

Expectations around childcare a key factor holding women in the workplace back

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Despite significant strides in achieving gender equality in the workplace in recent decades, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles – and the reasons are more complex than simply navigating a patriarchal workspace, a new survey reveals.

The [Global Network for Advanced Management \(GNAM\) Women in the Global Workforce Survey](#) interviewed over 5,000 students and alumni from 28 business schools worldwide – including the UCT Graduate School of Business in South Africa. According to the findings, women across the world are still battling a dual challenge of social expectations that are at odds with what will make them upwardly mobile in the workplace.

“Women are often caught in a double whammy: societies give them a disproportionately large family role and rewards for pleasing personalities, whereas workplaces reward long hours on the job and assertiveness,” the authors note.

Local experts agree. Despite the overwhelming evidence in its favour, gender equality is taking one step forward and two steps back, says Liz de Wet, course convenor for the [Women in Leadership](#) programme at the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB). “Diversifying one’s pool of employees means increasing the size of the available talent pool. This automatically makes for a more competitive environment, which is good for any business. It also allows companies to serve an increasingly diverse customer base.”

GSB Senior Lecturer Linda Ronnie, who contributed to the report, says it is essential to educate employers. “Senior managers may not realise it, but they have the power to exacerbate or relieve the pressure employees are feeling to conform to perceived expectations,” she explains.

The study authors, political scientists Frances Rosenbluth, Gareth Nellis, and Michael Weaver, asked participants to choose one of two hypothetical candidates for promotion in their workplace with randomly scrambled attributes including gender, age, assertive or reserved personality, experience, and availability.

The study found that a key factor to emerge was the expectation that women would play a more active role in childcare, which had a knock-on effect in the expectations that women would spend less time at work, be less productive, and be less career-oriented.

“Across the board, respondents expected women to take on more of the responsibility of childcare,” the authors noted. Moreover, respondents reported a belief that their own managers would dislike female employees who did not seem family-oriented – even if this disadvantaged them at work.

“Whether or not their employers intend to send these signals, female employees are likely to be on the horns of a dilemma: spending hours at work might help them get promoted, but their boss (and everyone else) may at the same time dislike them for bucking societal expectations,” the study argued. “Male employees who choose to invest time in their careers may face less disapproval for reducing time devoted to childcare. Around the world the presumption is that the mother should bear more than 50% of the responsibility for childcare.”

Respondents tended to promote candidates who were available to work around the clock. However, productivity data indicated that availability did not have a noticeable impact on work output, and when this was communicated, availability no longer influenced promotions.

Further, respondents believed both men and women were more likely to be promoted if they were assertive, but this preference varied greatly across countries and – in countries where labour markets were male-dominated – women tended to be socialised for marriage by being “congenial, docile and companionable” rather than competitive and assertive.

“If employers give higher marks to an assertive personality... professional women face a trade-off: the very characteristic that helps them at work may harm them in their social relationships. It is important that families, schools, and firms understand what female workers are up against,” the authors said.

Working remotely was also less of an advantage than may previously have been assumed. Done after hours, it was viewed positively, but done during office hours, it was viewed negatively. Technology, in other words, may simply be extending the hours people are expected to work rather than equalising the playing field, say the authors.

The study made a number of key recommendations to employers. Firstly, they argue, reward productivity rather than hours in the office. Secondly, support diversity and personality differences. Third, encourage fathers who may want to be more involved in childcare. Fourth, use remote work options to create workplace flexibility, not endless work hours.

“Companies that develop a culture that supports women in the workplace also encourage a healthy work-life balance for all employees,” the study concludes. “Such a culture could prove an advantage in the competition for the best talent.”

The findings of the GNAM [Women in the Global Workforce Survey](#) were presented in a [webinar](#) on 8 March at 17:00 SAST, moderated by Della Bradshaw, former business education editor of the *Financial Times*. It was hosted by the Oxford Said Business School and featured a panel of Global Network faculty, students, and alumni.

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