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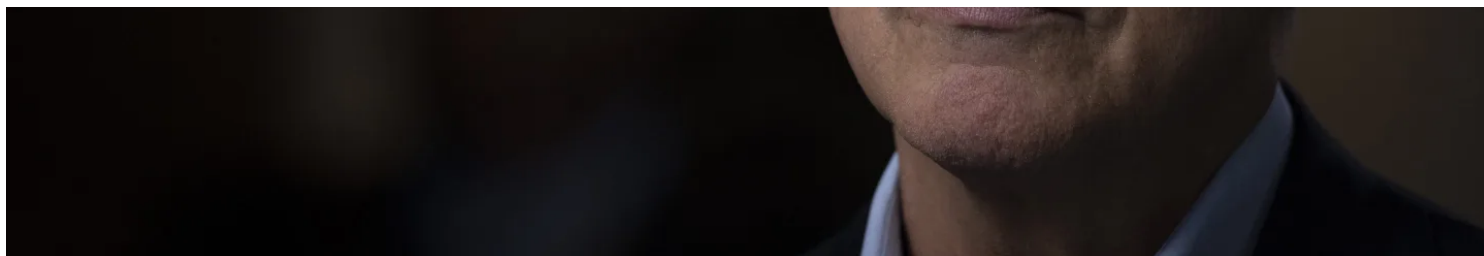
COMMENTARY · REMOTE WORK

Flexible work is feminist—and women won't return to a system that hasn't served them well to spare the feelings of powerful men

BY ERIN GRAU

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Several CEOs, including JPMorgan CEO Jamie Dimon, Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff, and Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, have rejected remote work—but they are the biggest winners from the old system.

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For the first 15 years of my career, I commuted into an office every day. This meant that by the time I had children, my workplace contributions were invisible to them. All they noticed was my absence, not my leadership skills at work. I missed a lot, too: Some days I left the house before they woke up to make it to my first meeting, or walked in the door too late to hear the highs and lows of their days.



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Now that I take fundraising, hiring, and sales calls from home a few days each week while my daughters do homework or play in the next room, they have exposure to the reality of my work. I hope the lessons they are learning about work and its place in a full life will have a positive impact on them in the years to come.

As the return-to-office movement gained steam over the past few months, bosses don't understand why people aren't returning to the office. They're voicing concerns over productivity, creativity, culture, advancement, and mentoring—and even asserting that the remote and hybrid work experiment of the past few years has reinforced the critical importance of sitting in an office. Wall Street executive Steven Rattner [questioned](#) the effectiveness of remote work, relying on statements from [Salesforce](#) CEO Marc Benioff, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, and JPMorgan CEO Jamie Dimon to further his argument. More recently, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman [called remote work](#) “one of the tech industry’s work mistakes.”

It's probably not a surprise that employees don't feel similarly—[new research](#) shows that employees still aren't permitted to work remotely as much as they'd like. And it is hardly a coincidence that the demographic which benefited most from the old system has also expressed the most anxiety about changing it. But we shouldn't confuse the feelings of powerful men with facts.

Despite all of the efforts of the feminist movement that have spanned generations, the reality is that it still largely falls on women to challenge gender inequities in society. Women are still trying to do it all, despite CEOs preserving work arrangements that are outdated and counterproductive when it comes to modern families and changing gender roles. By reimagining when, where, and even how we work, we can make meaningful progress toward gender equality and address the dramatic underrepresentation of women and people of all underrepresented genders in our companies, particularly at the most senior levels.

We've been stuck in the same corporate work norms since the late 1940s when many families could live comfortably on one paycheck and just [a third of women](#) worked outside of the home. While so much else has changed (women entering the labor force in [record numbers](#) in the late 1960s; the Anita Hill Senate hearing in 1991 that centered the movement around the compounding effects of race and class, the internet revolution, a pandemic that sent millions of workers home and yet didn't crater the economy), we are being told the only way to work is to return to a schedule invented with the Model T.

The case for flexible work has a social and moral imperative. It helps [retain women](#), [reduces burnout](#), and makes it [easier](#) to have children and [deliver on caregiving responsibilities](#). According to a recent [survey](#) of female hybrid workers that combine in-office and remote work, 88% believe the flexibility of hybrid work is an equalizer in the workplace, and two-thirds say it has had a positive impact on their career growth path. Flexible work provides greater opportunities for [career advancement](#) across gender lines and [increases the number of women](#) in leadership, which is good for business. Companies with more women in leadership have [more engaged workers](#) and are [more profitable](#).

[Ninety percent of women](#) want the ability to work remotely, including fully remote or hybrid-work options, and with it have experienced an increased sense of belonging, greater psychological safety, and, thanks to less unstructured time with colleagues, fewer microaggressions. This is even more pronounced for women of

color, LGBTQ+ women, and women with disabilities. Support for flexibility and the ability to work remotely is inextricably tied to gender equality and benefits us all: women, men, and marginalized genders.

The primary **breadwinner role is disappearing**, with 29% of opposite-sex couples earning the same amount of money and women out-earning their husband in 16% of marriages, and *yet*, women still spend two more hours on caregiving and 2.5 more hours on housework. Whether a stay-at-home mother or one that works outside the home, mothers still take on the lion's share of caregiving and domestic responsibilities, even though that work continues to be woefully undervalued, underappreciated, and undercompensated.

For opposite-sex couples with two wage earners, remote work supports gender equality at **home** by increasing a mother's paid labor *and* increasing a father's domestic labor. Fathers who work from home more frequently perform a **greater share of housework and childcare**, and their partners are more likely to be employed and work more hours in paid labor. There's more: Children **benefit long term** economically and socially when their mother works outside of the home: daughters are more likely to be employed, be supervisors, and earn more, and sons spend more time doing chores around the house and taking care of family members.

To be sure, flexibility can go wrong, especially if employers reward the people who spend more time in the office with all of the raises, promotions, and plum assignments. In such a scenario, flexibility could inadvertently contribute to a gender gap in pay and advancement. **Proximity bias**, the unconscious tendency to favor those that are physically closer to us, is a real pitfall and can lead to two classes of workers that break down by gender and race, with the less favored class being women and workers of color.

At the individual level, the benefits of flexibility for employees don't always hold. When your commute only requires you to walk a few feet and open your laptop, it's easy to extend your work day, which can have a **negative impact** on well-being and increase conflict between work and family, particularly for women. Anyone who has tried to work from the middle of their kitchen table knows how challenging it can be to focus when you're not in a dedicated workplace, especially if you can't access or afford childcare.

But these downsides are worth the tradeoffs. The real reason flexible work arrangements haven't worked or have led to a perception among CEOs of poorer outcomes is that companies haven't invested in the education, practices, and policies which promote gender equity and improve their workplaces, such as paid leave and mentorship programs. Flexible work certainly isn't the *only* key to a more gender-equal society but it's a hell of a lot better for the most marginalized workers.

The data on hybrid and remote work arrangements is “at best inconclusive,” which Rattner himself concedes. Flexible work isn't an **excuse** for workers to do *less* work, but rather for them to do *more* life—more focused work, more family time, and a greater focus on their well-being. It's not a rejection of work, but a renouncement of a system that hasn't served us well.

It's within the power of companies and CEOs to recast the “ideal” worker, value workers who shoulder domestic and caregiving responsibilities, support flexible work arrangements and policies and equip managers to lead through the multidimensional challenges of flexible work.

However, the onus is not just on CEOs. *All* workers, when and where possible, can support flexible work by choosing it for themselves and empowering colleagues to work when and where they need to.

We must destigmatize flexible work and prevent it from becoming another **mommy track**, a career path for mothers that offers flexible work at the expense of career advancement—or even worse, another version of the tired misogynist trope “women belong in the house.”

Flexible work will continue to be a win for women as long as it doesn't come with penalties, like slower paths to promotions or relegating women to **pink-collar** fields. And like parental leave, **men need to take it** without consequence, too, in order to support gender equity and make a powerful statement about the value of caregiving.

Three years ago, flexible work was novel. Two years ago, it was normal. Today, it's necessary. Our future workplaces—the ones my children and yours will inherit—rely on us to get this right.

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