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Challenging the Femininity Stigma of Flexible Work: Gender and Effort in Part-Time Employment

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Research Article

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Abstract

Flexible work arrangements are stigmatized as feminine, and employees who use them – particularly women – experience workplace bias. This paper tests the assumption that non-traditional work arrangements signal reduced effort among women, compared with men. Drawing on Social Role Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and flexibility stigma research, I argue that because women face comparatively less breadwinner pressure than men, women (compared with men) construe employment through a less instrumental lens, predicting stronger work effort, especially in part-time roles. Two representative samples support this pattern. Study 1, using panel data consisting of U.S. adults finds that employment status interacts with gender to predict work effort, such that men exhibit lower work effort in part-time (vs. full-time) roles, while women's work effort remains high across both. Study 2, using a nationally representative sample spanning 20 countries, demonstrates that women's weaker instrumental orientation toward work helps partially explain their stronger work effort in part-time roles. Implications for performance management and flexible work policies are discussed.

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Challenging the Femininity Stigma of Flexible Work: Gender and Effort in Part-Time Employment

Flexible work arrangements can positively impact organizations through increased commitment and job satisfaction, but the stigma associated with such arrangements attenuates those benefits (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Chung, 2020; Harrop et al., 2026). The stigma that flexible workers face is one of femininity, whereby employees who engage in such practices are perceived as more feminine and less committed to the workplace (Chung & van der Horst, 2018; Jacobi et al., 2025; Leslie et al., 2012; Rudman & Mescher, 2013; Williams et al., 2013). Flexibility is stigmatized as feminine because women, compared with men, are associated with prioritizing caregiving over work, thus challenging the masculine ideal worker norm which dictates that work should come first (Chung, 2020; Chung & van der Horst, 2018; Eagly, 1987; Ellemers, 2018; J. Müller & Chung, 2026; Williams et al., 2013). Importantly, both men and women tend to experience workplace discrimination when they utilize flexible work arrangements, but the consequences tend to be worse for women, compared with men (Chung & van der Horst, 2018; Rudman & Mescher, 2013). Consequently, people who engage in non-traditional work arrangements might be exceptional employees, yet they face backlash for engaging those work arrangements, with disproportionate negative impacts on women (Jacobi et al., 2025).

Flexible work arrangements are associated with more autonomy toward work (Akkermans et al., 2026; Guimarães et al., 2026; Harrop et al., 2026). This is because flexible work arrangements can provide employees with greater discretion over when, where, and how work is performed, although the degree of autonomy afforded varies across arrangements (Allen et al., 2013; Harrop et al., 2026). Further, autonomy toward work is associated with positive organizational outcomes, including stronger performance, organizational commitment, and job

satisfaction (Deci et al., 2017; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Thus, employees who work more (vs. less) flexibly should experience autonomy toward work as well as its associated positive organizational behaviors (Balderson et al., 2022; Guimarães et al., 2026).

However, gender roles complicate this dynamic. Men, more than women, are constrained to the restrictive provider role, making extrinsic rewards, like compensation, central and intrinsic work rewards, like personal fulfillment, secondary (Eagly, 1987; Ellemers, 2018; Hendrick & Cameron Schultz, 2026). Consequently, men, more than women, might construe work as more of a financial obligation, than a source of intrinsic meaning. Additionally, because women, compared with men, experience less breadwinner pressure, women (more than men) might construe work as volitional (Eagly, 1987; Ellemers, 2018). This difference in breadwinner pressure might be associated with stronger work effort for women, compared with men, especially in part-time employment, an employment arrangement that affords greater autonomy.

In this paper, I examine the assumption that flexible work arrangements signal reduced effort among women and question whether the associated femininity stigma is misplaced, given that men, rather than women, might exhibit the lowest work effort when participating in flexible arrangements. *Work effort,* the outcome of interest in this paper, is how hard someone works at their job (Van Iddekinge et al., 2023). Although work effort results from motivation and is often associated with job performance, work effort is conceptually distinct from both constructs (Van Iddekinge et al., 2023).

I posit that part-time (compared with full-time) employment status should be associated with stronger work effort for women, compared with men. First, gender norms that emphasize breadwinning for men (vs. women) make it more socially acceptable for women (vs. men) to de-prioritize both full-time employment and an instrumental orientation toward work (Eagly, 1987;

Ellemers, 2018). Second, less breadwinner pressure for women (compared with men) might be associated with more volition towards work (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Third, part-time work allows for more autonomy over one's time (Akkermans et al., 2026; Guimarães et al., 2026; F. Müller et al., 2025). Collectively, because women (vs. men) experience less breadwinner pressure, women, compared with men, might experience their work more volitionally and exhibit a stronger work effort. Because part-time (vs. full-time) employment offers greater autonomy, the gender difference in work effort should be strongest in part-time employment.

This project makes several contributions. First, although employees who utilize flexible work practices incur a femininity stigma, this research shows that it is men, rather than women, who exhibit lower work effort in part-time employment. Second, this research points to the benefits of less constrained gender roles for women, compared with men. While traditional gender expectations disproportionately harm working women, they might also give women more psychological freedom toward work. For instance, because women are not constrained to breadwinning in the way men are, they might experience more volition toward work and exhibit higher work effort as a result. Third, challenging lay perceptions that part-time employees are less essential to organizations, I show that part-time female (vs. male) employees exert more work effort, suggesting that organizational inferences about part-time employees might be overly simplistic.

Part-time employment

Non-traditional work arrangements, like part-time work, have recently grown in popularity (Akkermans et al., 2026). In this paper, part-time employment is operationalized as working fewer than 40 hours per week, consistent with the conventional 40-hour full-time workweek (Kalleberg, 2000). Importantly, part-time employees make up approximately 17% of

employed workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2026).

People tend to enter part-time for two primary reasons. Employees might enter part-time work voluntarily, in which individuals actively seek such arrangements, or involuntarily, in which individuals enter them in response to difficulties securing or maintaining full-time employment (Akkermans et al., 2026; Feldman, 1990; Haines et al., 2018; Katz & Krueger, 2017; Spreitzer et al., 2017). Most part-time work is for non-economic reasons (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025), suggesting that workers may derive benefits from non-traditional work arrangements that extend beyond financial compensation. Consistent with this distinction, voluntary part-time employees report greater job satisfaction and lower turnover intentions than involuntary part-time employees (Feldman, 1990; Maynard et al., 2006). These potential benefits may stem, in part, from the greater autonomy afforded by part-time work, which can allow workers to exercise greater control over and derive greater meaning from their work (Akkermans et al., 2026; Guimarães et al., 2026; F. Müller et al., 2025). Autonomy, in turn, is associated with higher job satisfaction and overall happiness for part-time employees (Possenriede & Plantenga, 2014; Van Der Meer & Wielers, 2013).

Although part-time employment provides greater autonomy, it also limits access to organizational resources and is perceived as less legitimate than full-time employment. Indeed, part-time (vs. full-time) employment is associated with financial instability and less access to benefits and organizational support (Akkermans et al., 2026; Cropanzano et al., 2023; F. Müller et al., 2025). Furthermore, non-traditional work arrangements are perceived as less legitimate than full-time work arrangements, yielding more bias toward those in non-traditional (vs. traditional) work arrangements (Chung, 2020; Chung & van der Horst, 2018; Jacobi et al., 2025; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Williams et al., 2013). For example, remote workers are perceived as

less committed, productive, and in turn, experience less advancement opportunities (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Wang & Chung, 2026). In sum, part-time, compared with full-time employees, receive less benefits, perform lower status roles, and their work is perceived as less legitimate (Akkermans et al., 2026; Dick & Hyde, 2006; Halldén et al., 2012).

The consequences of non-traditional work arrangements might be particularly important for women, who disproportionately occupy part-time roles. Indeed, over half (62%) of part-time employees are women (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2026). This uneven participation in part-time employment can be attributable to women's, compared with men's, preference to establish boundaries between work and private life or accommodate childcare responsibilities (Mullens & Glorieux, 2024). Thus, although part-time work may provide women with greater flexibility to navigate responsibilities outside of work, departing from full-time employment carries personal costs that extend beyond reduced pay.

Flexibility stigma

One major cost of flexible work arrangements is the stigma inherent to such arrangements. Flexibility stigma is the bias employees experience when working in non-traditional arrangements like part-time arrangements, job share programs, or remote work (Williams et al., 2013). It stems from the widely held belief that work should be prioritized over other responsibilities and if work is not prioritized, then productivity will suffer (Chung, 2020; J. Müller & Chung, 2026; Williams et al., 2013). Consequently, those who take on flexible work arrangements tend to be perceived as less committed, less dedicated to their careers, and less likely to be viewed as ideal workers (Chung, 2020; Williams et al., 2013). This stigma has negative consequences for employees including diminished desire to stay, lower job satisfaction, and worse well-being (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Ferdous et al., 2022).

Importantly, flexibility stigma carries a femininity stigma that penalizes employees who use non-traditional work arrangement for violating the ideal worker norm, a norm that is inherently tied to masculine expectations (Rudman & Mescher, 2013; Williams et al., 2013). When employees utilize non-traditional work arrangements, employers might interpret this as confirmation that they are de-prioritizing work, an expectation held for women, more than men (Chung, 2020; Chung & van der Horst, 2018; Eagly, 1987; Rudman & Mescher, 2013; Williams et al., 2013). Consequently, part-time employees may simultaneously experience both flexibility stigma and femininity stigma.

Women, compared with men, tend to bear the brunt of flexibility stigma (Chung, 2020). This is because traditional gender roles associate women (more than men) with caregiving (Chung, 2020; Ellemers, 2018; Shockley et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2013). Indeed, Social Role Theory posits that women are expected to prioritize caregiving while men are expected prioritize breadwinning (Eagly, 1987; Ellemers, 2018). Because women and men have historically occupied different social roles, beliefs about competence in caregiving and employment roles reinforce a gendered division of labor (Eagly, 1987). As a result of these historically different social roles, women are expected to prioritize family and to de-emphasize career advancement while men are expected to prioritize work and neglect relationships (Ellemers, 2018). These gendered expectations shape organizational perceptions of work dedication, such that flexible work arrangements may be interpreted as reduced career commitment, especially for women, compared with men.

Indeed, women, compared with men, are perceived as less dedicated to the workplace, resulting in adverse career outcomes. For instance, perceptions that working women, compared with men, are less invested are associated with worse performance evaluations and hiring bias

(Heilman et al., 2024). Further, because working women (vs. men) are perceived to be less competent than men, women (vs. men) are also given less leadership opportunities (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001; Scheuer et al., 2025). When women, but not men, behave counter to gender norms, they experience backlash at work (Goya-Tocchetto et al., 2026). For example, agentic women are perceived as less likable and socially skilled, with resulting workplace penalties (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). These consequences include workplace hostility, sabotage, and exclusion (Rudman & Phelan, 2008; Vara-Horna et al., 2026). In sum, working women face a double bind whereby they face stereotypes that they are less engaged, but are penalized when they prioritize work.

Taken together, research on part-time employment and gender roles suggests that both part-time employment and women's work are independently subject to organizational devaluation (Chung, 2020; Ellemers, 2018; Lyonette, 2015; Sirianni & Negrey, 2000). Because part-time (vs. full-time) and women (vs. men) are independently perceived as less engaged employees, women who work in non-traditional arrangements may be perceived as especially disengaged (Chung, 2020; Heilman et al., 2024; Wang & Chung, 2026). I challenge this assumption that women (vs. men) and part-time (vs. full-time) employees are necessarily less engaged by proposing that because women, compared with men, face less breadwinner pressure, they may construe part-time work more volitionally and, in turn, exhibit greater work effort.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a framework for understanding why the meaning – and its implications for work effort – attached to work may differ by gender. Because women, compared with men, face less pressure to anchor their identity in breadwinning, women (vs. men) might construe employment as more volitional, rather than obligatory. Indeed, work is

more important to women's (vs. men's) sense of self arguably because women tend to place more importance on intrinsic rewards, like personal fulfillment, while men tend to place more importance on extrinsic rewards, like salary (Hendrick & Cameron Schultz, 2026; Pinho & Gaunt, 2023). Consequently, gender differences in the meaning of work suggest that women's, compared with men's, engagement with work might be more rooted in intrinsic rewards.

Further, reduced work hours may provide employees with greater autonomy over their work and personal lives. According to SDT, autonomous motivation involves acting with a sense of volition while controlled motivation involves acting for rewards or the avoidance of punishment (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Experiencing greater autonomy toward work may foster autonomous motivation by allowing employees to experience their work as more volitional rather than obligatory (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Research on work effort specifically suggests that intrinsic motives, such as autonomy, play an important role in eliciting it (Van Iddekinge et al., 2023). Autonomy towards work has downstream consequences for work, including increased performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Deci et al., 2017; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Putnam et al., 2014; Van den Broeck et al., 2016; Van Iddekinge et al., 2023). Meanwhile, experiencing controlled motivation towards work is associated with less effort, worse performance, and lower engagement (Deci et al., 2017; Putnam et al., 2014).

The literature on the impact of extrinsic work motivations (e.g., working for salary) specifically is mixed (Cerasoli et al., 2014; Gerhart et al., 2026; Gerhart & Fang, 2015). Broadly, extrinsic motivation tends to undermine intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1999). Indeed, perceiving work primarily as a means for compensation is associated with autonomy frustration as well as harmful organizational consequences, like unethical behavior in the workplace (Tran

& Howard, 2026). Moreover, compensation can undermine creativity (Byron & Khazanchi, 2012; Gerhart & Fang, 2015). Meanwhile, extrinsic motivation is associated with higher output and stronger work performance up to a point (Cerasoli et al., 2014; Jr. et al., 1998; Pokorny, 2008). To reconcile these mixed findings, it may be that the type of compensation (e.g., pay for performance) as well as the amount of compensation explains these differing work outcomes (Ederer & Manso, 2013; Gerhart et al., 2026; Gerhart & Fang, 2015; Jr. et al., 1998; Pokorny, 2008).

In this paper, I suggest that gender norms qualify these mixed findings. For example, it may be that the negative consequences of extrinsic motivation are more pronounced when working for compensation is experienced as obligatory (vs. volitional). Because men, compared with women, face more breadwinner pressure, men may be more likely than women to construe their employment – and compensation – as an obligation rather than a volitional pursuit, which may be associated with men's (vs. women's) lower work effort. If this is the case, mixed findings on the organizational consequences of extrinsic rewards may partly reflect how the meaning of work – and compensation – is experienced as a constraint for men, compared with women.

Thus, I formally hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: The effect of employment status on work effort will be moderated by gender, such that women will exhibit high work effort across both part-time and full-time arrangements, whereas men will report lower work effort in part-time compared to full-time arrangements.

Hypothesis 2: Women, compared to men, will report a weaker instrumental orientation toward work.

Hypothesis 3: Instrumental orientation toward work will mediate the interactive effect of gender and part-time employment status on work effort, such that women's lower instrumental orientation toward work will explain their relatively greater work effort in part-time employment.

Overview of Studies

I tested my hypothesis using two large, nationally representative samples. Study 1 draws on panel data from respondents participating in the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) Refresher survey (Ryff et al., 2025, 2026). Study 2 draws on a large cross-sectional sample of respondents from 20 countries participating in the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP Research Group, 2024). This research sheds light on how traditional gender roles shape work effort, challenging organizational assumptions that gender and part-time employment signal reduced engagement.

Analysis code is available here: https://osf.io/kpfba/overview?view_only=a9a255cfb18144f1b6be1d6200cdc7a2. Study 1 data may be accessed at https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/sites/icpsr/home and Study 2 data may be accessed at https://www.gesis.org/en/issp/data-and-documentation/work-orientations/cumulation. Data were analyzed using Stata 19. All conditions, participant exclusions, and measures are reported.

Study 1

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Analysis code is available here: https://osf.io/kpfba/overview?view_only=a9a255cfb18144f1b6be1d6200cdc7a2. Study data may be accessed at https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/sites/icpsr/home. Data were analyzed using Stata 19. All conditions, participant exclusions, and measures are reported.

Participants

The initial sample included 3,577 individuals in Wave 1 (2011-2014) and 2,154 individuals in Wave 2 (2022-2024). I retained all employed respondents who had valid data for all variables. This yielded a final sample of 1,974 participants (M = 1.4 observations per participant). Most of the sample (70%) were employed at least 40 hours a week, indicating full-time employment. About half the sample was female (52%), and most had children (87%). The sample was largely White (86%) with a mean age of 51 years (SD = 13). About half held a college degree (57%). The average household income was $69, 933 ($SD$ = $63, 310). Sample attrition increased over time, with 60% of participants retained from Wave 1 (2011-2014) to Wave 2 (2022-2024).

Procedure

Participants were recruited via telephone. Respondents completed phone interviews and questionnaires covering physical health, psychological well-being, work history, and demographics (see Ryff et al., 2025, 2026, for additional details).

Measures

Independent variables. Gender was coded as 1 (female) or 0 (male). Employment Status was coded as 1 (working at least 40 hours a week) or 0 (working less than 40 hours a week).

Outcome variable. Work effort was measured using the item: “Using a 0 to 10 scale

where 0 means "no thought or effort" and 10 means "very much thought and effort," how much thought and effort do you put into your work situation these days?" Work effort was measured on a scale from 0 -10.[1]

Control variables. In all models, I controlled for *age*, *income*, *race*, *education,* and *wave* given that they might confound gender and work effort.

Age was measured continuously.

Household income was measured continuously and was logged.

Race was measured from among the following identities: White, Black and/or African American, Native American or Alaska Native Aleutian, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or Other. Because the majority of respondents identified as White, I categorized participants as White, Black, or Other Race and created two dummy variables: Black (1 = Black, 0 = not Black) and Other Race (1 = Native American or Alaska Native Aleutian, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or Other, 0 = not one of these groups).

Education was coded as 1 if the respondent had a college degree and 0 if not.

Wave was coded as 1 for respondents who participated in wave 1 and 2 for respondents who participated in wave 2.

Analytic strategy

Given the nested nature of the data, I first computed the intraclass correlation using a null model. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) was .28, providing justification for a multilevel modeling approach. Analyses therefore used hierarchical models to account for multiple observations within individuals, with wave at level 1 and respondents at level 2. Due to

[1] Single-item measures have been shown to demonstrate comparable validity and reliability to multi-item scales across a wide range of job attitudes and behaviors (Matthews et al., 2022).

the archival nature of this dataset, analyses were not pre-registered

Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables are shown in Table 1. These results show that the effect of employment status (full-time vs. part-time) on work effort was strengthened by male (vs. female) gender. Table 2 presents results of multilevel models. Model 1 presents the interaction between gender and employment status on work effort over time. Consistent with predictions, the interactive effect of employment status and gender on work effort was significant, b = -.48, SE = .19, z = -2.59, p = .010, *95% CI* [-.85, -.11]. Model 2 adds the control variables and finds similar results for the effect of gender on work effort, b = -.45, SE = .19, z = -2.42, p = .016, *95% CI* [-.82, -.09], supporting Hypothesis 1 (see Figure 1). Simple slope analyses reveal that among women, there was no difference in work effort among women working part-time (M = 7.91, SE = .09) and women working full-time (M = 7.91, SE = .07), b =.01, SE =.12, z = .12, p = 0.903, *95% CI* [-.22, .25], see Model 3. Among men, those working part-time (M = 7.32, SE = .13) exhibited less work effort than those working full time (M = 7.77, SE = .07), b = .43, SE = .15, z = 2.85, p = .004, *95% CI* [.13, .73], see Model 4.

Robustness analyses

To ensure that the observed interaction between gender and employment status on work effort is not spuriously driven by underlying family arrangements, I conducted a series of robustness analyses. All models included the same control variables as the primary analysis, with an additional term added to account for full-time to part-time transition, breadwinner status, partnership status, parenthood status, spouse employment status, or reduction of work hours to care for children.

Full-time to part-time. To examine whether gender difference in work effort changes for

those transitioning from full-time employment to part-time employment, I created a two-way interaction, gender by wave, and selected on employees who transitioned from full-time to part-time work during the study (n = 190, 59% female). The gender by wave interaction was not significant, b = .45, SE = .44, z = 1.02, p = .309, *95% CI* [-.42, 1.31]. Although the interaction was not statistically significant, I report the group means to better understand the pattern. Women's work effort in full-time employment (M = 8.27, SE = 0.23) was higher than in part-time employment (M = 7.95, SE = 0.23). Men's effort in full-time employment (M = 7.37, SE = 0.26) was higher than in part-time employment (M = 6.66, SE = 0.29). Taken together, there is no evidence that the gender difference in effort changes following the transition from full-time to part-time employment.

Breadwinner status. To examine whether breadwinner status moderated the gender by employment status interaction, I created a three-way interaction: gender by employment status by breadwinner status. Breadwinner status was coded as 1 (respondent income / household income > 50%) and 0 (respondent income / household income ≤ 50%).

The three-way interaction between gender, employment status, and breadwinner status was marginally significant, b = -.94, SE = .48, z = -1.94, p = .052, *95% CI* [-1.88, .01]. Because the interaction approached significance, I examined the gender x employment status interaction separately for breadwinner status. Among breadwinners, the effect of female (vs. male) gender and full-time (vs. part-time) employment status on work effort was significant, b = -.61, SE =.21, z = -2.95, p = .003, *95% CI* [-1.01, -.20]. Simple slope analyses revealed that among breadwinners employed part-time, women (M = 7.96, SD = 2.02) reported stronger work effort than men (M = 7.23, SD = 2.38), b = .84, SE = .19, z = 4.41, p < .001, *95% CI* [.47, 1.21]. Among breadwinners employed full-time, gender did not predict work effort, b = .16, SE = .12, z

= 1.40, p = .163, *95% CI* [-.07, .39]. The gender by employment status interaction for non-breadwinners was not significant, b = .40, *SE* =.47, z =.85, p = .396, *95% CI* [-.52, 1.31].

I also added breadwinner status as a control variable to the original gender by employment status analysis. The interactive effect of employment status and gender on work effort remained significant after adding breadwinner status as a control variable, b = -.41, *SE* = .19, z = -2.22, p = .027, *95% CI* [-.78, -.05].

Partnership status. To assess whether partnership moderates the effect of gender and employment status on work effort, I created a three-way interaction variable, partnership by respondent employment status by gender. *Partnership* was coded as 1 if the respondent was married and 0 if separated, divorced, widowed, or never married. There was no effect of partnership on the interaction effect, b = -.68, *SE* = .40, z = -1.72, p = .086, *95% CI* [-1.47, .10].

I also added partnership as a control variable to the original gender by employment status analysis. The interactive effect of employment status and gender on work effort remained significant after adding partnership as a control variable, b = -.45, *SE* = .19, z = -2.41, p = .016, *95% CI* [-.82, -.08].

Parenthood status. To assess whether parenthood moderates the effect of gender and employment status on work effort, I created a three-way interaction variable, parenthood status by respondent employment status by gender. Parenthood was coded as 1 (parent) and 0 (non-parent). There was no effect of parenthood on the interaction effect, b =.15, *SE* = .14, z = 1.08, p = .281, *95% CI* [-.12, .42].

I also added parenthood as a control variable to the original gender by employment status analysis. The interaction between gender and work effort remained statistically significant after controlling for parenthood, b = -.45, *SE* = .21, z = -2.14, p = .032, *95% CI* [-.86, -.04].

Spouse employment status. I assessed whether spouse work status moderates the interactive effect of employment status and gender on work effort. Spouse Full-Time status was coded as 1 (Spouse employed at least 40 hours per week) and 0 (Spouse employed at less than 40 hours per week). I created a three-way interaction variable, spouse work status (full-time vs. part time) by respondent employment status (full-time vs. part-time) by gender. There was no effect of partner spouse status on the interaction effect, b = -.31, SE = .56, z = -.56, p = .578, *95% CI* [-1.42, .79].

I also added spouse employment status as a control variable to the original gender by employment status analysis. The interaction between gender and employment status on work effort remained statistically significant after controlling for spouse employment status, b = -.49, SE = .20, z = -2.43, p = .015, *95% CI* [-.89, -.10].

Reduce work hours to care for children. Finally, I examined whether reducing work hours to care for children moderates the interactive effect of employment status and gender on work effort. Participants responded to the question: "Since having children did you cut back on the number of hours worked at a job to care for the children?" Reducing work hours to care for children was coded as 1 (yes) and 0 (no). I created a three-way interaction variable, reduce work hours by respondent employment status (full-time vs. part-time) x gender. The effect of reducing work hours to care for children on the interaction effect was not significant, b = .98, SE = .53, z = 1.84, p = .065, *95% CI* [-.06, 2.02]. I also added reducing work hours to care for children as a control variable to the original gender by employment status analysis. The interactive effect of employment status and gender on work effort remained significant after adding reducing work hours to care for children as a control variable, b = -.44, SE = .21, z = -2.11, p = .035, *95% CI* [-.86, -.03].

Study 2

Study 2 tested whether instrumental orientation toward work might help explain gender differences in work effort in part-time employees. The sample consisted of respondents participating in the International Social Survey Programme: Work Orientations I-IV survey, a cross-sectional study of work orientations (ISSP Research Group, 2024). Data was collected at multiple time points: 1989, 1997, 2005, and 2015. Because data was collected from multiple countries, I included participants at Level 1 and country at Level 2 to account for country-level variation. I restricted the sample to part-time employees to allow for a cleaner test of whether an instrumental orientation toward work accounts for the gender differences in effort observed in Study 1.

Method

Participants

The initial sample included 122,003 participants across 32 countries. I retained all respondents who reported being employed and who had valid data for all variables. Twelve of the initial 32 countries were excluded from the analytical sample due to listwise deletion.[2] Ethnicity was not captured across ISSP modules.[3] To mitigate this limitation, I included country at Level 2 to account for country-level variation. Additionally, work effort, but not instrumental orientation toward work, was discontinued after 1997, so the primary analysis is restricted to 1989 and 1997. I conducted robustness analyses for instrumental orientation toward work across the four waves ranging from 1989 to 2015. The final analytical sample comprised 8,342

[2] Six countries (Australia, Finland, Latvia, Mexico, South Africa, and Taiwan) did not collect data for the primary outcome variable, work effort, and were excluded from analyses. Six countries (France, Ireland, Israel, Italy, New Zealand, and Slovenia) were excluded from the analyses due to missing control variable data.

[3] Ethnicity data was not collected due to differing cultural norms regarding the collection of ethnicity; Europe and Africa are less likely than North America, South America, and Oceania to collect ethnicity data (Simon et al., 2015).

individuals across 20 countries. Over half were female (59%) and almost half had children (47%). The mean age was 40 years (*SD* = 12). Less than a quarter held a college degree (16%). Participants' average income was slightly above middle income (*M* = 2.27, *SD* = .78).

Procedure

Data collection was coordinated across all countries by local academic institutions and polling agencies and was collected at four points: 1989, 1997, 2005, 2015. Response rates varied by country and year. Detailed response rates are available through the GESIS Data Archive. Surveys were administered using face-to-face interviews (computer-assisted or paper-and-pencil), self-administered paper or web-based questionnaires, and telephone interviews.

Measures

Independent variables. Gender was coded as 1 (female) or 0 (male).

Outcome variables. Work effort was measured on a scale from 1 to 3 using the item: "Which of the following statements best describes your feelings about your job?" with options including: "I only work as hard as I have to" (1), "I work hard, but not so that it interferes with the rest of my life" (2), and "I make a point of doing the best work I can, even if it sometimes does interfere with the rest of my life" (3).

Instrumental orientation to work was measured using the item: "A job is just a way of earning money - no more," thinking of work in general. Responses were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (Strongly agree) to 5 (Strongly disagree). Item was reverse-coded.

Control variables. In all models, I controlled for *age*, *income*, *year*, *education,* and *marital status* given that they might confound gender, work effort, and instrumental orientation toward work.

Age was measured continuously.

Household income was measured using the ISSP standardized relative income category variable, coded as 1 (Low Income), 2 (Middle Income), and 3 (High Income).

Education was coded as 1 if the respondent had a college degree and 0 if not.

Analytic strategy

Study 2 used a cross-sectional survey design to test the proposed mediational pathway among part-time employees. Because the sample included participants from 20 different countries, I used a multilevel model with individuals at Level 1 and countries at Level 2 to account for the dependence among observations. Data were analyzed using Stata 19 using 5 000 bootstrap replications. Due to the archival nature of this dataset, analyses were not pre-registered

Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables are shown in Table 3. Means and standard deviations for instrumental orientation and work effort are shown in Table 4 by gender and condition. These results show that women maintained higher levels of work effort compared to men.

Supporting Hypothesis 2, the effect of female (vs. male) gender on instrumental orientation toward work was significant, b = -.21, SE =.03, z = -8.13, p < .001, *95% CI* [-.26, -.16], see *a* path. Simple slope analyses reveal that among part-time employees, women (M = 2.79, SD = 1.26) compared with men (M = 2.94, SD = 1.30), reported lower instrumental orientation toward work, b = -.25, SE = .03, t = -9.51, p < .001, *95% CI* [-.30, -.20]. Instrumental orientation toward work was negatively associated with work effort, b = -.08, SE = .01, t = -11.82, p < .001, *95% CI* [-.09, -.07], see *b* path.

Among part-time employees, the total effect of gender on work effort was significant, b = .11, SE =.02, t = 7.07, p < .001, *95% CI* [.08,.14], see *c* path. Furthermore, when controlling for

instrumental orientation toward work, the direct effect remained significant, such that women (*M* = 2.25, *SD* = 0.71) compared with men (*M* = 2.15, *SD* = .74) exhibited higher work effort, *b* = .08, *SE* = .02, *t* = 5.41, *p* < .001, *95% CI* [.05, .11], see *c′* path. These findings support partial mediation.

Supporting Hypothesis 3, the indirect effect of gender on work effort via instrumental orientation toward work was significant among part-time employees, *indirect effect* = .02, *bootstrap SE* = .003, *95% bootstrap CI* [.01,.02], see Figure 2.

Robustness analyses

Instrumental orientation toward work. Instrumental orientation toward work was captured across all four waves ranging from 1989 to 2015. This analysis examines gender differences in instrumental orientation toward work among part-time employees across each wave, excluding work effort as an outcome variable. The analytical sample for this analysis comprised 57,310 individuals across 32 countries. Men (*M* = 2.94, *SD* = 1.31) compared with women (*M* = 2.79, *SD* = 1.26) exhibited stronger instrumental orientation toward work, *b* = -.17, *SE* = .01, *z* = -16.21, *p* < .001, *95% CI* [-.19, -.15].

Study 2 Discussion

Using a large, cross-sectional sample spanning 20 countries, Study 2 provided converging evidence that women, compared with men, exert more effort in part-time work. Study 2 also extended the findings of Study 1 by demonstrating that women's (vs. men's) weaker instrumental orientation toward work might help explain this effect. Exploratory analyses revealed that the gender difference in instrumental orientation toward work is stable. Taken together, men's (vs. women's) stronger view that work is simply a means to earn money, a view supported by breadwinner ideology, might help explain men's (vs. women's) lower work effort.

General Discussion

This research questions the legitimacy of the femininity stigma associated with flexible work practices. In two large, representative samples, female (vs. male) gender was associated with work effort in part-time employment. Challenging established research, I show that men, not women, show reduced effort in the flexible arrangement of part-time work, thus challenging the femininity stigma of flexible work. Women, compared with men, tend to exert greater effort in the non-traditional work arrangement of part-time work arguably because part-time employment affords higher autonomy, allowing women – who experience work as less of a financial obligation than men do – to approach these roles more volitionally. Finally, non-traditional work arrangements, such as part-time employment, should not be a signal of reduced commitment to be penalized, but rather as an organizational reward to elicit stronger engagement, especially for women.

Implications for research

This project contributes to research on the femininity stigma of flexible work arrangements. First, women, compared with men, might construe part-time work as more of a source of intrinsic (vs. extrinsic) meaning, with important consequences for work effort. Challenging the femininity stigma associated with flexible work arrangements, women, but not men, display similarly high levels of work effort in both full-time and part-time work arrangements. Future research should examine whether these findings hold for other flexible work arrangements such as remote work.

This research also extends scholarship on gender roles to discover that less constrained gender roles for women, compared with men might benefit individuals and organizations. First, gender roles tend to harm working women, who are perceived as less committed than their male counterparts. However, gender roles might restrict men, compared with women, in their

approach to the meaning of work, with downstream consequences for work effort and ultimately, organizations. Second, because traditional roles constrain men (more than women) to breadwinning, men might construe part-time employment as a failure to masculine gender roles whereas women might construe that same work arrangement as a path to personal fulfillment. Thus, constrained roles for men, compared with women, might reduce the effort men exert in counter-stereotypical employment arrangement and simultaneously induce a sense of failure to meet breadwinner expectations. Future research should examine whether the femininity stigma of flexible work arrangements further decreases men's work effort in part-time arrangements.

Limitations and future directions

A primary limitation of this research is that it relies on existing archival data. Although high in external validity, I cannot show that breadwinner pressure causally explains gender differences in work effort; future research should examine this mechanism using an experimental design. This archival data also relied on a single-item measure, which could introduce measurement error. Future research should examine these effects using multi-item scales. Further, this research cannot rule out other explanations for women's stronger work effort. For example, I cannot rule out reverse causality or social desirability effects. Finally, this research examined part-time arrangements; future research should examine whether these findings extend to other flexible arrangements like remote work.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Study Variables, Study 1

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Effort	7.80	2.13													
2. Female[a]	.52	.50	.05*												
3. Full-Time[b]	.70	.46	.04*	-.19*											
4. College[c]	.57	.50	.06*	-.05*	.05*										
5. Income[d]	10.67	1.38	.09*	-.12*	.20*	.28*									
6. Age	50.74	12.98	-.02	-.05*	-.16*	-.02	-.21*								
7. Black[e]	.05	.23	.03	.08*	.00	-.02	-.06*	-.04							
8. Other Race[f]	.09	.28	.02	.03	.01	.00	-.01	-.09*	-.08*						
9. Breadwinner[g]	.78	.41	.05*	-.22*	.03	.07*	-.13*	.26*	.02	-.04*					
10. Marital[h]	.69	.46	.02	-.19*	.07*	.06*	.35*	-.03	-.13*	-.04	-.20*				
11. Parent[i]	.87	.34	.05*	.05*	-.03	-.12*	.03	.18*	.02	-.04	-.01	.25*			
12. Spouse Full-Time[j]	.85	.36	-.01	.19*	-.01	-.02	-.09*	.01	.06*	.02	-.07*	-.21*	-.04*		
13. Reduce Hours[k]	.29	.45	.02	.36*	-.19*	.02	-.04	-.08*	.01	-.01	-.19*	-.07*	.03	.09*	
14. Wave[l]	1.33	.47	.05*	.00	-.06*	.07*	.17*	.28*	-.01	-.02	.33*	.00	.19*	.01	-.04

Note. [a] 0 = male, 1 = female; [b] 0 = employed less than 40 hours per week, 1 = employed at least 40 hours per week; [c] 0 = no college degree, 1 = college degree; [d] logged household income; [e] 0 = not Black, 1 = Black; [f] 0 = not Other, 1 = Other Race; [g] 0 = earned less than half household income, 1 = earned at least half household income; [h] 0 = not partnered, 1 = married; [i] 0 = not a parent, 1 = parent; [j] 0 = spouse employed less than 40 hours per week, 1 = spouse employed at least 40 hours per week; [k] 0 = did not reduce work hours to care for family, 1 = reduced work hours to care for family; [l] 1 = Wave 1, 2 = Wave 2.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table 2
Multilevel Models Predicting Work Effort from Gender and Employment Status, Study 1

Variable	Model 1 Predictors Only	Model 2 Full Model	Model 3 Women Only	Model 4 Men Only
Gender[a]	.60*** (.16)	.59*** (.16)		
Employment Status[b]	.55*** (.15)	.45** (.15)	.01 (.12)	.43** (.15)
Gender x Employment Status	-.48** (.19)	-.45* (.19)		
College[c]		.19* (.09)	.01 (.13)	.39** (.13)
Household Income[d]		.14*** (.04)	.15** (.05)	.14* (.06)
Age		-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.01)	-.00 (.00)
Black[e]		.32 (.18)	.38 (.22)	.29 (.32)
Other Race[f]		.18 (.15)	.25 (.20)	.05 (.22)
Wave[g]	.17* (.08)	.12 (.09)	.22 (.12)	-.01 (.12)
Constant	7.19*** (.13)	5.67*** (.50)	6.20*** (.66)	5.69*** (.72)
N	1,974	1,974	1,028	946
Observations	2,736	2,736	1,420	1,316

Note.
[a] 0 = male, 1 = female
[b] 0 = Employed less than 40 hours per week, 1 = Employed at least 40 hours per week
[c] 0 = No college degree, 1 = college degree
[d] Logged
[e] 0 = Not Black, 1 = Black
[f] 0 = Not Other race, 1 Other race
[g] 1 = Wave 1, 2 = Wave 2
*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table 3
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Study Variables, Study 2

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Instrumental Orientation Toward Work	2.57	1.21						
2. Work Effort	2.22	.71	-.19*					
3. Female[a]	.59	.49	-.10*	.07*				
4. Year	1994.84	3.55	-.05*	-.07*	.04*			
5. Age	39.65	12.31	.02*	.10*	-.04*	.06*		
6. College[b]	.16	.37	-.17*	.05*	.00	.10*	-.02	
7. Income[c]	2.17	.78	-.12*	.05*	-.02	-.06*	.01	.13*

[a] 0 = male, 1 = female
[b] 0 = No college degree, 1 = college degree
[c] Relative income, 1 (Low Income), 2 (Middle Income), and 3 (High Income).
*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

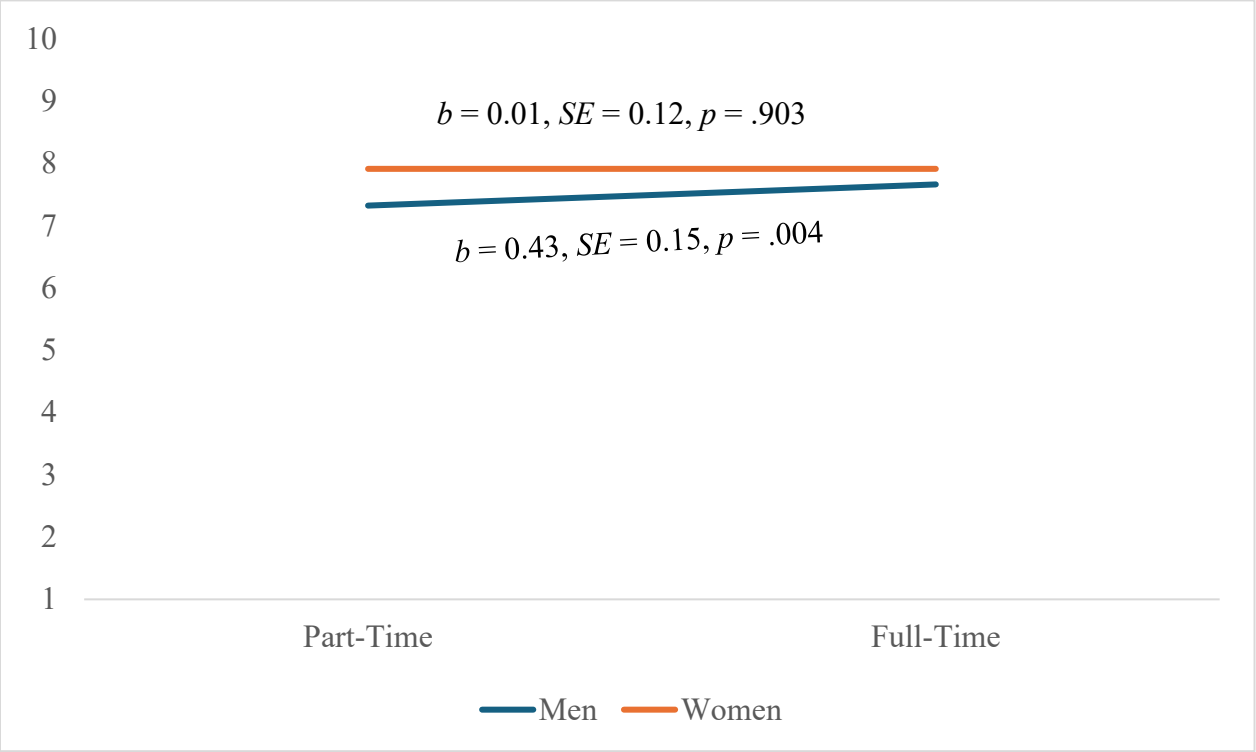
Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations for Instrumental Orientation Toward Work and Work Effort by Gender, Study 2

	Women		Men	
Variable	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***
Instrumental Orientation Toward Work	2.79	1.26	2.94	1.30
Work Effort	2.25	0.71	2.15	0.74

Figure 1

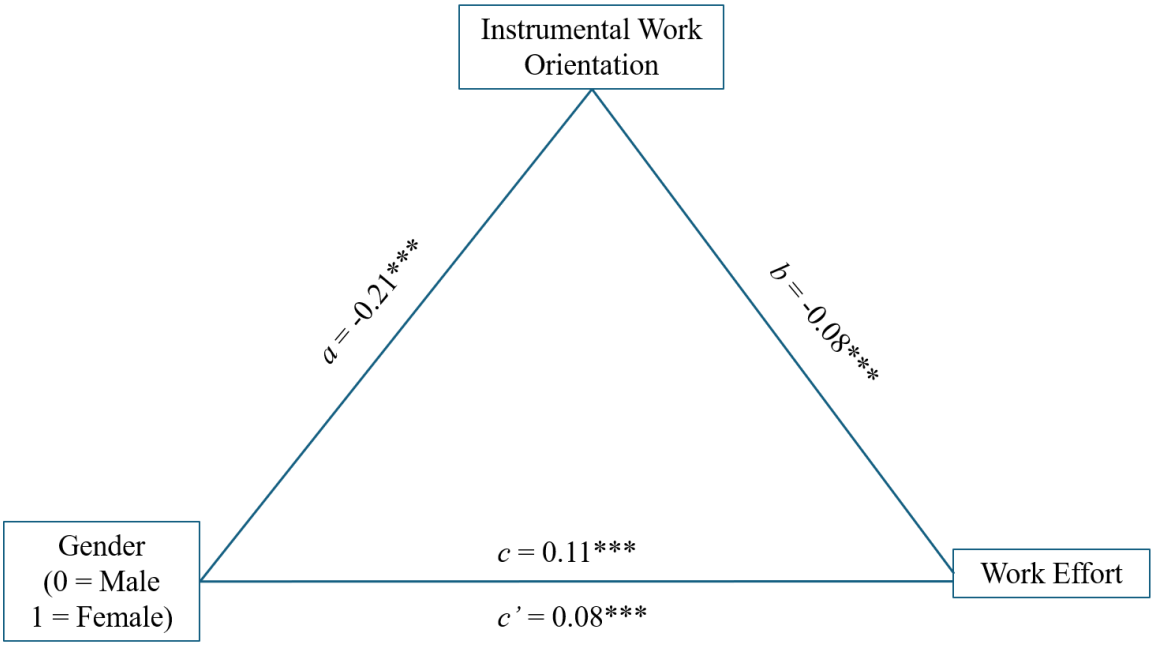
The Effect of Gender on Work Effort by Employment Status, Study 1



Interaction: $b = -.45$, $SE = .19$, $p = .016$

Figure 2

The Effect of Gender on Work Effort via Instrumental Orientation Toward Work, Study 2



Indirect effect = 0.02, *bootstrap SE* = 0.003, *95% bootstrap CI* [0.01, 0.02]