

Opinion: When employers reward 'ideal' workers, gender equality suffers

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

UK deputy prime minister Dominic Raab recently resigned following the publication of a report into workplace complaints about his conduct, including bullying allegations. But this element of his behavior wasn't the only concerning workplace problem highlighted by the report.

[It also detailed how](#), seemingly unencumbered by responsibilities outside work, his working hours ran from 7:30am until 10pm, Monday to Thursday, while Fridays were spent on constituency business, usually followed by extensive work on weekends.

When organizations or leaders support such working practices—either by working long hours themselves or rewarding those that do—it can deepen inequality in the workplace. Setting an expectation that it's OK (or even necessary) to work beyond your contracted hours disadvantages those that need more flexibility, such as caregivers, who are typically women.

Unfortunately, long hours are essentially [a requirement for promotion](#) in many managerial and professional jobs. Such working practices accord with the very values that led to [the emergence of modern capitalism](#) and the creation of the concept of the "ideal worker," as argued by [sociologist Max Weber](#). It's hardly surprising, then, that many organizations value and require long hours, even if they are inefficient.

But long working hours [undermine health](#), raising the risks of cardiovascular disease, [chronic fatigue](#), stress, depression, sleep quality, self-perceived health, use of alcohol and cigarettes, and a host of other conditions and problems. Inefficiently long hours could also [contribute to low productivity](#), as well as promoting [gender inequality](#) at work and in the home.

Work flexibility versus career progression

Feminist scholars have also long pointed to the adverse effects of long hours on women in particular. Research shows this is a key source of the gender wage gap [disadvantage](#). The UK's [Equal Pay Act](#) made a substantial difference in narrowing the gender pay gap, but long working hours still stand in the way of this progress—particularly for those who

have caring responsibilities, such as mothers. It is partly because of care that the gender wage gap [continues to widen](#) up to the age of 42. During this time, those who can't work excessive hours could miss out on [career opportunities](#).

Any kind of work flexibility can come at a high price in terms of career progression, as I found [in my study](#) of professional and managerial women's exit from work, conducted with organizational psychologist Emma Cahusac. We found that even women who continued to work full-time after having a child were disadvantaged because in professional and managerial work, full time often means being available any time. Many women are pushed into less interesting work because [face time and on-call](#) availability are disproportionately rewarded.

Reducing women's domestic work can contribute to closing the [gender pay gap](#). [Numerous studies](#) have shown that [housework is negatively associated with wages](#). This is why it matters when men do much less around the home than women. Their contributions have gradually increased to a small degree, with men's involvement in childcare picking up more than their participation in the mundane daily housework tasks. But women still perform the [lion's share](#), and tend to take responsibility for [domestic work](#), taking on the "[mental load](#)" of making sure chores get done.

Organizations reinforce this unequal sharing in the home when they make working long hours a pre-condition for success. Such company cultures uphold an unspoken "[gendered contract](#)" that it is women who are meant to perform care.

Working fewer hours

If long hours are an ingredient of success in modern organizations, not everyone is convinced—even those who benefit. I conducted [a study](#)

with University of Luxembourg sociologist [Robin Samuel](#) which showed that on average even male breadwinners—the main beneficiaries of the long hours system and those who actually work the longest hours—would prefer to work fewer hours for less pay. Further, when male breadwinners want to work fewer hours, our research shows it's often because they feel their jobs interfere with their family lives.

Recent examples of toxic workplaces should encourage debate about what it is reasonable to expect from employees. Gender inequalities relating to the reconciliation of work and care remain largely a side issue within organizations, although both the crisis of care and how people can accomplish work and care are critical issues facing our society. The [#MeToo movement](#) shone a light on [sexual harassment](#), but it hasn't been the turning point many had hoped for in terms of boosting gender equality at work. There has been a [substantial backlash](#) to it, in part emanating from the gulf in understanding between those affected by such abuse and those who perpetrate or condone it.

A similar divergence can be seen in discussions about toxic workplaces—whether that's about bullying or deep-rooted employer expectations about working practices such as long hours, which systematically disadvantage some employees. Some people may see working long hours as linked to being robust, high-achieving, results-driven and demanding, others believe it diminishes employees and degrades the workplace environment.

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