individual and situational, influence the gender gap typically seen in negotiation outcomes, and how an understanding of these factors can help to reduce this gender gap in both initiation of negotiation and negotiation performance.

Dr. Bear's research has been published in journals and books, including *Academy of Management Review*, *Psychological Science*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *Sex Roles*, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, and the *Academy of Management Best Paper Proceedings*. Dr. Bear is also the recipient of multiple best paper awards from the Academy of Management and the International Association of Conflict Management, as well as a Fulbright Fellowship and a Marie Curie Fellowship.



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