

Workplace flexibility bias not just a mother's problem

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Work-life balance is not an issue exclusive to women, particularly mothers—even men and those without children can suffer when they feel that their workplace culture is not family friendly, according to a new study.

When employees think their careers will suffer if they take time away from work for family or personal reasons, they have lower work satisfaction and experience more work-life spillover. In addition, they are more likely to intend to leave their [jobs](#), say researchers at the University of Michigan and California State University Channel Islands.

Study co-author Erin Cech, U-M assistant professor of sociology, say these negative impacts of this kind of [workplace culture](#) have the potential to affect all workers. This underscores the need to overhaul work structures that threaten to penalize all workers for attempting to balance their work and home lives—whether or not those lives include children, she said.

The study focused on understanding the "ideal [worker](#) norm"—a belief many employers have that individuals should be single-mindedly devoted to them, available to work full-time until retirement and have few interruptions from family.

Researchers tested workplace flexibility bias using a nationally representative sample of more than 2,700 employed people (half were men). They answered questions about job satisfaction, engagement, job-

to-home spillover, home-to-job spillover and turnover intentions.

Respondents reported their beliefs about their workplace environment, specifically whether they felt they could ask for time off for personal or family reasons and still get ahead in their jobs or careers.

Nearly 40 percent felt that workers at their jobs are unlikely to get ahead at work when they ask for time off. Many respondents were caregivers or used a flexible work schedule.

People typically think only women and moms experience work-family issues, and need flexible work arrangements, like telecommuting, part-time work or job sharing. Society believes it's women who bear the brunt of unfriendly work cultures, when it actually impacts all genders, says Lindsey Trimble O'Connor, lead author and assistant professor of sociology at California State University Channel Islands.

This flexibility bias, the researchers say, leaves workers with little control over their schedule, feeling unsupported by their companies or unhappy knowing that their company might be discriminating against those balancing work with personal responsibilities.

What can organizations do? It's not enough for them to have [work](#)-life policies on the books. They need to promote a culture where workers feel like they can use those policies without their careers being penalized, the researchers say.

The findings appear in the April issue of *Sociological Perspectives*.

More information: Lindsey Trimble O'Connor et al. Not Just a Mothers' Problem: The Consequences of Perceived Workplace Flexibility Bias for All Workers, *Sociological Perspectives* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0731121418768235](https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121418768235)

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