

# Want more women in top positions? Provide them with more flexibility at work

August 18 2017, by Heejung Chung

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The recent BBC report on the pay of its top earners laid bare the disparities between men and women's earnings. But it should come as no surprise. The gender pay gap has been stubbornly stagnant over the past decade. According to the EU (which calculates the gap based on hourly pay differences between men and women), men earn [around 20 percent](#)

more. And the UK's official statistics group, which calculates the pay gap of full-time earnings, men earn an average of [about 10 percent](#) more than women.

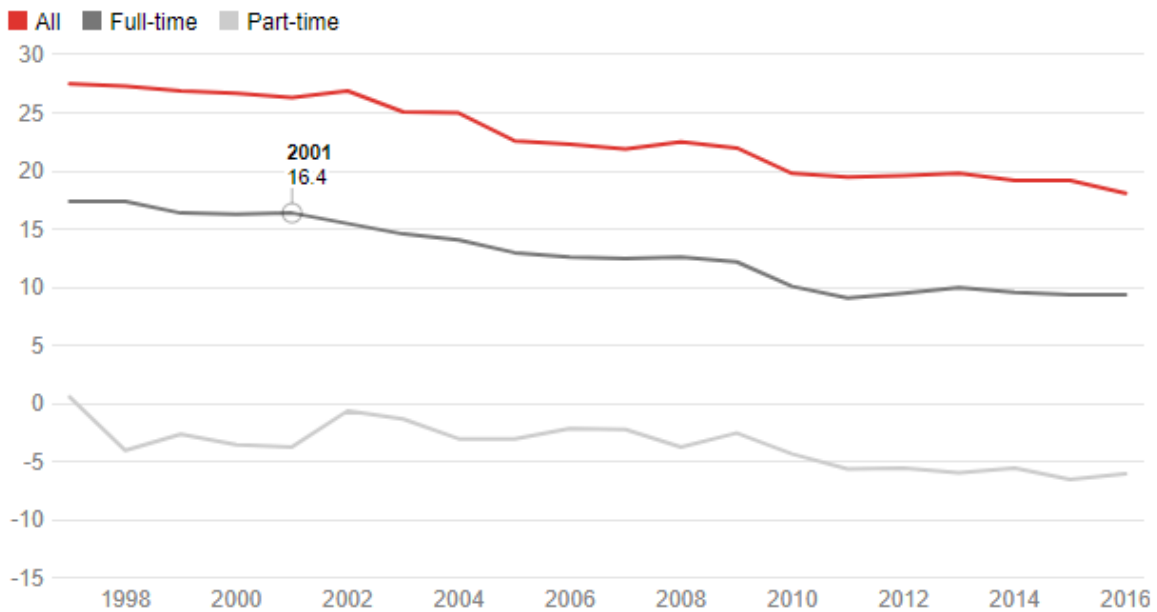
One core reason for this difference is the tendency for women to drop out of the labour market or [move into \(bad and low-paid\)](#) part-time jobs after having children. Employment data makes this clear.

For example, in 2015, 85 percent of women between the ages of 25–49 without children were employed, exactly the same proportion as childless men employed in the same age group. But women are likely to drop out of the labour market or reduce their hours after childbirth, while men are more likely to increase their hours and increase their labour market participation.

The stats show that there is a sharp drop in the employment rate of women with children – to 71 percent – while the employment rate of fathers rises to [more than 90 percent](#) . Further, only 16 percent of all women between the ages of 25–49 without dependent children worked part-time, while this proportion more than triples for women in the same age group with children [to 52 percent](#) .

It isn't just about working part-time but the quality of part-time work is also a factor. It is [widely known](#) that women usually switch to lower-paying, lower-quality jobs when moving into part-time work, due to the lack of high-quality well-paid part-time jobs in the UK .

## The gender pay gap in the UK (%)



Source: [Office for National Statistics](#)

So the question arises: what can we do to help women maintain their working patterns after childbirth, without sacrificing their careers? My research into flexible working arrangements shows that they can help women maintain their working hours and stay in employment.

## Introducing flexitime

Obviously the more flexibility you have at work the better you are able to shape work around family demands. I myself am a good example of this. Coming back to work from having taken six months of maternity leave after the birth of my daughter, I would not have been able to go back to work full-time if it wasn't for the flexibility I had at work. Given

the great amount of freedom you have as an academic to work whenever and wherever you want (within limits), I was able to work full-time by working from home and catching up on work during the weekends and evenings when my baby was asleep or I had other childcare support available. It was hard and I lost a lot of sleep – but through such flexibility I was able to maintain my research career.

I wondered whether similar patterns could be observed for other women in the UK. To investigate, my colleague Mariska van der Horst and I used a data set of 40,000 households to see whether being able to have control over when you work and where you work influences women's likelihood of remaining in employment and not reducing their working hours significantly (of more than 4 hours) after the birth of their children. The results were remarkable.



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In our research, which was published in the journal [Human Relations](#), we found that women who were able to use flexitime were only half as likely to reduce their working hours after the birth of their child. This effect was especially the case for the women who used flexitime prior to the birth of their child as well as after.

In the overall sample, more than half the women reduced their working hours after the birth of their child. But less than a quarter of the women who were able to use flexitime reduced their hours, with similar results for women who were able to work from home if they wanted to. This

shows that, given the chance to work flexibly, many women would stay in work and maintain their hours and their pay after having children.

As I've found in [previous research](#), not all jobs allow for flexible work arrangements – and they are not necessarily provided to those in most need of them. Rather, they tend to be given more to high-skilled, higher educated workers in supervisory roles. Another [recent study](#) found that a large number of mothers are forced to leave their jobs after flexible working requests were turned down.

It is not only a matter of justice but also a matter of society's economic prosperity and development to ensure that [women](#) are able to remain in the labour market across different stages of the life cycle, including childbirth. The right to flexible working is crucial if we are to tackle the problem of gender inequality in the [labour market](#) – especially when it comes to having a balance at the top of the career ladder.

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