



## Who Gets to Choose? A Global Perspective on Gender, Work-Life Balance, and Choice in the Post-Pandemic Workplace

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### Abstract

Post-2020, there is evidence of persistent gender inequities both at work and at home, which research has shown can limit women's work choices. Thus, it is urgent that we investigate gender differences in domestic responsibilities among working parents and the potential impact of these differences on work choice. Using an original dataset with employees who have internet access in select countries in North America, South America, Europe, and Asia (N=3,147), we conducted logistic regression analysis to explore whether employees felt they had a choice in where they do their work. In addition to gender, we considered how childcare responsibilities, housework responsibility, self-identified "minority" status, education, workspace model (hybrid, remote, in-office or on-site), and country influenced employee perceptions of choice. Notably, in addition to significant differences between countries, education, and according to "minority" status, we found that men (OR: 1.23; 95%CI 1.04-1.47) and those stating that a partner was responsible for all or most of the housework (OR: 1.45; 95%CI 1.06-1.98) and childcare (OR: 2.72; 95%CI 1.95-3.78) reported feeling they had more choice regarding where they work. Additional chi-square analyses found significant gender differences in the distribution of housework and childcare responsibilities. These results suggest that working women still shoulder more of the childcare and housework responsibilities globally, and this unequal distribution of responsibility could have an impact on women's perceptions of their choices when it comes to work.

Keywords: Gender, Work, Work-Life Balance, Working Parents, Gender Inequality, Work Choice

### Introduction

Global feminist scholarship has established the importance of gender for experiences with paid work (Baxter & Wright, 2000; Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011; Leidner, 1991; Miller et al., 1991; Misra et al., 2021; Murray, 2000). For instance, research has repeatedly shown that persistent gender expectations task women with balancing paid work and childcare—pressure that men typically do not experience (Hays, 1996; Hochschild, 2003). Across the world, gender norms have consistently impacted women's career choices and trajectories for more than thirty years, to the extent that some scholars have pondered whether many women actually have career "choices" in the same manner as men (Blair-Loy, 2005; Glass, 1988; Kan et al., 2022; Massey et al., 1995). For example, several studies have found that women's choices can be constrained since women often feel compelled to make certain decisions due to gender expectations (Blair-Loy, 2005; Corby & Stanworth, 2009; Williams, 1991). Particularly given emerging evidence that the pandemic has

made the task of balancing work and family increasingly difficult for women despite burgeoning remote and hybrid work opportunities (Collins et al., 2021; Dunatchik et al., 2021; Mooi-Reci & Risman, 2021; Russell & Frachtenberg, 2021), investigating gender differences in perceptions of choice at work—and additional factors that relate to perceptions of choice—could reveal insight into which issues are currently impacting women when it comes to work choices. Removing any extant barriers could be key to fostering greater equity.

Thus, we use data from original surveys with employees across the world (N=3,147) and a feminist theoretical lens to explore gender differences in employee perceptions of choice in where they do their work post-2020 as well as how employees' current childcare responsibilities, housework responsibilities, workspace (hybrid, on-site/in-office, or entirely remote work), self-identified "minority" status, education, and country might matter for perceptions of choice. Using logistic regression, we found that partner responsibility for childcare and housework predicts increased perceptions of choice, while the inability to work remotely at least part of the time and lower education levels predicted diminished feelings of choice. We also found significant differences among countries, which suggests the need for more cross-country comparisons of this issue. Further, using chi-square tests, we found significant differences between women and men concerning self-reported responsibilities for housework and childcare. Our findings suggest that gender inequities in work choice are persistent in the post-2020 workplace. While not a complete solution, we propose that taking steps to equalize gendered responsibilities at home and at work will seemingly help equalize feelings of choice at work, and thus, support gender equity.

## **Background**

### **Gender Discrimination and Stereotyping Pre- and Post-2020**

Although there is evidence of exacerbating inequities among workers based on race, class, and gender lines since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mooi-Reci & Risman, 2021), feminist researchers have a long history of capturing evidence of gender inequity at work. This scholarship helps provide insight into how gendered ideas that exist at the structural level continue to matter for individual women's work choices. For instance, gender stereotyping and discrimination in the workplace are two such elements that can ultimately impact individual choice.

First, gender discrimination continues to play a significant role in shaping outcomes for women in the workplace (S. Fiske, 1998; B. F. Reskin, 1988; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Ridgeway & England, 2007). Over the last thirty years, studies have continued to find evidence of discriminatory practices at every stage of the employee life cycle, from hiring practices and job classifications (Acker, 1990; Goldin & Rouse, 2000; Gorman, 2005) to wage disparities, promotions, and authority lines (Meitzen, 1986; Olson & Becker, 1983; B. Reskin & McBrier, 2000). Yet despite the increased attention paid by scholars and practitioners over the past three decades, discrimination continues to be a barrier to gender equity at work (England, 2006; Gorman, 2005).

How can we explain continued discrimination despite repeated calls for addressing this issue? There is broad consensus among scholars that cultural beliefs about gender are foundational to discrimination in the workplace, and that the persistence of these beliefs helps fuel continued inequality (S. T. Fiske et al., 2002; Ridgeway & England, 2007). In general, these gender essentialist beliefs advance depictions of men and women that support the idea that women and men are fundamentally different kinds of people—and thus, will have different outcomes as workers. These efforts at categorization subsequently facilitate gender stereotyping, which leads to discrimination in many workplace contexts (Ridgeway & England, 2007).

Regarding stereotypes, there are two types (descriptive and prescriptive) that can help explain the link between gender stereotyping and workplace discrimination and inequality (Berger et al., 1972; Burgess & Borgida, 1999). Descriptive stereotypes are shared beliefs about traits and abilities that men and women possess. For example, one descriptive stereotype is the idea that men have agentic qualities associated with leadership, such as competence and assertiveness. Conversely, women are assumed to possess communal qualities associated with helping and nurturing, such as warmth and empathy. Discrimination based on descriptive stereotypes results when one gender is perceived as unfit to perform tasks associated with qualities believed inherent to the opposite sex (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In this context, men are seen as naturally suited for agentic occupations such as a lawyer or doctor, while women are believed more suited for nurturing occupations such as a nurse or counselor.

If descriptive stereotypes derive from cultural beliefs about what men and women *can* do, prescriptive stereotypes arise from cultural beliefs about what men and women *should* do. Like their descriptive counterpart, prescriptive stereotypes align with the agentic-communal dichotomy. However, prescriptive stereotypes are fundamentally normative, and thus prone to greater social-cultural disapproval and sanction for those who violate them (Burgess & Borgida, 1999). While studies suggest that men who display attributes counter to prescriptive norms (less assertive, more empathetic) risk minor forms of professional disapproval (Connell, 1995), women who violate their prescriptive stereotyping (particularly in the workplace) face penalties on numerous levels (Rudman, 1998). When a woman succeeds in a masculine role, she signals competence but can violate prescriptive gender norms. In this context, the assumption is that her possession of successful agentic qualities also reflects a deficit of stereotypically feminine communal qualities. The resulting double-bind places her in an unwinnable situation: she can be seen as competent but not likeable, or she can be viewed as likeable but not competent. Consequently, assertive women in high-status roles are frequently viewed as hostile, cold, or aloof, negative attributions that move organizations to penalize successful women when it comes to rewards such as salary, opportunity, and hiring (Heilman, 2001). By contrast, men are not penalized for behaving in assertive, agentic ways (Rudman, 1998).

Unfortunately, gender stereotypes and discrimination continue to be problems in workplaces across the world despite calls for more awareness of these issues. For instance, since 2020, scholars have clearly captured global patterns of work inequality by demonstrating that women (and especially women of color) have faced rising levels of stress and job precarity that likely relates to how valuable employers view them in economically unstable times (Mooi-Reci &

Risman, 2021). This treatment adds insult to injury, as due in no small part to gender stereotypes, working women have historically also shouldered much of the day-to-day responsibilities associated with home life as well.

### **Gender and Balancing Work and Family Pre- and Post-2020**

The rootedness of the idea that women are caregivers first and employees second can be seen in research on the “second shift” (Hochschild, 2003). Developed in the late 80s, Hochschild argued that the advancement of gender equality in the U.S. economy had stalled due to what she coined as the “second shift”—the unpaid work of childcare and housework after already completing a “first shift” of paid work in the workplace. In Hochschild’s research, the “second shift” was overwhelmingly taken on by women, and more recent research has found evidence that the gendered aspect to the “second shift” continues today on a global scale (Dunatchik et al., 2021; *Women in the Workplace*, 2020).

Nearly three decades later, the scholarly consensus is that the move towards gender equality in the workplace remains fundamentally stalled (Blair-Loy et al., 2015; Hochschild, 2003). Despite notable advances for women in education and income, many of the challenges originally identified by Hochschild remain unreformed: there continues to be a lack of gender balance in housework and caregiver work, and organizations remain overwhelming structured around the construct of an ideal worker who is always available and committed to work. As one scholar summarized, “women still face fewer opportunities for work involvement, pay, and public life while men spend less time with their children” (Blair-Loy et al., 2015). Even institutional features that outwardly appear to promote or even advocate for women employees ultimately formalize male privilege in the workplace and reinforce hierarchical orders of status inequality (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). For instance, policies that exclusively support maternity or caregiver leave for women (without providing equal policies for caregivers of any gender) risk reinforcing stereotypes that predominantly associate women with communal qualities of nurturing (in addition to the idea that men don’t need caregiver leave). The unintended consequence of aligning organizational policy with a descriptive stereotype that paints women as family caregivers first and as workers second, suggesting that their role as potential mothers or caregivers makes them less invested as employees (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011).

While pre-pandemic assessments of gender equality in the workplace are troubling, one question remains unanswered: does this view of women’s experience in the workplace apply to the current work environment characterized by radical changes in schedule and location flexibility? Unfortunately, according to most current research, the answer is yes (Dunatchik et al., 2021; *Global Gender Gap Report*, 2021; *Women in the Workplace*, 2021; Mooi-Reci & Risman, 2021). Despite the widespread acceptance of flexible remote and hybrid work models, as well as new technology designed to streamline collaborative work across multiple locations, women continue to experience significant stress and exhaustion in addition to magnified domestic responsibilities (Collins et al., 2021; *Women in the Workplace*, 2020; *Women in the Workplace*, 2021). Additionally, women continue to experience persistent gaps in the corporate pipeline, with promotions at initial steps towards management being both inconsistent and inequitable

(Dunatchik et al., 2021; *Women in the Workplace*, 2021). Women leaders are increasingly taking on additional responsibilities, both in supporting their teams and advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) initiatives, yet relatively few are being recognized for their contributions. Overall, today's ongoing gender discrimination and lack of support—both domestically and institutionally—echoes the unfavorable experiences of previous generations (*Women in the Workplace*, 2021).

Collectively, the picture that emerges from the literature highlights the ways compounding gender pressures constrain the choices women have about their work. Even before entering the workplace, gender beliefs about abilities and limitations bias both individual and institutional expectations that, in turn, define (or limit) the professional opportunities that are made available for women. Once inside the workplace, those who choose to push beyond the constraints of gender stereotypes sometimes pay for their professional success with the interpersonal hostility and disapproval that comes with choices that violate prescriptive norms (Heilman, 2001). In addition to externally imposed constraints on choice, women are also forced to wrestle with the self-limiting internalization of gender bias (Foschi, 2000; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Gender-biased self-perceptions of ability (which are rooted in structural ideas about gender) can discourage an individual from making decisions that would otherwise advance their professional standing. In terms of amplifying personal and professional need fulfillment, even recently expanded options for hybrid and remote work models are something of a false-choice for women. The ability to capitalize on the flexibility and opportunity these work models afford is frequently compromised by childcare and housework responsibilities that continue to disproportionately fall to women (Dunatchik et al., 2021). Whether at home or in the office, complex layers of gender discrimination continue to negatively impact how women perceive choice and opportunity at work.

## Methods

The survey data used in our analyses were gathered in the fall of 2021 as part of a monthly survey project carried out by the authors' institution. To qualify for the survey, participants had to be working at organizations with at least 500 employees in one of the following countries: the United States (n=858), the United Kingdom (n=605), Canada (n=472), India (n=795), and Brazil (n=417). We targeted English-speaking participants in these countries since our survey only fielded in English. We used Alchemer software to build the survey and Lucid marketplace to screen and administer the survey. Lucid is a sample aggregator that enables direct-to-respondent sampling through its marketplace platform, reaching potential respondents via a number of panel providers (Coppock & McClellan, 2019). The panel providers compensate respondents for their time in the form of cash or reward cards and redeemable points. Payment for this survey ranged from \$1.25 to \$1.85 USD per respondent, depending on the country (adjusted for cost-of-living and to attract respondent interest). Our survey is comprised of a convenience sample and is thus not representative of all workers in the sampled nations. For instance, participants had to have internet access and be English-speaking to take the survey, which limited our sample somewhat. However, our sample is large enough to generate meaningful results.

## Survey and Instrumentation

After we posted a survey to the Lucid platform, panel providers contacted potential participants who were then taken to a screener for our survey that included a consent form. Respondents were informed that they could exit the survey at any time. Opting out of the survey did not hurt participants' quality scores with panel providers. Surveys then asked participants a series of questions related to their experiences in the workplace, including their experiences with diversity, equity, and inclusion at work as well as demographics. Our survey also asked about their domestic responsibilities (housework and childcare) outside of work.

## Analytic Strategy

We used StataMP 17 to generate both chi-square tests and our logistic regression model. Our dependent variable in both analyses was participant self-reports regarding whether they felt they had a choice in where they do their work. While the "choice" in where one does their work can be somewhat limiting depending on the field, emerging research demonstrates that more educated workers and "knowledge" workers (or, those whose jobs require they work with information) are more likely to have choice in where they work, typically due to the feasibility of conducting knowledge work remotely (Auginbaugh & Rothstein, 2022). Indeed, our survey skews toward a more educated sample (87% of participants have at least a high school diploma or equivalent). Thus, it is suitable to explore perceptions of choice.

In addition to education, gender, and workspace (remote, hybrid, or in-office workers) we explored how self-identified minority status and housework and childcare responsibilities might matter for perceptions of choice since previous and recent work has suggested that they may (Auginbaugh & Rothstein, 2022; Blair-Loy, 2005; Glass, 1988). We also compared across countries due to a lack of research using international samples to investigate this particular issue. Lastly, we conducted chi-square analyses comparing housework and childcare responsibilities across gender, since gender inequalities are our main focus in this paper.

## Findings

According to the logistic regression test, all independent variables demonstrated statistical significance in some respect. Full results of the test are available in Table 1. The pseudo-R<sup>2</sup> of our model was 0.2269, which indicates good fit. Consistent with our expectations, we found that men were more likely to express optimism around work choice. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we also found that those working in hybrid or remote environments also expressed greater optimism around choice. Interestingly, we found that minority-identified workers also expressed significantly more optimism around choice. Lastly, we found that compared to the United States, those in India and Brazil were significantly more likely to express optimism, whereas those in Canada were significantly less likely to express optimism around choice.

At the same time, when it came to housework, we found that compared to those respondents who reported that they were mostly responsible for housework, those who attested to living in a

household where *partners* were mostly responsible for housework were more likely to express optimism around choice. Interestingly, compared to respondents with no children, those with children were all more optimistic around work choice. However, those reporting partner responsibility for childcare were the most optimistic (see Table 1). Exploring these patterns further, additional chi-square analyses found statistically significant differences according to gender when it came to both housework and childcare. Men were significantly more likely to report that their partners had responsibility for both the housework and the childcare, whereas women were significantly more likely to report that they were responsible for both in their households. These results are reported in Table 2.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, given past research into the impact of gender on work choices (see (Blair-Loy, 2005), we sought to explore gender differences in employee perceptions of choice in where they work. In addition to differences in childcare and housework responsibilities, by including in our models an international sample of key employee characteristics historically associated with gender inequities at work, we contribute to the growing body of literature in global gender equity in the workplace (Hideg & Krstic, 2021). While some of our results echo the gender challenges highlighted in previous studies, our findings also provide some compelling insights that can be used to inform future research and practices in workplace gender equity post-2020.

With respect to the gender gap in domestic work, we found little evidence that the division of labor between men and women has become more equitable. Men are consistently more likely to express optimism around work choice, as are those individuals whose partners are responsible for household labor. Unfortunately, our study found that when it comes to household labor, women continue to bear primary responsibility for childcare and housework. One aspect of the domestic dynamic that merits future exploration is our finding that respondents with children felt more optimistic around work choice. While this might suggest a positive impact on perspective from the additional support children might potentially bring to household tasks, more research would be necessary to account for this increase in optimism.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, we also found that those working in remote and hybrid environments were more likely to express optimism about work choice. Although our study did not specifically test whether individuals were given the option to choose their work location, the post-Covid implementation of hybrid and remote work schedules has largely been in response to employee-driven expectations of greater flexibility and choice (*Future Forum Pulse*, 2021). As such, these work location options could be broadly construed as the result of employee work choice, although further research would be required to confirm this observation.

Lastly, we found that minority-identified workers expressed significantly more optimism around choice in where they work compared to their non-minority counterparts. While compelling on its own, this finding signals some potentially interesting areas for additional exploration. Current research finds that the desire for flexibility in work location—specifically remote—is strongest among underrepresented groups (*Future Forum Pulse*, 2021). That minority employees in our

study are expressing optimism about choice in where they work suggests a potentially positive move in diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. However, the desire of underrepresented workers to overwhelmingly move to remote work environments should also raise questions about potential inclusivity, bias, or discrimination issues that might be informing the shift away from the office. Additional qualitative research could provide more nuanced insight into the complexity of this particular finding.

Our research is not without limitations. First, since our sample is one of convenience, we cannot generalize our results to all workers in the countries that we sampled. Our research is also limited in that our survey was administered electronically, so any potential participants would need access to technology and an internet connection in order to participate. Yet despite our limitations, our research provides insight into gender differences in perceptions of choice at work. While hybrid and remote work opportunities hold out the possibility for greater flexibility and work-life balance, continued gender inequity in the division of domestic responsibilities disproportionately impacts women and how they perceive their work choices. As such, organizations should question whether their policies facilitate gender-equitable practices or are they complicit in perpetuating gender stereotypes that spill over into the home. We should also continue to question how gender stereotyping in the workplace impacts not only women's choice in where they work, but also the opportunities they have for professional advancement, growth, and contribution.

**Table 1: Logistic Regression Results Comparing Demographics and Perceptions of Choice at Work**

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Odds Ratio</b>	<b>95% Confidence Interval</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
<i>Women (ref.)</i>		
Men	1.23†	1.04-1.47
<b>Workspace</b>		
<i>On-site (ref.)</i>		
Hybrid	4.98**	3.97-6.26
Remote	4.58**	3.79-5.54
<b>Housework</b>		
<i>Respondent Responsible (ref.)</i>		
Shared Responsibility	0.82	0.65-1.02
Partner Responsible	1.45†	1.06-1.98
<b>Childcare</b>		
<i>No Children (ref.)</i>		
Respondent Responsible	2.20**	1.73-2.81
Shared Responsibility	1.73**	1.38-2.18
Partner Responsible	2.72**	1.95-3.78
<b>Minority Status</b>		



<i>No (ref.)</i>		
Yes	1.45**	1.19-1.76
<b>Education</b>		
<i>College Graduate (ref.)</i>		
Post-Graduate Degree	1.19	0.96-1.48
Some College or Trade School	0.57**	0.44-0.72
High School or Less	0.51**	0.38-0.67
<b>Country</b>		
<i>United States (ref.)</i>		
Canada	0.72†	0.56-0.93
India	2.67**	2.05-3.49
United Kingdom	0.93	0.73-1.18
Brazil	1.62*	1.23-2.13

† p&lt;0.05

\* p&lt;0.01

\*\* p&lt;0.001

**Table 2: Chi-Square Tests Comparing Gender against Childcare and Housework Responsibility**

	Women n(%)	Men n(%)	$\chi^2$
<b>Housework</b>			
Respondent Responsibility	798 (69)	455 (36)	(2)=157.1465**
Shared Responsibility	645 (49)	664 (51)	
Partner Responsibility	193 (33)	392 (67)	
<b>Childcare</b>			
No Children	658 (59)	452 (41)	(3)=186.0021**
Respondent Responsibility	400 (66)	205 (34)	
Shared Responsibility	434 (46)	507 (54)	
Partner Responsibility	144 (29)	347 (71)	

† p&lt;0.05

\* p&lt;0.01

\*\* p&lt;0.001

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