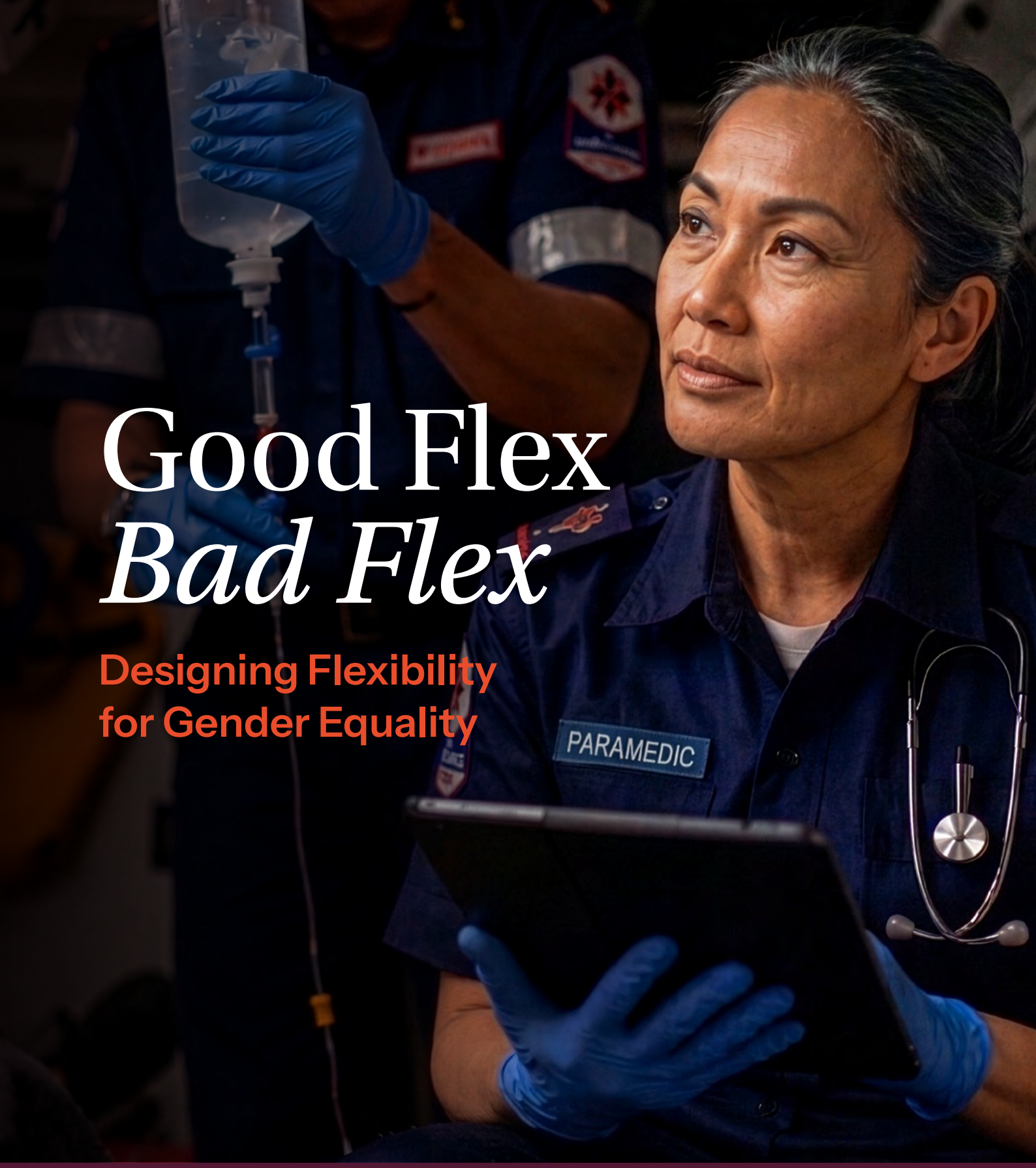

Good Flex *Bad Flex*

Designing Flexibility for Gender Equality

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WORKING for WOMEN
Research Partnership

Acknowledgement of Country

The authors and partners of this report wish to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the nations across Australia and pay our respect to Elders past and present. We recognise that all Elders and mobs in locations across Australia have their own experiences with work. We hope this report enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to keep telling their own stories.

The Working for Women Research Partnership is co-led by researchers at The University of Sydney, The University of Melbourne and The University of Technology Sydney, with support from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's Office for Women.

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Contents

Working for Women Research Partnership

Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality

Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality is the national strategy to achieve gender equality in Australia.[1] The strategy outlines the Australian Government's vision: "an Australia where people are safe, treated with respect, have choices, and have access to resources and equal outcomes no matter their gender". [2]

The Working for Women Research Partnership is a five-year collaboration (2025–2030) between the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's Office for Women and a national consortium of interdisciplinary researchers to develop an evidence-base to inform the strategy.

The Partnership brings together expertise across sociology, economics, public health, industrial relations, and social policy, to generate new, high-quality data through a mixed-methods design that combines nationally representative survey data with in-depth qualitative research.

This approach enables analysis of gender inequality across multiple levels—individual, organisational, and structural—and across different workforce cohorts, sectors, and life stages.

A central feature of the Partnership is its commitment to addressing critical gaps in existing data, particularly by centring the experiences of groups often underrepresented in research and policy, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women living in regional, rural and remote areas, migrants, LGBTQI+ people, and workers with disability or chronic health conditions.

The Partnership is explicitly oriented toward impact. It prioritises the generation of context-sensitive, evidence-based insights that can inform government decision-making, support industry and organisational reform, and strengthen community-led responses to gender inequality at work.

By linking empirical research to practical pathways for change, it seeks to move beyond problem identification to support sustained, structural transformation in Australian working life.

Working for Women Research Partnership

Across the five years of the Partnership, research will focus on several key themes that align with the priorities of ***Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality.*** **This year, the theme is flexible work and the cohort for more focused analysis is women aged 40-55.**

We focus on flexible work because it sits at the centre of the inequalities identified in ***Working for Women.*** Women take on a disproportionate share of unpaid care and face ongoing barriers to economic security, career progression and pay equity.

Flexible work directly shapes whether they can remain in the workforce, advance, and balance paid work with care. When it is well designed and widely available, flexible work supports participation and progression. When it is limited or poorly implemented, it reinforces the inequalities ***Working for Women*** aims to address.

We focus on women in the mid-years (40–55)—a life stage at which many women experience the 'midlife collision' when work commitments, disproportionate responsibility for family care and personal health and wellbeing challenges converge.[3] It is a time when many women are at the peak of their expertise and strongly attached to paid work but find themselves crushed between competing responsibilities and aspirations.

Also called the 'sandwich generation', mid-years women are often shouldering care responsibilities for children and ageing parents alongside paid work. These experiences highlight the significant misalignment between women's lives, needs and responsibilities and the way work is structured.

In line with *Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality,* the Working for Women Research Partnership identifies **flexible work** as a key lever for reshaping the systems that govern work and care so that people of all genders have meaningful choices and the ability to participate fully in economic and community life. This report focuses on this topic.

Our Team

This report draws on research delivered as part of the first cycle of the Working for Women Research Partnership. The Partnership is delivered by an academic consortium led by the Australian Centre for Gender Equality and Inclusion @ Work at the University of Sydney, in collaboration with University of Melbourne, and the Centre for Indigenous People and Work at the University of Technology Sydney.

The Working for Women Research Partnership is led by Consortia Leads **Professor Rae Cooper AO, Professor Elizabeth Hill, Associate Professor Brendan Churchill** and **Professor Nareen Young,** in partnership with:

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This report was prepared through collaboration between 89 Degrees East and the academic consortia leads of the Working for Women Research Partnership.

Not all flexibility is created equal

Across the Australian labour market, flexibility has become a common feature of work, but its impact varies significantly in practice.

In some environments, workers have genuine choice and organisational backing, creating conditions often associated with positive, mutually beneficial or worker-centred flexibility. In others, flexibility is only partial, symbolic, or shaped in ways that primarily serve organisational needs.

The quality of flexible work, including who controls it, how safe it feels to use, and whether it supports or constrains career development, is unevenly distributed across the workforce.

As a result, different forms of flexibility can either advance or undermine gender equality.

Bad Flex		Good Flex [4]
Employer-controlled arrangements with limited worker choice over hours and scheduling, constraining capacity to meet care, cultural and community needs and reinforcing insecurity and pressure.	**What is it?**	Mutually beneficial arrangements that provide real choice and control over work hours, patterns and location, enabling people to meet paid work alongside care, cultural and community needs without compromising job quality, security or progression.
Employer-oriented	**Who benefits?**	Mutual benefit to workers and employers
Employers have control and choice	**Who chooses?**	Workers have control and choice
Lower job quality	**What is the link to job quality?***	Higher job quality
Insecure and uncertain	**Is it secure?**	Secure and stable
Limits or lacks clear progression pathways	**Is there a link to career progression?**	Supports career progression
Underutilised or below qualification level	**How are skills and qualifications used?**	Well utilised and aligned with qualifications
Lower and/or unstable pay	**How does this relate to wages?**	Stable, professional wages
Unpredictable arrangements that make care difficult	**What is the impact on care?**	Predictable arrangements that support care
Drives workforce turnover and exit at key life points	**How does it impact retention & turnover?**	Supports retention at key life points
Lower labour costs through reduced pay or conditions	**What's in it for employers?**	Productivity gains from retaining and effectively utilising skilled workers
Reinforces structural and gendered inequalities	**Overall impact**	**Delivers mutual benefit and sustainable flexibility**

*Quality jobs are characterised by security, fair wages, safe working conditions, and equitable access to opportunities, benefits and worker protections.

Embracing the language of 'good flex' and 'bad flex'

Certain terms have become deeply embedded in the language of flexible work.

Terms such as 'work from home', 'hybrid work' and the ever-elusive 'work-life balance' have become increasingly central to how we talk about work—but they don't describe the array of flexible working practices or make the complexity of flexible work visible.

Adopting the distinction between 'good flex'—flexibility that genuinely supports workers—and 'bad flex'—flexibility that can put workers at risk and compound existing inequalities - can help to shift the conversation. Not all flexibility is created equal, and recognising this is critical to understanding why increased flexibility does not automatically lead to better outcomes.

This framing provides a more precise way to assess flexible work and support practical action. It enables workers, employers, unions, industry leaders and policymakers to identify what works, what harms, and what needs to change, and to design and advocate for more equitable access to higher-quality flexibility that delivers real benefits.

Employers

Well-designed flexibility benefits employers too. When people have real choice, predictability and security, they are more likely to stay, use their skills, and build their careers over time.

This means fewer unplanned absences, higher productivity, lower turnover and a more stable workforce. By contrast, low-quality, employer-controlled flexibility might reduce labour costs in the short term, but it drives people out, wastes skills and limits performance.

Good flex is culturally informed

Bad flex can reinforce discrimination (e.g. racism) when policies are culturally uninformed, while good flex responds to cultural nuances in needs and responsibilities e.g. Indigenous ways of caring.

WOMEN

Women—especially those in feminised sectors such as health, education, retail and care—are more likely to experience bad flex, where flexibility is limited to adjusting hours within tightly controlled, on-site roles. This often comes through part-time, casual or reduced hours work, with less autonomy, security and opportunity. This is most pronounced for women with lower labour market power, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, migrant women and women with disability who face compounding structural barriers that limit access to high-quality, supportive flexibility.

GENDER-DIVERSE PEOPLE

Gender-diverse workers are more likely to experience lower-quality or constrained forms of flexibility, with less autonomy over when and where they work and fewer opportunities to shape their working arrangements. Gender-diverse workers are more likely to encounter shared or employer-controlled arrangements, where flexibility exists in principle but is limited in practice. This places them at greater risk of bad flex, where reduced control and weaker workplace support can undermine security, wellbeing and inclusion.

MEN

While many men are more likely to have access to high-quality flexibility embedded in secure, full-time roles (particularly in professional and higher-autonomy industries), some men—especially those in frontline, manual or tightly structured roles—also experience constrained or low-quality flexibility.

Context: A deeply gendered labour market

The lack of 'good flexible work' is one of the key foundations of Australia's deeply gendered labour market.[5] Access to and uptake of flexible work is widely recognised as critical to improving workforce participation and addressing gender inequality, enabling more equitable access to opportunities while addressing barriers that limit women's safety and security, freedom, and opportunity to thrive.

Over the past two decades, debates about flexible work have matured and opened new frontiers in flexible working practices, leading to a more nuanced and sophisticated policy conversation.

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a significant turning point,[6] accelerating the adoption of some forms of flexible work—spurred by necessity—and demonstrating what is possible at scale, while also highlighting the benefits and limitations of flexible work models, including the heightened risks and visibility of precarious work. As well as forcing governments and employers to rethink what might be possible, and to develop tools, policies and infrastructures to enable different working arrangements, the pandemic also gave employees the chance to demonstrate they could work productively beyond standard 9–5 site-based arrangements.[7]

A sharp increase in awareness of, and demand for, flexible working arrangements has changed workplace norms irrevocably - though frontline workers, particularly those concentrated in feminised sectors, continue to have the least access.

Given its significance for workers, flexibility has become a contested terrain at the national policy level, while also driving reforms to broaden access, including changes in national industrial relations legislation.[8]

These shifts are unfolding amid mounting economic pressures. Rising cost of living, housing affordability challenges and increasing financial insecurity are placing greater strain on households, amplifying the consequences of unequal access to secure, high-quality work.

The result is a widening wealth gap: those with access to good flex are better able to maintain income, build savings and accumulate wealth, while those in bad flex are pushed into more precarious work that limits financial security over time.

At the same time, Australia's labour market remains highly gendered, with particularly acute consequences for women and gender-diverse people with lower labour market power, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid care, are more likely to work part-time or in casual roles, and are concentrated in lower-paid, feminised industries where flexibility is often tied to reduced hours, casual work and tightly controlled shifts.

Many Australian women are employed in jobs that do not match their skills and experience,[9] limiting their access to career progression and training, and locking them into low-paying, poor-quality employment that yields lower retirement savings.[10] These patterns contribute to persistent gender gaps in pay, job quality and economic security.

Introduction

Flexible work is often thought of as a 'nice-to-have' arrangement that gives workers more 'choice' and improves their work-life balance. Flexible work is also commonly conflated with one type of flexibility —'working from home'—which is regularly framed as workers having the freedom to fit work around life rather than life around work.

But this isn't the full story. Depending on how it is designed and supported, flexible work can deliver benefits or cause harm. It can expand or limit freedom, strengthen or undermine security, and create or restrict opportunities for people to thrive at work.

Crucially, how we design and support flexible work can advance gender equality, or it can further entrench inequality.

In Australia, this is already playing out. While access to flexible work is widespread, this access is uneven. More importantly, the quality and impacts of this flexibility are unevenly distributed. Research from the first year of the Working for Women Research Partnership shows that flexible work is becoming a new axis along which advantage and disadvantage are organised.

When flexible work is poorly designed, unevenly available, culturally uninformed, and impacts are disproportionately borne by women, it exacerbates gender inequality. These inequalities can intensify when gender intersects with other identities, including Indigeneity, race, disability and sexuality.

This is not accidental. It reflects the way work has been designed—shaped by outdated assumptions about what men and women are capable of and rigid ideas about who does paid work and who provides unpaid care.

These conditions are not fixed—they are reinforced and reproduced through decisions made by policy-makers, industry leaders and employers about how jobs are structured, how flexibility is designed, and whose needs are prioritised.

On average, men have greater access to high-autonomy, well-supported flexibility, embedded in secure, full-time roles—such as hybrid or remote work. This may seem counterintuitive and highlights a disconnect between how flexible work is framed—as a support for women—and how flexibility is distributed in practice.

Meanwhile, women, gender-diverse people and others with lower labour market power are more likely to be channelled into lower-quality flexibility, often tied to reduced hours, insecure work or tightly controlled schedules. This limits access to the benefits of flexibility and reinforces existing inequalities.

This has negative repercussions for employers, industries and the broader economy. Bad flex constrains workforce participation, meaning capable people with critical skills and experience are underutilised. This reduces overall workforce capacity and quality, while increasing inefficiencies and costs as employers have to fill gaps. It also exacerbates skills shortages in essential sectors such as healthcare and education,[11] where women make up a large share of the workforce.

At a national level, this undermines productivity and growth, and limits Australia's ability to fully leverage its available talent.

Research from the first year of the Working for Women Research Partnership shows that flexible work is becoming a new axis along which advantage and disadvantage are organised.

Flexible work: *Two possible futures*

As flexible work becomes increasingly central to how we organise our working lives, it is critical to address uneven access to the benefits that good flex can deliver.

Our current models of flexible work are not fit for purpose. In particular, they are not meeting the needs of women, gender-diverse people and women who experience intersecting inequalities, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women of migrant background and women living with disability. Men also experience inconsistent access to flexibility depending on their role and industry, meaning some men are unable to access the flexibility they want or need. This reinforces rigid gender roles that constrain men and women and limits a more equal redistribution of unpaid care.

Without action, this divide will widen—reinforcing and worsening existing inequalities, compromising wellbeing, restricting participation, and limiting productivity across the workforce.

This is a critical moment. There is urgent work for employers, unions, industry leaders and governments to do to improve access to good flex and help protect all workers from the risks of bad flex. If we do not get this right, the consequences will be felt by individuals, families, workplaces, communities and the economy. This research reveals what is at risk when we get flexible work wrong and how people of all genders benefit when we get it right.

People with less labour market power pay the price

Women and gender-diverse people—particularly those with less labour market power—face greater barriers to accessing good flex, are more exposed to bad flex, and experience disproportionate negative impacts as a result.

Bad flex persists when organisational needs are prioritised over people

Lower-quality arrangements that undermine workers' autonomy, security and opportunities can be lucrative in the short-term, even as they weaken retention, productivity and long-term economic growth. However, equitable access to good flex ensures flexibility delivers for people ***and*** organisations.

If we get flexible work *wrong*...

Uneven access to good flex persists, restricting freedom, security and opportunities for workers and employers, the risks of which are disproportionately borne by women—particularly those with less labour market power, reinforcing gender inequality.

Less freedom

If we get flexible work wrong, workers' choices and career pathways are constrained. They have less autonomy and are forced to make tradeoffs, reinforcing rigid gender roles and unequal care burdens. Access to genuine choice is unevenly distributed across key industries and workplace types, especially feminised sectors.

This constrains employers' access to the talent they need, narrowing hiring options and limiting their ability to fully utilise workforce skills and experience.

Less security

If we get flexible work wrong, it compounds existing pressures and leaves workers—particularly women and those with less labour market power—more exposed to insecurity. It pushes people into lower pay, reduced hours and insecure contracts, undermining long-term financial and retirement security and contributing to increased stress, fatigue and illness.

Employers face a more unstable workforce, with higher turnover, more frequent unplanned absences and rising recruitment and training costs, disrupting operations and driving economic instability.

Less opportunity

If we get flexible work wrong, people are prevented from reaching their full potential. Skills and capability are underutilised, with many workers stuck in roles below their qualifications and working fewer hours than they would prefer. Opportunities for progression are limited, careers stall, and skills atrophy.

Employers face a reduced pool of skilled labour as people scale back or exit due to a lack of quality flexibility. This lowers productivity and limits growth for organisations and the broader economy.

If we get flexible work *right*...

The benefits of good flex are more evenly distributed, delivering greater freedom, security and opportunity for workers and employers and supporting the advancement of gender equality.

More freedom

If we get flexible work right, workers have more control and genuine choice over where, when and how work is done. Good flex supports disruption of gendered expectations, giving people more freedom to pursue their goals, and improves job quality in essential sectors and across workplace types.

This gives employers greater choice by expanding and diversifying labour supply, enabling better use of skills and qualifications, and filling skills gaps.

More security

If we get flexible work right, workers have greater access to stable, secure employment and more predictable income, strengthening long-term financial security—especially important for women—and supporting better health and wellbeing.

For employers, this contributes to higher retention and workforce stability, reducing the costs and risks associated with unplanned absences and high turnover, delivering broader economic benefits.

More opportunity

If we get flexible work right, all workers have the opportunity to thrive in rewarding jobs that match their skills, experience and training. They have more opportunities for career progression and development, and are supported to participate in the workforce across different life stages.

For employers, this means a stronger and more sustainable workforce of people performing at their best, across their lives. This helps to address skills shortages in critical industries, increases productivity, drives innovation and performance, and contributes to more inclusive economic growth.

How do we get it right?

Research from the Working for Women Research Partnership demonstrates that the way flexible work is designed and the extent to which it is supported by employers determines whether flexibility expands worker choice, security and opportunity, or entrenches inequality.

How flexible work is designed and implemented also has significant implications for labour supply, workforce sustainability, economic productivity and growth. The expansion of good flexible work arrangements across all sectors and occupations will deliver a triple-win for governments, employers and workers.

Getting flexible work right is a shared responsibility.

Who has a role to play?

- Policy makers
- Industry leaders
- Unions
- Employers
- Supervisors
- Workers

Methodology

In its first year, the Working for Women Research Partnership published two Working Papers exploring women's working arrangements and workplace experiences, with a focus on flexible work. This report draws on findings described in the Working Papers:

Thematic Working Paper No. 1:

How flexible working arrangements shape workplace experience across genders in Australia (December 2025)

6000+ Australian employees, self-employed and unemployed people aged 18-70

Thematic Working Paper No. 1 examines how access to flexible work is experienced across the gendered labour market. It draws on data from the nationally representative Australian Workplace Gender Equality Survey (AWGES), which captures the experiences of more than 6,000 Australian employees, self-employed and unemployed people aged 18-70.

This nationally representative survey includes booster samples of groups often under-represented in labour market data, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, LGBTQI+ people, migrants and people who speak languages other than English, enabling researchers to take an intersectional approach to understanding flexibility.

Quantitative data comes from the Australian Workplace Gender Equality Survey

All figures in this report are drawn from the 2025 Australian Workplace Gender Equality Survey (AWGES), a nationally representative survey which captures the experiences of more than 6,000 Australian employees, self-employed and unemployed people aged 18–70.

Cohort Working Paper No. 1:

The 'Midlife Collision': Insights into the working lives of mid-years women (February 2026)

397 Australian 'mid-years' women, aged between 40-55 years

Cohort Working Paper No 1. draws on extensive qualitative data collected from almost 400 Australian 'mid-years' women, aged between 40-55 years (n=397). It highlights the current dynamics of the midlife collision, its impact on diverse groups of women, and how access to different types of flexible work across different industries and occupations shapes the mid-years work–life experience.

Data was collected between September and November 2025 utilising a combination of online focus groups, online discussion boards, and yarning circles. Yarning circles, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants, were designed, managed, facilitated and analysed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers from the UTS Centre for Indigenous People and Work.

The Cohort Working Paper explicitly captures a diversity of experiences from mid-years women living in metropolitan, rural and regional Australia; women working across frontline, onsite, hybrid and fully remote settings; and women with a wide range of caring responsibilities, roles and levels of seniority. Women from diverse backgrounds took part in the research, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, refugee and migrant women, LGBTQI+ people, women living with disabilities and chronic illness, and women with varied family structures. This ensured the specific experiences and voices of women from communities often overlooked in research on work and economic security were included.

Intersectional experiences

Women and gender-diverse people with low labour market power face the greatest barriers to good flexibility, but these impacts are not uniform.

An intersectional lens shows that experiences of work are shaped by overlapping inequalities—such as gender, race, disability and other factors—which can compound disadvantage.[12] Those in insecure or low-paid work, with caring responsibilities, health needs or experiences of discrimination are more likely to encounter forms of flexibility that reduce control and security.

As a result, flexibility can either help reduce inequality or reinforce it, depending on how it is designed. Throughout this report, we shine a 'spotlight' on groups who are disproportionately and uniquely impacted, to show who is being left out, and how good flex delivers for those who are most often denied autonomy, security and opportunities to thrive.

What kinds of *flexible work* are there?

Flexible work is typically designed as a variation in *where* and *when* people work.

***Temporal* flexibility** refers to arrangements that change **when** and **how many hours** people work, such as variable start and finish times, compressed weeks, shift swaps, job sharing, school-hours schedules and reduced hours.

***Spatial* flexibility** refers to **where** work takes place, capturing whether jobs are performed fully on-site or remotely* (such as from home), in hybrid patterns that combine home and workplace days, or in remote-first arrangements.

*In this report, 'remote work' refers to home-based remote work as opposed to work (such as 'fly-in-fly-out' arrangements in the mining industry) carried out in locations remote from urban areas and employees' homes.

Together, these dimensions shape and reflect job quality, autonomy, workforce participation and career progression in highly gendered ways.

Flexible work arrangements are widespread but unevenly distributed. Women and gender-diverse workers are clustered in forms of flexibility that help them 'make do' within constrained jobs and rigid service systems, while men more often access flexibility associated with higher-autonomy roles and structured hybrid models.

Despite the expansion of hybrid and remote work, most workers still work fully on-site, with women slightly more likely than men to do so. Women are concentrated in on-site work in industries such as healthcare and retail, while men are more represented in on-site work in the construction industry.

By contrast, remote work is most common in office-based industries such as information media and professional services. Autonomy over the location of work is a marker of high-quality flexibility, yet only a third of workers have full control over where they work.

Most describe shared decision-making with their employers about work location, while some report that their employers determine where they work.

Meanwhile, women use almost every form of temporal flexibility at higher rates than men, including changing start and finish times, swapping shifts and reducing hours.

However, greater use of flexibility arrangements does not necessarily translate into greater autonomy (good flex). In fact, it reflects increased pressure on women to adapt their work around employers' needs (bad flex) in response to gendered expectations, with implications for their wellbeing, security and access to opportunities.

Women and gender-diverse people with less labour market power are more particularly likely to rely on forms of flexibility that reflect the characteristics of bad flex.

60% of women can change their start or finish times ***vs 50% of men***

51% of women can swap their shifts ***vs 40% of men***

36% of women can reduce their hours temporarily ***vs 26% of men***

22% of women can work only during school hours ***vs 18% of men***

For employees who cannot work remotely, the main barrier is the design of the job itself. Workers with less access to spatial flexibility are concentrated in lower-paid, frontline roles where they have limited ability to negotiate hours or location of work, even when demand for flexibility is high (characteristic of bad flex).

26% of women work in hybrid roles ***vs 32% of men***

12% of women work in remote-first and fully remote jobs ***vs 10% of men***

45% of women want to apply for a remote job in future, ***vs 29% of men***

76% of women say their work cannot be done from home ***vs 73% of men***

Good flex can be designed into all roles and industries, including for frontline workers working primarily on-site. This includes influence over rostering, some capacity for off-site administrative work, and more flexible shift design aligned with workers' needs and preferences.

Flexibility *environments*

Flexibility is not a single arrangement; it is an environment shaped by both the degree of autonomy workers have over when, where and how they work, and the level of workplace support that legitimises and encourages the use of flexible working options.

Treating flexibility as an environment, rather than a policy, helps reveal why some workers benefit while others, especially women, continue to face work–life conflict and poorer job quality despite having formal entitlements.

Flexibility environments reflect whether workers experience real choice and organisational backing, distinguishing between conditions that align with good flex and those that resemble bad flex.

This research identifies four distinct flexibility environments – high-quality, conditional, constrained and low-quality.

These are shaped by the combination of **autonomy**—the degree of control employees have over how, when and where they work - and **workplace support**—the extent to which flexible working is encouraged, accepted and viewed as legitimate by managers and colleagues.

High

AUTONOMY

Conditional

High autonomy but low support

Employees may control schedules, but weak workplace support means flexibility feels risky and may carry career penalties.

High quality

High autonomy and high support

Employees have meaningful control over their work and flexibility is normalised and supported.

Low quality

Low autonomy and low support

Employees lack both control and support; flexibility is discouraged, inaccessible or associated with negative career consequences.

Constrained

Low autonomy but high support

Workplaces are supportive, but the nature and design of jobs limits employees' ability to adjust hours or tasks in practice.

Low — SUPPORT — High

Workers are spread across flexibility environments

Around three in ten workers are in high-quality environments, but a similar share work in low-quality environments. Women and non-binary workers are more likely to be in environments where flexibility is constrained or of lower quality, creating and compounding precarity.

High-quality flexibility supports health and balance

Workers in high-quality environments report the strongest self-rated health and the lowest work–life conflict. However, as autonomy erodes, work-life conflict rises—especially for women. Compared to men in low-quality environments, women report higher fatigue, frequent worry about work outside of work hours, and difficulties finding time for family.

Highest work-life conflict levels, with greatest gender gap, in lower-quality flexibility environments

Too tired after work to do household tasks

Women	41%	32%	Men

Frequently worry about work outside of work hours

Women	29%	24%	Men

% in low-quality flexibility environments

Managers make a difference

Managers are a critical part of the ecosystem, facilitating or limiting access to flexibility. This drives inconsistent implementation and outcomes across teams and organisations.

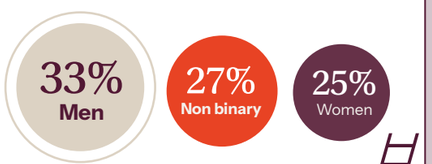
> **When my manager gives me flexibility, it makes me feel valued and that they care about my wellbeing. It also helps build trust and a good relationship, which makes me feel more comfortable and motivated at work."**

— Shirin, part-time, onsite retail worker, mid-years woman

A gap in support

There is a gap in what employers say they offer and what people feel is available. While most employees report strong supervisor support for flexible work, women workers are less likely to say their organisation actively encourages flexibility.

Men are more concerned that using flexibility will negatively impact their career progression.



% workers worried that using flexibility will harm their career

> **It would be nice even if we could have maybe one admin day a month [working from home] but they've just put a blanket ban on it."**

— Jodie, regional onsite worker, social worker, mid-years woman

Men's access to flexible work

Men are more likely to work in full-time, permanent jobs with greater control over tasks and greater influence in workplace decision-making. They are more likely to work full-time (78% vs 54% of women) and are overrepresented in high-quality flexibility environments.

Men are more likely to prefer working in the workplace (17% vs 11% of women), suggesting different comfort levels with remote work. At the same time, men are more likely than women to decide where they work, and to access flexibility in higher-autonomy roles and industries where hybrid and remote work are more feasible.

While women are pulled towards short hours, men are pushed towards long hours and overwork, with 44% of men working more hours than they would prefer to (compared to 32% of women). Men are also slightly more likely to say they work more hours when they work remotely (58% vs 56% of women), but many feel they are more productive when working remotely, albeit at a lower rate than women (62% vs 70% of women).

While most employees report their employer is not pushing them to return to the office, where this is happening men are more likely to face explicit full-return requirements or multi-day attendance expectations—particularly in construction, mining and hybrid white-collar industries.

However, men's access to flexibility is not universal. Some men are missing out on the benefits good flex delivers. In fact, men report varied access to flexible work, depending on employment status, industry and workplace composition. Men are also making use of flexible work arrangements at consistently lower rates than women, in line with their comparatively lower expectations to adjust their work to accommodate care and domestic duties.

Men working in female-dominated workplaces report the lowest levels of flexibility, highlighting broader barriers in feminised, on-site industries. They are also more likely to worry that working flexibly will harm their career progression (33% compared to 25% of women), reflecting gendered expectations about who provides care and who is seen as 'needing' flexibility.

SPOTLIGHT

Mid-years *women*

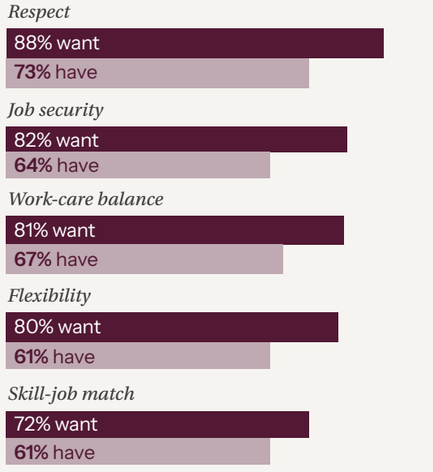
Each year the Working for Women Research Partnership focuses on a specific population cohort. In 2025, the priority cohort is women aged 40–55 years who are referred to as 'mid-years' women.

The mid-years stress test shows current models of work fail

Interviews with close to 400 Australian mid-years women revealed a 'midlife collision' between work commitment, capability and aspirations; the organisation and design of jobs; disproportionate responsibility for family care; and personal health and wellbeing.[13]

This collision is not inevitable; it can be avoided. It is produced by the way work and society is organised and is most acute for women who are on the margins of the labour force – especially those who are in insecure work, those with intense caring responsibilities, are managing personal health needs and/or experience racism in the workplace and beyond.

What women in the mid-years want/ have now from work (%)



Paid work provides identity, purpose and a chance to contribute

Women in the mid-years are highly skilled, strongly attached to paid work and often at the peak of their expertise. They are one of the fastest-growing cohorts of workers in Australia.[14] Work is central to identity, providing purpose, social connection and economic security. For many, however, work becomes more difficult in the mid-years as family, health and care demands intensify while systems of work remain largely unchanged. Rigid job design, insecure employment and uneven or no access to good flexible work arrangements force many to moderate their work, cutting back hours, moving into lower-responsibility roles or pausing career progression to keep work and life manageable.

Flexible work can be a 'game changer'

Flexible work, designed and implemented well, can make a difference. Good flex can support mid-years women to not only survive but thrive in their chosen occupation and career without compromising other essential parts of life or economic security. However, experiences differ substantially between women employed in onsite frontline jobs, like nurses, teachers and retail workers, and those in white-collar office-type occupations where working from home is more easily arranged. While award and enterprise agreement provisions, employment contracts and workplace policies set the nominal rules around flexibility, mid-career women report that trust and respect, especially from their direct manager, determine how it operates in practice. For many mid-years women, flexible working is now crucial to managing their multiple needs and responsibilities but comes with sacrifices, particularly in relation to career progression, finances and savings.

> **I feel like at 51, I'm still young enough to put my foot down and try to accelerate my career. I think, okay, I've got a good 10 years left to get to where I might've been … I just feel like, 'Okay, my kids are out of my hair now and it's all about me now'… I love the job and it's very interesting, but I feel like I'm capable of so much more. I feel that I'm too intelligent to be in the role I'm in, that I could be in a higher paying role, higher status role. It's just how do you get out of it?"**
>
> — Paula, full-time hybrid worker, mother of adult children

Ways in which women adapt to competing pressures are frequently misread as 'choice'

Caught between the competing demands of work and care, time pressure for women peaks in the mid-years. Increased responsibility at work often sits alongside the intensification of family care responsibilities: for school-aged and adult children, for ageing parents and extended family and community, leaving mid-years women caught between younger and older generations—a 'sandwich generation' putting everyone's wellbeing and happiness before their own.

While flexible work is frequently framed as giving workers 'choice', mid-years women spoke about having 'no' or 'little' choice and 'making do' in the context of these competing demands, providing examples of difficult trade-offs they felt forced to make. Mid-years women also reflected on the cumulative negative impact that moving to part-time work or a job below their skill level can have on their economic and retirement security, wellbeing and life satisfaction.

Mid-years women's experiences of flexible work

Mid-years women are making use of a range of temporal and spatial forms of flexibility. Most prefer remote or hybrid arrangements, though many are still required to be onsite most or all of the time. Women reported being more productive when they could match tasks to their working environment, for example, working at home for focus tasks and onsite for collaboration or when specialised equipment was required. Time saved on grooming, commuting and unproductive 'chat' were other benefits. Most reacted negatively to the idea of a full-time return to the office, noting negative impacts on mental and physical health and their ability to manage family life.

While flexible work helps women meet the complex demands of their lives, some worry that 'blurred boundaries' increase expectations to 'do it all' with little support. Some women are working outside standard hours, and some feel pressure to prove they are working hard when not physically present, describing a sense of surveillance from managers or colleagues.

Manager lottery leads to variation even within organisations and across teams

Managers were widely seen by mid-years women as both gatekeepers of flexible work and influential role models.

Many pointed to a 'manager lottery', where access to flexibility depends on individual managers, resulting in inconsistent implementation and uneven outcomes across teams and organisations.

> **I'm happy to log on for late calls at night if I can take some time during the day running my daughter to dance and back or a school presentation or something. It's give and take."**
>
> — Valerie, sales support, full-time hybrid worker

Trust and Respect

Mid-years women value and expect high levels of workplace trust and respect. They consistently report that they are productive, skilled workers who should be recognised for their contributions and valued as whole people with commitments beyond work, including care, health and wellbeing. Mid-years women value and expect trust from their managers and view flexible arrangements as a signal of trust and respect.

SPOTLIGHT

Aboriginal *and* Torres Strait Islander women

> **"As an Aboriginal woman, I don't feel safe in this country. You carry that before you even get into the office."***

The findings summarised in this section are drawn from analysis of the Australian Workplace Gender Equality Survey 2025 and yarning circles with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. The yarning circles were designed, managed, facilitated and analysed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers from the Centre for Indigenous People and Work, a joint initiative between the UTS Jumbunna Institute and the UTS Business School.

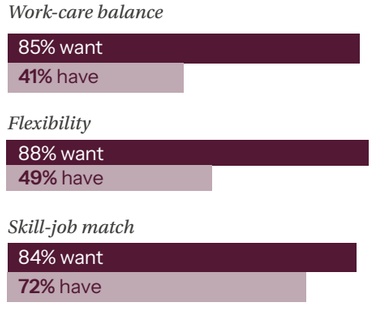
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's experiences of flexibility

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, flexibility is still tied to lower pay, weaker security and fewer opportunities for progression and influence.

This cohort frequently rely on temporal flexibility, often by reducing hours or moving to casual work, and encounter workplaces that are less supportive of these arrangements, increasing the risk that flexibility comes at the cost of security and progression. Meanwhile their access to remote roles is much lower, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women more likely to report managerial barriers to working from home.

This cohort is also overrepresented in lower-quality flexibility environments with limited control and workplace support, resulting in lower self-rated health and higher rates of fatigue.

What Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (40-55years) want/have now (%)



The importance of flexibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the mid-years[15]

Flexible working is particularly critical for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women due to their cultural and extended family-based caring responsibilities, which are often not recognised by workplace policies. The strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is demonstrated through their care work for extended family and community, country and culture as well as immediate family.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the mid-years reported limited possibilities for career progression noting that advancement—particularly into leadership roles—was contingent on access to flexibility that responds directly to Indigenous ways of caring. This cohort also reported the largest gaps between what they want from work and what they have now in the areas of work–care balance; a job that matches their skills, qualifications and experience; and flexibility.

While there was clear synergy with findings from the main sample of non-Indigenous mid-years women, in yarning circles, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's accounts consistently foregrounded racism as a core factor shaping their experiences of flexibility at work.

> **Flexibility is great as a policy, but in practice it is boss-based."**

> **Last year [my organisation] introduced cultural leave, 3 days of leave...This year I went to use 2 days and the amount of explanation that I had to give...they wanted me to sign a stat dec ...I don't feel particularly culturally safe discussing these types of things."**

*Given the small and familiar nature of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, quotes have been kept anonymous.

> **Trust is pretty few and far between generally in workplaces... but for Blak women, I feel like there's a double jeopardy."**

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, caring often involves supporting themselves and their families when being targeted in the workplace with racism. This takes a heavy toll on the psychosocial safety and wellbeing of Indigenous women and their families.

Racism at work

In yarning circles, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women said workplace flexibility was most often experienced through the lens of workplace racism, impacting their ability to access flexible leave provisions (e.g. cultural leave) and flexibility in where, when and how they worked. This adversely affected their career development and progression.

There are four ways workplace racism expressed itself in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's experiences of flexibility:

Non-Indigenous people's ignorance of Indigenous ways of caring.

Ignorance about Indigenous ways of caring is a key friction point for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women trying to access flexibility. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women take on an enormity of roles within their families and communities, but non-Indigenous managers and team members are often ignorant of or resistant to responding appropriately to Indigenous ways of caring. This puts additional pressure on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to choose between their family and community needs and their job.

The prevalence of 'boss-based' flexibility.

A major friction point for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women accessing flexibility was 'boss-based flexibility' which depends on the discretion of individual managers, whose decision-making is often influenced by racist biases, fear of presenteeism, and ignorance of Indigenous ways of caring.

For flexibility to be genuinely accessible, policies need to provide standardisation across workplaces that is unable to be interpreted differently by managers.

Deep-seated managerial distrust and hyper-surveillance.

While flexible work policies exist, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women find them difficult to use due to excessive scrutiny and suspicion of them as Blak women from management and colleagues. Some women were avoiding using flexibility entitlements or asking for time off for fear of being perceived as 'slack', while others are 'hyper-surveilled' and subject to excessive scrutiny, often through excessive documentation requirements, when they did access flexibility.

These factors compound to limit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's career progression.

The pervasiveness of boss-based flexibility, distrust and excessive scrutiny, and the assumption that all senior roles require physical presence five days a week, are blocking Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's career development. This is compounded when flexibility, for this cohort, is often granted as a debt to be repaid, eating into valuable professional development time. Long term career-planning is further inhibited when job insecurity prevents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women from pushing for flexible arrangements out of fear of losing their jobs entirely.

Compounding barriers

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women also highlighted a lack of early access to superannuation as a major barrier to their economic security, noting the lower life expectancy of Indigenous peoples.

SPOTLIGHT

Single women and single mothers

For single women, work not only delivers economic security, but can facilitate social connection and provides a sense of purpose and belonging. This is particularly important for women who are more socially isolated.

Single mothers, however, face added challenges in managing their work life, care responsibilities and personal needs. Often, single mothers are in less secure employment and are more financially vulnerable as they are unable to work in full-time roles.

Flexible work and supportive workplaces can be the deciding factor in whether they can stay connected to the workforce or withdraw altogether.

Taking up remote, part-time or casual work to manage competing demands often involved trade-offs in terms of pay, progression and identity.

> **I quit my job because my husband died and they wanted me back in the office 3 days a week. And I'm like 'I'm a new single parent, I don't even know what that looks like yet.' That's the whole reason I became self-employed. My kids don't deal with school very well, so there's lots of anxiety from them...I need complete flexibility."**

— Megan, self employed, single mother, mid-years woman

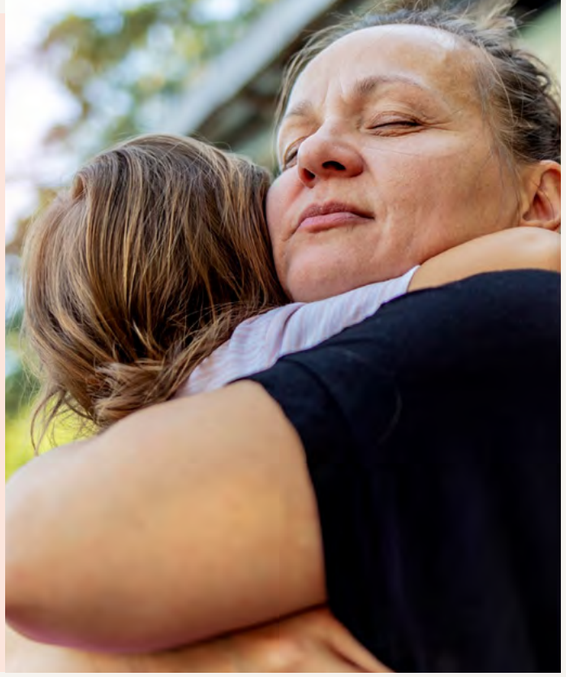
SPOTLIGHT

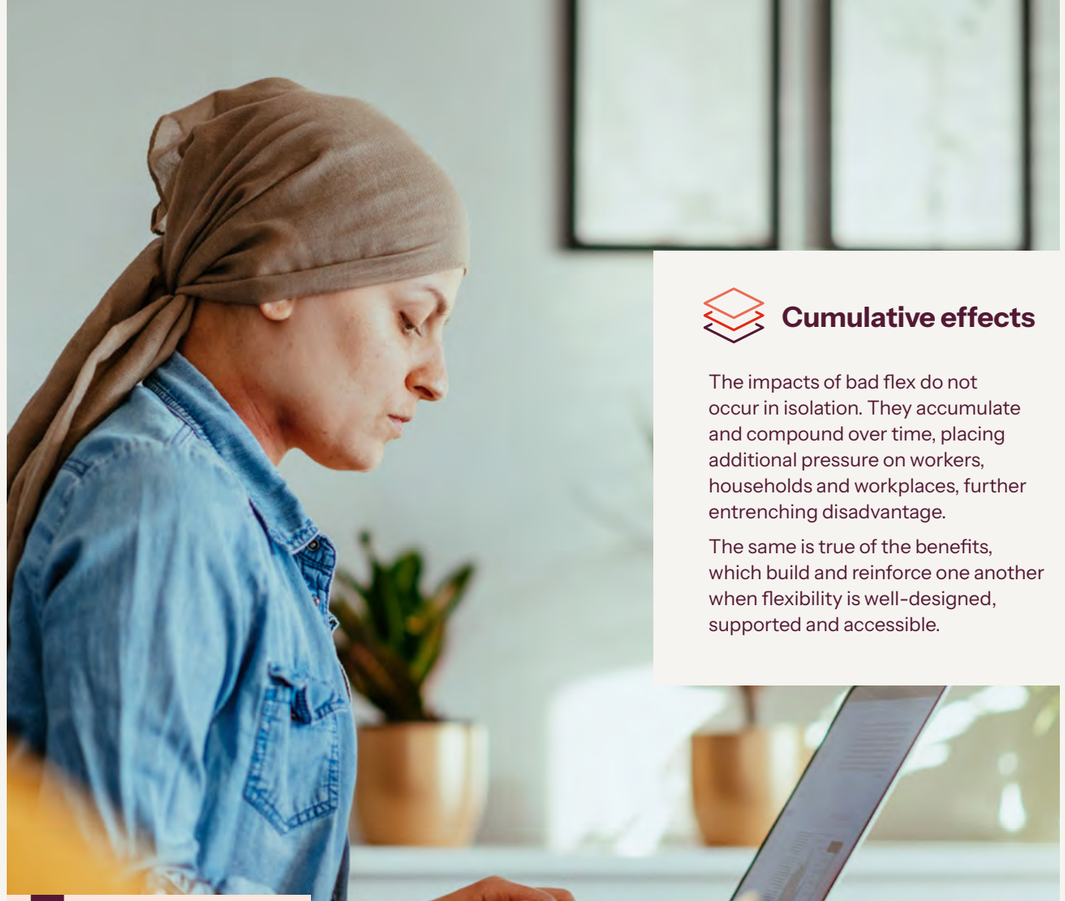
Working parents

Working parents of all genders rely on a range of temporal flexibility arrangements to manage care responsibilities.

However, they report less autonomy over work location and are more likely than those without children to work fully on-site.

Despite their need for flexibility, working parents report lower perceived productivity when working flexibly, and have less confidence in organisational support for flexible work.





Cumulative effects

The impacts of bad flex do not occur in isolation. They accumulate and compound over time, placing additional pressure on workers, households and workplaces, further entrenching disadvantage.

The same is true of the benefits, which build and reinforce one another when flexibility is well-designed, supported and accessible.

SPOTLIGHT

Women living with disability or chronic illness

Women with disability or chronic illness, especially during the mid-years, often struggle to stay in full-time work due to overlapping health, care, and job demands.

They face greater financial vulnerability and are more likely to rely on flexible or insecure work arrangements like reduced hours or remote work.

Although they strongly value flexibility and feel productive using it, they often lack organisational support and autonomy, leaving them to negotiate arrangements themselves—sometimes at the expense of job security and career progression.

Securing good flex, such as adjusting hours, location, and tasks helps these women remain productive, protect their wellbeing, and maintain economic security.

> **I'd be on a disability support pension if I couldn't work from home because I just can't go into a workplace and stay there all day and work."**

— Narelle, living with cancer, fully remote worker, mid-years woman

Good flex supports *genuine choice*

Autonomy and control

While flexible work arrangements are often framed as 'choice', the extent to which workers are genuinely in the driver's seat depends on how this flexibility is designed and supported by both managers and the broader workplace culture. Women are less likely than men to report having the flexibility they want and need and are less likely to feel able to shape workplace decisions or decide how their work is carried out - limiting their ability to adapt work around competing life pressures.

These constraints are more pronounced for women facing intersecting forms of disadvantage, which reinforces patterns of marginalisation. Improving access to good flex is critical to ensuring that flexibility delivers genuine choice—not an 'illusion' of choice that forces women to make difficult trade-offs.

Employer *impact*

Increasing workers' freedom through greater access to high-quality flexibility helps to unpick a gender-segmented labour market, enabling women and men to work in roles that match their skills while managing paid work with care.

This strengthens the national labour supply, helps to address skills shortages, and broadens the pool of qualified and experienced workers that employers can choose from.

Freedom from gendered expectations and pressures

Gendered expectations about work and care continue to shape access to 'choice'. Women are still expected to take primary responsibility for unpaid care, while men are often seen as the default 'providers'.

These patterns continue to influence career pathways, opportunities and flexible work. Bad flex intensifies these pressures, pushing women to make sacrifices, channelling them into lower-quality work; disrupting careers and driving gender gaps in pay and progression. Meanwhile, men are more likely to remain in full-time, continuous career pathways reinforcing unequal work and care loads.

Good flex supports people of all genders to adapt work without sacrificing job quality, progression or security. It supports a more equal redistribution of unpaid care, giving men more freedom to take on greater caring roles without career penalty and reducing the expectation that women will absorb these responsibilities. Redesigning the systems, policies and supports that govern work, care and resourcing is crucial to ensuring all people have meaningful choices and the ability to participate fully in economic and community life.

Bad flex limits choice and control

If we get flexible work wrong, workers' choices and career pathways are constrained. They have less autonomy and are forced to make tradeoffs, reinforcing rigid gender roles and unequal care burdens, disproportionately impacting women and people working in frontline, feminised sectors.

It is often women—not workplaces—who are expected to adapt, pushing them to reduce hours, move into lower-responsibility roles or step away from the workforce for a while.

Genuine choice across industries and workplace types

The freedom workers have to shape how, when and where work is done varies considerably by occupation, industry and workplace type. Employer-determined arrangements (often indicative of low-quality flexibility) remain common in workplaces such as health, education, retail and other frontline industries where women are concentrated.

Women in onsite roles also report fewer opportunities for flexible working. The gendered labour market also shapes access to meaningful flexibility, with women consistently reporting lower access to the flexibility they need, especially in highly gender-segregated workplaces.

Patterns for men also vary by context: they report the highest levels of flexibility in gender-balanced and male-dominated workplaces, and the lowest in female-dominated workplaces. This suggests autonomy is constrained for all workers within feminised industries. Gendered norms relating to caregiving also mean male-dominated workplaces are under less pressure to provide flexibility, reinforcing inequality and increasing pressure on women.

While many workers say the nature of their job prevents remote work, this does not mean good flex is out of reach. Good flexibility looks different across industries and roles, but within these parameters there remains scope for greater autonomy through joint decision-making, more flexible scheduling and better alignment between job design and workers' needs. Improving access to high-quality flexibility across industries and workplace types is critical to ensuring genuine choice and control are not limited to select parts of the workforce.

Genuine choice in frontline roles

Limited autonomy and control in physically demanding frontline jobs, such as nursing, teaching, retail and hospitality, can harm women's health and push them out of paid work early, partly due to a lack of flexibility.

Many on-site frontline workers want greater flexibility in how their work is organised, such as improving access to paid leave, being able to take leave for appointments, flexibility in start and finish times, and a greater say over shift and roster design.

> When returning from mat[ernity] leave, it was so hard to find a balance. I took a lower-level job, which then made me feel really s**t because I'd always worked so hard for my career progression. And then it took years because at that point my husband having no flex and me being that primary carer, it took years and years to get back into a senior management role again."

— Mia, inner metro, hybrid worker, mid-years woman

> I'm in a very male-dominated industry. I'm probably one of a couple of females in large meetings and sessions... but in terms of understanding [women's] responsibilities ... there's no sympathy basically. ... At the moment, there's no opportunities to go part-time, but I think the only way I can get that balance is actually to go part-time. And the pay is not going to be great, but at least you can get that flexibility. But the way it is now, working full-time, I think it is really difficult trying to keep up with all the roles and responsibilities and then being there for the [kids]. It's just really difficult."

— Amy, IT sector, full-time hybrid worker, mid-years woman

Workers need *choice*

Industry differences

Men report the highest levels of flexibility in wholesale trade (87%), information, media and telecommunications (77%) and electricity, gas and water (76%), and the least flexibility in transport, postal and warehousing (52%) and education (52%).

Meanwhile, women reported the most flexibility in finance and insurance (83%), professional services (81%) and self-directed industries such as arts and recreation (99%). They have the least flexibility in education (58%), agriculture (60%), and construction (60%), suggesting gender differences in flexibility are significantly shaped by industry.

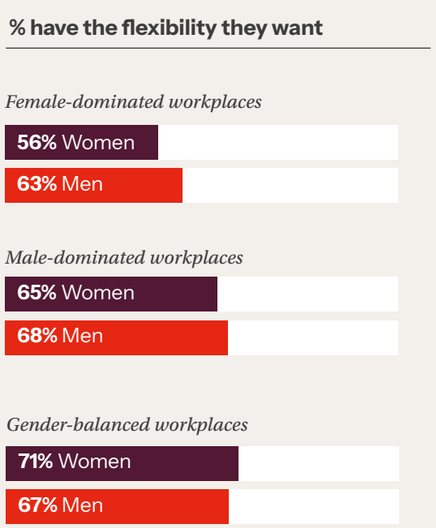
Managers matter, but genuine choice requires workplace support

Managerial support is important but it does not guarantee autonomy. Without a workplace culture that supports trust and shared decision-making, flexibility can remain controlled or restricted, limiting workers' ability to exercise genuine choice even if flexible work options are available.

Unequal care burden limits 'choice'

Women in the mid-years reflected on how gendered expectations played out at home. Some felt unable to ask male partners to step up, as care and domestic work are just not seen as men's 'role'. Other women spoke about making 'joint decisions' to reduce their hours and move into less demanding roles based on the rationale that their male partner earned more and had a more important, demanding or inflexible job.

Lowest access to flexibility for women and men in female-dominated workplaces



SPOTLIGHT

LGBTQI+ and gender-diverse workers

LGBTQI+ women and gender-diverse workers are often using flexibility to manage competing demands within relatively fixed job structures, rather than accessing flexibility on their own terms.

Lesbian and bisexual women show stronger demand for more flexibility than heterosexual women, and are more likely to use adjusted schedules, restructured hours and, in some cases, remote work. Non-binary workers* report high use of arrangements such as reduced hours, compressed weeks, shift swaps and job share, but also lower autonomy over where they work, suggesting that while demand for flexibility is high, control over it is often limited.

*Caution should be taken when interpreting these results due to small sample sizes.

Working for Women Research Partnership

Good flex builds *security*

Secure jobs and futures

When flexibility is well-designed and supported, workers are more able to access and remain in secure jobs that match their skills, offer fair wages, and provide progression opportunities—supporting financial security in the short and long term.

However, poor quality flexibility widens existing gaps, driving job insecurity, underemployment and economic disadvantage, with disproportionate impacts on women, especially those with less labour market power.

Many women are under pressure to move into forms of flexibility linked to insecurity, such as casual contracts and part-time work, often to manage caregiving. Set rosters, limited capacity to perform work offsite, insecure employment and uneven or no access to good flex put women under significant pressure, forcing trade-offs that undermine earnings, superannuation and retirement outcomes.

Better health and wellbeing

Work can be an enabler of good health and a cause of ill health across the life course. Self-rated physical and mental health is highest among people in high-quality flexibility environments, who also report the lowest levels of sick leave.

However, as the quality of flexibility decreases, health ratings decline and sick days increase, with women in these environments reporting worse health, increased fatigue, and more moderate and prolonged sick leave compared to men.

These patterns are strongest among women with disability, migrant and language-diverse women, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

By contrast, good flex allows workers to adapt their work to manage their health needs, such as adjusting hours around fluctuating capacity associated with chronic conditions, or having the freedom to work remotely during minor illnesses. In flexibility environments where workers have genuine choice and control, and are supported to use flexibility without stigma or penalty, they report better health and wellbeing.

Employer *impact*

Good flex delivers workforce stability, supporting higher retention of talented workers and a more dependable and sustainable workforce. This reduces the costs and risks associated with recruitment, onboarding and workforce disruption, strengthening organisational performance over time.

Bad flex is a security risk

Bad flex compounds existing pressures and leaves workers more exposed to insecurity in their jobs, futures and general wellbeing.

Good flex = Better health

8 *in* 10
workers in high-quality flexibility environments report good or very good health

High-quality flexibility environments	Low-quality flexibility environments
81% Women	66% Women
82% Men	73% Men

Bad flex is linked to increased fatigue

High fatigue is reported by 41% of women and 32% of men in low-quality flexibility environments, versus 24% of women and 20% of men with high-quality flexibility.

Workforce stability

Access to good flex is also critical for workforce stability. Well-designed and supported flexibility contributes to higher productivity, improved employee satisfaction and stronger retention outcomes, with workers much more likely to intend to remain with their employer.

Bad flex, however, is associated with higher turnover as workers are more likely to consider leaving and to feel uncertain about their future, increasing churn and reducing workforce capability. This risk is particularly pronounced for women, with more than half of those in conditions resembling bad flex expecting to leave their job in the next 12 months.

This undermines the stability of the workforce and negatively impacts employers by increasing recruitment and training expenses, loss of skills and experience, and reduced organisational performance.

These patterns confirm that improving access to good flex strengthens workforces and stabilises the labour market.

Women are overrepresented in part-time arrangements, feel less secure and have less autonomy when working part-time.

% in part time employment

- 46% Women
- 22% Men

% part-time workers who feel their job is secure

- 60% Women
- 69% Men

% part-time workers who have control over tasks

- 61% Women
- 69% Men

Good flex is protective

High-quality flexibility appears particularly protective for women, supporting attachment to work even when competing demands are high.

SPOTLIGHT

Mid years women: a convergence of insecurity

For many mid-years women, the ‘midlife collision’ delivers strain, exhaustion and a time crunch that in many cases compromises career progression, personal wellbeing and economic security.[16]

Mid-years women are the least likely to feel their job is secure or that their income covers essential needs, highlighting the potential for good flex to support stability, sustain participation and protect the wellbeing and economic security of women in this life stage.

Improving access to good flex strengthens workforces and stabilises the labour market.

> **“[I didn’t understand] what it would mean to take a pay cut, what it would mean to take a step back in my career, and what that means for things like future earnings and superannuation.”**

— Kavya, local government, onsite worker, mid-years woman

SPOTLIGHT

Women in regional areas

Structural and location-based barriers limit regional women’s access to effective flexible work.

Regional women report less support for flexible working arrangements, especially in senior roles, however, they are more likely to desire flexibility than urban women. They often rely on reduced hours or shift swaps and are more likely to work fully on-site, despite preferring not to.

They also face fewer career opportunities, often needing to travel or relocate to advance. While fewer work remotely or hybrid, those who do report strong benefits and support.

> **“I live in the country. When I went for this role, it was supposed to be mainly remote [from home]. Then for some reason they’re pushing for 2 days in the office.**
>
> **It takes me 2 hours to get to the office and 2 hours to get home. I’m a carer for my mum as well as my 3 kids.**
>
> **And there’s nothing worse than dropping your car off and getting on a train knowing that if anything happens to anyone, you can’t do anything, you’ve somehow got to get back there.”**

— Stephanie, single mother, regional hybrid worker, mid-years woman

Good flex builds *opportunities to thrive*

Quality jobs that match skills and experience

Good flex helps workers thrive in good jobs that match their skills and qualifications. When flexibility is limited or poorly designed, workers—especially women—are pushed into arrangements that involve reducing paid hours, moving to casual contracts or stepping into less demanding roles where their capabilities and experience are underutilised.

By contrast, workers with access to good flex can adjust how work fits into their lives while remaining in secure, well-paid roles where their qualifications and skills are recognised and rewarded.

Career progression and skill development

When flexible work is well designed, women don't have to step back at key career moments due to competing demands. Even within the same employment arrangements, women report fewer opportunities for advancement than men, particularly women in part-time or casual work.

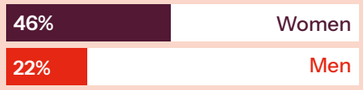
Mid-years women shared examples of the impact that working part-time, flexibly or in less demanding roles had on their career progression, including missing out on promotions and development opportunities.

Concerns about the negative impact of flexible work on career progression can also deter uptake, particularly among men, highlighting the importance of workplace cultures and job design that actively support flexibility and give workers confidence that this won't hinder their advancement. Progression is further limited by assumptions that senior roles require full-time, on-site presence, reinforcing gender gaps in leadership when women have less opportunity to work on-site, full time.

These constraints are pronounced for some groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, who report limited opportunities for career acceleration and require flexibility in leadership roles that is culturally-informed.

Women have less opportunity to remain in secure, full-time work

% in part time work



% on casual contracts

Employer *impact*

Good flex supports a stronger and more sustainable workforce, enabling people to perform at their best. This helps to address workforce skills shortages in critical industries by supporting workers to remain and thrive in employment across the life course by allowing work to adapt to changing needs and responsibilities. This, in turn, benefits employers by improving productivity and performance, underpinning innovation and economic growth.

Bad flex denies people the chance to be their best

Limited and uneven access to high-quality flexibility prevents many people—especially women and groups with less labour market power—from reaching their full potential.

Meaningful, sustained participation

Good flex enables meaningful and sustained workforce participation across life stages. It allows work to adapt to life, enabling women to continue to participate and thrive in the workforce as their needs, priorities and responsibilities shift.

Without access to high-quality flexibility, workers—especially women—are forced to scale back or exit the workforce.

This is particularly evident for mid-years women, who are often highly skilled and strongly attached to paid work, but experience increasing pressure from competing demands that current systems of work often fail to respond to.

Women in fully onsite roles such as healthcare, education and retail, face the greatest constraints in managing work and life demands, limiting their ability to sustain participation in the workforce over time.

When participation is constrained, we miss out on the contributions of capable people with critical skills and experience, disrupting the labour market and limiting the overall capacity and quality of the workforce.

Increased productivity and performance

Good flex improves performance.

When workers have more autonomy over when, how and where they work, they are more productive, engaged and able to perform at their best.

When flexibility is well designed and implemented, it builds trust, autonomy and accountability, which underpin high performance. For employers, this translates into stronger organisational performance, which helps to drive innovation and growth. Ensuring this growth is sustainable and inclusive requires expanded and equitable access to good flex so that it does not entrench existing inequalities.

When people feel valued and when they feel respected, they're infinitely more productive. They'll work harder and they'll work more hours. And they'll be more productive in the hours they are working. But when you're trying to fit people into this box because you don't know how to deal with flexible work arrangements, like 'OK we're all going to come into the office 3 days a week'... Then people are feeling overwhelmed, people are feeling resentful ... because it may or may not work for them."

— Kristy, full-time hybrid worker for international company, mid-years woman

Women are overrepresented in lower-quality environments that resemble bad flex

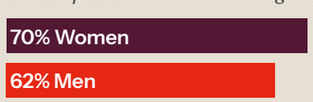
% workers in constrained or low-quality flexibility environments

Good flex increases productivity

% more productive when working flexibly

More productive when working remotely

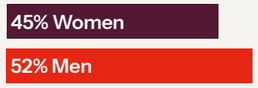
% more productive when working remotely i.e. from home



Women have less opportunities for career progression

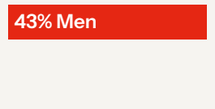
% have the opportunity to move to a senior position

Full-time work



Part-time work

On casual contracts



In order to be able to do everything, to maintain the job and the family commitment, the parental responsibilities, I sacrificed my career... I am stuck in a job I would have otherwise left many years ago.

So, I stayed there because it's very comfortable and it's solid and it's safe and pays well. But 10 years on, I am frustrated, bored, and annoyed, but I decided that it had to work for me and for my family.

As much as I wanted to, I really wanted to, I thought it was too risky to change and maybe sacrifice that flexibility that I have."

— Theresa, single mother, onsite worker, mid-years woman

SPOTLIGHT

Migrant, refugee and language-diverse women

Migrant and language-diverse* women show a stronger appetite for flexibility than Australian-born and English-only women, shaped in part by limited access to family support when managing work and care.

Language-diverse women tend to use a broader mix of temporal flexible arrangements, while overseas-born women make less use of other forms of flexibility, suggesting constraints in access.

In addition, superannuation contributions often start later for migrant women, meaning forced work–care trade-offs resulting from limited or poor quality flexibility can exacerbate economic insecurity for this cohort.

I came as a refugee... I think that shaped requesting my flexible working in my position, when I started in the beginning, I couldn't even request that."

— Mabel, 10 years in Australia, full-time onsite worker, mid-years woman

*Language-diverse refers to workers who speak a language other than English.

What's *next?*

There is urgent work for employers, unions, industry leaders and governments to do to unlock the benefits of good flex.

Research from the Working for Women Research Partnership demonstrates that the way flexible work is designed and the extent to which it is supported by employers determines whether flexibility expands choice, security and opportunity or entrenches inequality.

Well-designed and supported flexible work delivers a triple-win for workers, employers and governments. The experiences outlined in this research provide a crucial evidence base for improving job design to maximise these benefits.

Workers with access to good flex have more autonomy, greater economic security and better health and wellbeing. They are able to stay connected to the workforce across life stages as their priorities, needs and responsibilities fluctuate, and have opportunities to progress in their careers in roles that utilise their skills and experience.

For employers, good flex delivers a stronger, more diverse and more sustainable workforce.

When flexibility is well designed and supported, it is linked to higher retention and fewer unplanned absences, reducing the disruption and costs associated with workforce turnover. Good flex supports qualified, capable workers to contribute their best throughout their careers, driving productivity and increasing the pool of skilled workers available to employers.

Good flex also delivers significant benefits for the economy. It helps to strengthen Australia's labour supply—which is especially critical in the context of urgent national skills shortages[17]—and supports more productive, sustainable and high-performing workforces that drive innovation and growth.

Ultimately, well-designed and evenly distributed flexibility advances gender equality and supports more inclusive economic growth by increasing access to choice, security and opportunity for women and cohorts with less labour market power.

A report exploring solutions will be delivered by the Working for Women Research Partnership later in 2026.

Delivering high-quality flexibility is a shared responsibility across the economy, requiring coordinated action from policymakers, industry leaders, unions, employers, supervisors and workers.

Endnotes

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