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## The exacerbation of gender inequality: The effects of overwork on work outcomes

Loribeth Fitzgerald

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The exacerbation of gender inequality: The effects of overwork on work outcomes

by

Loribeth Fitzgerald

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of Honors Requirements

May 2021



Approved by:

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## **ABSTRACT**

Gender disparity in the workplace is a pervasive problem that has been widely studied, especially as to why women do not progress in their careers to the same degree as their male counterparts. Measures have been established for work-family conflict, and it has been claimed that this is the main factor that prevents women from advancing in their careers. Research into the unequal distribution of time, labor, and pay has become increasingly popular as a means to understand the forces contributing to women's stalled advancement. This study furthers this work to determine if gender inequality is a factor in overwork, burnout, and work-family conflict. It is hypothesized that women will experience outcomes more negatively than men. Data were retrieved from a survey that was given to working-age individuals via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which produced 400 responses. The results of this study revealed the men sampled experienced more negative outcomes than women. Although the findings did not align with the hypothesis, it is suggested that there are more significant implications to the gendered approach to overwork that should be explored. Future research is recommended to continue this line of inquiry and determine the mechanisms contributing to the gender gap in the workforce.

***Keywords: gender inequality, burnout, overwork, work-family conflict***

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to Jonathan, who spurred me to enroll in college despite feeling like I was not good enough. Thank you for giving me the drive to push myself and become the person I could be proud of. Since we first met, he has made me want to be the best version of myself. His motivations ignited a passion within me to work hard and achieve my goals. I want to thank him for the inspiration needed to start this journey, and more importantly, I want to thank myself for not giving up and fighting to be achieve my goals – no matter what.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This thesis has become a reality with the overwhelming support and guidance of many individuals. I want to offer my sincerest gratitude to each one of them.

I would like to express my most profound appreciation to my mentor, Dr. Jacob Breland, whose unrelenting guidance and encouragement allowed for my successful completion of this project. Through him, I have gained so much, and I am forever grateful for his knowledge, patience, and overwhelming support.

To my friends and family, I appreciate the encouragement and patience it has taken to support me along this journey.

I want to thank my Honors College advisor, Dr. Westley Follett, for his abundance of knowledge and enthusiasm. His excitement for learning, paired with his overall passion for academic research, was contagious, and I thank him for his efforts in preparing me for this journey.

I would also like to thank Mr. Russ Willis and Dr. Joseph Peyrefitte both of whom supported my ideas, provided genuine feedback and provided me with the lessons needed to become a better leader. They offered wisdom and encouragement throughout their courses, and I am forever grateful for the confidence their words instilled in me. These professors have had a lasting impact on me over these last two years inspired my ideas and given me confidence in ways they may never recognize.

Lastly, I would like to offer my warmest gratitude to the Drapeau Center for funding this project as well as the Honors College for providing me with the opportunity to participate in undergraduate research – an experience I will always treasure.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<a href="#">LIST OF TABLES</a> .....	ix
<a href="#">LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</a> .....	x
<a href="#">CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION</a> .....	1
<a href="#">Motivation</a> .....	1
<a href="#">CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE</a> .....	3
<a href="#">Overwork</a> .....	3
<a href="#">Significance of Gender Inequality and the Wage Gap</a> .....	4
<a href="#">Work-family Narrative as Social Defense</a> .....	4
<a href="#">Burnout</a> .....	6
<a href="#">CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY</a> .....	8
<a href="#">Participants</a> .....	8
<a href="#">Measures</a> .....	9
<a href="#">Burnout</a> .....	9
<a href="#">Overwork</a> .....	10
<a href="#">Work-Family Conflict</a> .....	10
<a href="#">CHAPTER IV: RESULTS</a> .....	11
<a href="#">CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION</a> .....	13
<a href="#">Limitations</a> .....	13
<a href="#">Future Implications</a> .....	13



<a href="#"><u>APPENDIX A: IRB Approval Letter</u></a> .....	15
<a href="#"><u>REFERENCES</u></a> .....	16

## LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table 1. <i>Participant Demographics (n=257)</i></u> .....	8
<u>Table 2. <i>Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations</i></u> .....	11
<u>Table 3. <i>Results of Mean Comparisons</i></u> .....	12

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

MTurk	Amazon Mechanical Turk
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## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

The shorter workweek is a forgotten American Dream (Hunnicut, 2013) that has been lost on a culture of overwork. The framework for how Americans conduct business, developed for manufacturing during industrialization, is far antiquated and does not translate to the modern workforce. Today, families are striving for balance, and in the modern age of dual-earner structures, they are falling short (Flood & Genadek, 2016). With the advancements of technology and the everchanging working environment, people are adapting their lives to the modern workforce.

However, the central issue remains – businesses have failed to adapt to reflect the current circumstances. The “cultural and normative expectations in the workplace and marriage are a key mechanism through which spousal overwork leads to gendered outcomes in job quitting” (Cha, 2010, p. 326). These pressures have pigeonholed women into sacrificing their careers by working shorter hours, avoiding competitive working environments, or quitting altogether (Cortes & Pan, 2019).

### **Motivation**

The goal of this study is to identify overwork between genders and determine if feelings of inequality are present. By identifying a relationship between perceptions of overwork, work-family conflict, and burnout in the workplace, and their impact on the disparity between genders, it is anticipated the findings will further the necessity for a work-life balance. This research will contribute to existing literature of gender inequality and will argue the need for dialogue and the restructuring of a cultural framework that eliminates the gender bias present in the modern workforce.

By integrating data from the global research firm, McKinsey & Company, the relevance of this research today was apparent after learning the implications it holds in the midst of a global pandemic. Companies cannot afford to lose their women leaders; the pandemic may force upwards of two million women out of the workforce – setting women’s progress back by years (Corry et al., 2020). With fewer women in positions of leadership, the cycle of gender disparity in the workplace continues, further stalling women’s advancement in the workforce.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Overwork

With enormous gains being made in reversing the education gap, women are faced with returning to working longer hours in order to help close the wage gap. It has been argued that the norm of overwork “systematically disadvantages women, who are less likely to work long hours because they are expected to take primary responsibility for household labor with minimal spousal support” (Cha, 2010, p. 304).

Men who work long hours often contribute less domestically, increasing women’s share of household labor, resulting in women less able to work long hours and facing the possibility of sacrificing their careers (Cha, 2010). This cyclical disadvantage to women perpetuates gender inequality in the workforce and at home. However, Dutch historian Rutger Bregman argues, “countries with shorter workweeks consistently top the gender equality rankings” (2017, para. 10). With fewer hours worked, there is a more equitable distribution of labor among workers, and this allows for domestic work as well. With men and women working more similar hours, men are able to contribute to family and chores.

Overwork’s contribution to the exacerbation of gender inequality stems from the inability for women to compete in a work environment that rewards long hours. The prevalence of overwork leads many dual-earner couples to return to their respective separate spheres of breadwinner and homemaker (Cha, 2010). As studied by Cortes and Pan (2019), although “the cross-occupation and time-series evidence of the relationship between the returns to working long hours and the gender pay gap are highly suggestive, they do not address the issue that occupations that disproportionately reward individuals

who work long hours are likely to differ on other important dimensions that may have an independent effect on the gender pay gap” (p. 3). These positions tend to be highly competitive, and as research has suggested, men will outperform women in these environments, and the women will “opt-out” of these competitions.

*Hypothesis 1: Overwork will affect women more than men.*

### **Significance of Gender Inequality and the Wage Gap**

Gender inequality remains a substantial issue nationwide and even more apparent in the workforce. Based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), women at all levels of educational attainment earn significantly less than men. Women who have received their bachelor’s degrees or higher can be expected to receive annual earnings that are 76 percent of that of men. This wage discrimination has been prevalent in society and is slowly on the decline.

Cortes and Pan (2019) found in their study of gender wage gaps among the highly skilled that “the return to long working hours...contributes to perpetuation of gender pay gaps among the highly skilled workers” (p.22). This gap is caused by an inequitable division of domestic work, such as raising families and household chores, which leave men more able to accept longer hours. This gender gap in overworking is detrimental to women’s success when jobs unevenly reward those working longer hours.

### **Work-family Narrative as Social Defense**

Researchers and sociologists have assessed the work-family narrative as too facile an explanation despite its prevalence in many discussions (e.g., Cha, 2013; Damaske 2011; Padavic et al., 2020; Stone, 2007). Not only is the work-family narrative dangerous to women and families, but it also fails to take in to account the underlying

cause of the problem – impossibly long hours engendering a culture of overwork, and companies’ inability and lack of promotion for female workers. This phenomenon is more aptly known as the broken rung (Huang et al., 2019).

Regarding family-work spillover, research suggests that the narrative regarding women’s family obligations is an incomplete explanation, and is instead an excuse that overlooks the culture of overwork itself. They argue that despite the “hegemonic narrative,” it is the failure of corporations to advance women to senior positions and the lack of representation that further women’s stalled advancement (Padavic et al., 2019).

Women are being held back in their careers by taking these accommodations given by organizations. The persistence of these accommodations as the dominant “solution” for work-family conflict among women perpetuates inequality. Organizations knowingly refute evidence supporting these claims and insist the failure of women to advance is dependent upon the individual and not the corporation (Padavic et al., 2019); however, this reasoning is equivocal. These among other factors contributing to the widespread acceptance of overwork culture “highlights the need for better understanding of the determinants of the demand for overwork” (Cortes & Pan, 2017, p. 109).

Gendered expectations are the distinguishing factor between men and women’s abilities to participate in overwork culture (Cha, 2010). The increase in working hours among men results in fewer hours spent contributing domestically. Despite the transition to dual earner families from men being the sole provider, the addition of children to families encourage overwork in men thus creating larger gender gaps by forcing women to reduce their level of work time participation (Jacobs & Gerson, 2001).



A study analyzing the relationship between overwork and the occupational choices of highly skilled women revealed that overwork affected women's labor market participation by reducing the desirability of the work environment (Cortes & Pan, 2017). Although overwork affects men and women, the normative expectation of women to bear the domestic burden influences their choice of what can be considered desirable working environments in the workplace, often forcing them to participate less – this opting-out is indicative of the sacrifices made due to the strain of work and family's imbalanced coexistence.

*Hypothesis 2: Women will report higher levels of work-family conflict than men.*

## **Burnout**

A 2001 study defined burnout as a “prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job,” stating that it was defined by three dimensions: “exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy” (Maslach et al., p. 397). The World Health Organization describes burnout as an “occupational phenomenon” that results from chronic stress in the workplace and although it is “not classified as a medical condition,” (2019, para. 1). There has been an increasing amount research to understand burnout, along with a rise in popular media reports on the phenomenon which suggest the fault remains with the company – not the individual (Garton, 2017). Burnout can be as physically, emotionally, and mentally taxing on employees.

A study conducted by the Meredith Corporation (2019) showed that beyond the emotional strain and unmanaged chronic stress from the workplace, the cultural norm of overwork, work-family conflict, and lack of visibility in the workplace force women to exist in an environment that perpetuates gender inequality. Over 45% of women feel that

work-life balance is an unattainable fantasy and are overwhelmed by a society that promotes overwork. Furthermore, 73% of women felt unseen for all that they are. The many roles that women face as their expected responsibilities contribute to the predominate feelings of burnout.

According to researchers at the University of Montreal, women face unequal treatment in the workplace and have less authority due to holding positions that offer little leeway in decision-making (Beauregard et al., 2018). Given women receive little to no recognition for their ideas and hard work (McClean et al., 2018), women are subjected to higher levels of frustration and overall stress with little opportunity for career advancement (Beauregard et al.). The lack of opportunity to utilize skills leads women to feel a greater lack of self-esteem compared to men. This combined with “limited access to greater control opportunities” can be attributed to women experiencing higher levels of burnout than men (Beauregard et al., p. 430-431). Beauregard et al. suggest women feel higher levels of burnout due to lower levels of skill utilization and low self-esteem and that this “specifically disadvantaged” women in the reported burnout levels, as a result of higher levels of work-family conflict and less time to engage in career advancement (p. 431).

*Hypothesis 3: Women will feel more significant levels of burnout.*

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

### Participants

The study used a national sample of 257 working age individuals who ranged from 18 to 68 years old with a mean age of 38 ( $SD = 11.26$ ). As shown in Table 1, the majority of participants were white (77%) and male (59%). The sample was comprised primarily of married/domestic partnerships (76%), followed by those reporting single (19%), and divorced, widowed comprising the remainder (5%). Participants came from all educational backgrounds with the majority holding degrees in higher education (85%).

Table 1. *Participant Demographics (n=257)*

<i>Demographic</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Demographic</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
<u>Race</u>			<u>Education</u>		
African American	23	9%	Some High School	3	1%
Asian American	34	13%	High School/GED	18	7%
Hispanic	5	2%	Some College	16	6%
White (non-Hispanic)	202	77%	Associate	7	3%
			Bachelor's Degree	172	65%
<u>Relationship Status</u>			Master's Degree	46	17%
Married/Domestic Partnership	201	76%	Doctorate	2	1%
Single	50	19%			
Divorced	5	2%	<u>Gender</u>		
Widowed	2	1%	Male	157	59%
Other	5	2%	Female	107	41%

*Note.* All percent values are rounded to nearest whole number.

Data were collected by hosting a survey on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) website, which is a crowdsourcing marketplace allowing participants to provide service/complete tasks for compensation. The intent for using MTurk was to secure a national sample at greater numbers than emailing and sharing the survey through other forms of media. Participants in the study were directed through MTurk to the survey system, Qualtrics, where they were informed of the scope of the project, the Institutional

Review Board approval, as well as the intentions for compensation. Participants provided electronic consent and continued through the survey.

Those who completed the survey were compensated one dollar for their time and participation, but this was contingent on two factors, minimum time and attention checks. The questionnaire was pilot-tested to determine approximately how long it would take a typical respondent to complete, and this assessment projected a typical time of 15-20 minutes. As a result, the researcher decided that a minimum time to earn the compensation was at least five minutes. For the attention checks, three questions (e.g., “leave this question blank” or “for this question select “does not apply””) were included in the survey to determine if responses were accurate. Those participants who passed at least two of three checks were allowed to be counted in the survey and were awarded compensation. Overall, 143 participants were removed for failing to meet the minimum time requirements and validity checks.

## **Measures**

### ***Burnout***

A 10-item self-measure for burnout, The Burnout Measure, Short Version was utilized to assess the level of the “individual’s physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion” (Malach-Pines, 2005, p.79). Participants rated statements on a 5-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5). Sample questions include “I am often tired,” “Work makes me feel trapped,” and “Where work is concerned, I feel like a failure.”

### ***Overwork***

The 11-item self-report measure, the overwork climate scale, was used to assess the perception of overwork. Statements were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5). Participants indicated their responses to questions that would indicate perceived reward for overwork such as, “Performing overwork is important for being promoted,” and “Almost everybody expects that employees perform overtime work.”

### ***Work-Family Conflict***

A 5-item self-report measure of work-family conflict was utilized to assess the level of “interrole conflict in which the general demands of, time devoted to, and strain created by the job interfere with performing family-related responsibilities” (Netemeyer et al., 1996, p. 401). Participants indicated their responses to questions such as “My job produces strain that makes it difficult to fulfill family duties,” and “The demands of my work interfere with my home and family life” on a five-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5).

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Table 2 reports means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for all study variables. Acceptable internal consistency levels were exhibited for all variables.

Table 2. *Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations*

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Age	37.75	11.27	—							
2 Sex	0.59	0.49	-0.04	—						
3 Race	0.51	1.03	-0.09	.13*	—					
4 Education	4.79	1.11	-0.02	0.07	0.26	—				
5 Relationship Status	1.87	0.57	.27**	-0.12	-0.17**	.13**	—			
6 Burnout	2.79	1.04	-0.11	0.08	0.01	.19**	-0.03	<i>0.95</i>		
7 Overwork	3.55	0.71	-0.08	0.02	-0.02	.31**	-0.05	.47**	<i>0.86</i>	
8 Work-family Conflict	3.67	0.78	-0.12	0.04	-0.07	.27**	0.01	.61**	.63**	<i>0.86</i>

*Note:* \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ ; reliabilities are shown in italics on the diagonal.

There are low (below  $\pm .29$ ) correlations between education levels and burnout ( $r = .19, p < .01$ ) as well as education level and work-family conflict ( $r = .27, p < .01$ ). Moderate levels (between  $\pm .30$  and  $\pm .49$ ) of correlation are shown between education and overwork ( $r = .31, p < .01$ ). The data also demonstrated a strong (between  $\pm .50$  and  $\pm 1$ ) correlation between work-family conflict and burnout levels ( $r = .61, p < .01$ ) as well overwork and work-family conflict ( $r = .63, p < .01$ ).

Table 3 reports mean comparisons for all variables. Overall, individuals reported an average level of burnout ( $M = 3.11$ ) and a higher level of work-family conflict ( $M = 3.66$ ). Men and women demonstrated similar responses to all variables with men feeling greater levels of burnout, overwork, and work-family conflict than women. Therefore, no support was found for Hypotheses 1, 2, or 3.

Table 3. *Results of Mean Comparisons*

<i>Demographic</i>	n	Mean	SD
<u>Burnout</u>			
Male	157	3.20	1.3348
Female	107	3.03	1.2653
<u>Overwork</u>			
Male	157	3.57	1.0918
Female	107	3.53	1.0621
<u>Work-family Conflict</u>			
Male	157	3.70	0.9867
Female	107	3.63	0.9825

## **CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION**

Although no significant difference between genders was found, males scored higher on burnout, overwork, and work-family conflict. These results do not support the study's hypotheses. Due to the slight difference between variables and average response, further study and retesting of these hypotheses are encouraged to adequately determine if differences do exist.

### **Limitations**

Survey data hosted on a paid worksite provided the data for the study. Future study and retesting may prove advantageous with a different data collection method that is comprised of known working individuals where the information collected is confidential rather than anonymous, which would allow for better verification of some parts of the sample. Due to the nature of data collection, honesty and willingness to participate remain uncertain. These sources of uncertainty limit the reliability of the results. Although attention checks were in place, and half of the data were removed due to failed reliability tests, there was enough responses to conduct the study. Self-report data of perceptions is difficult to quantify; however, overwork is measurable. Further research utilizing data of how much time people actually work to predict feelings of overwork may prove more informative. It can be speculated that utilizing more advanced statistical analysis would offer more insight into the effects of overwork and burnout.

### **Future Implications**

Although men suffer high levels of burnout and overwork, women are more likely to accept flexible arrangements. Research has demonstrated that women who accept these arrangements fail to advance in their careers. However, when presented with



evidence that women pay a higher price, evidence exists that overwork culture is still detrimental to men. Despite this, management maintains their belief that work-family conflict was the explanation for women's lack of success – not the culture of overwork itself (Padavic et al., 2019).

If, by taking accommodations offered by organizations, women are being held back in their careers, the organization's persistence in offering this as the dominant “solution” for work-family conflict among women perpetuates inequality. Organizations knowingly refute evidence supporting these claims and insist the failure of women to advance is dependent upon the individual and not the corporation (Padavic et al., 2019). The equivocal reasoning by leadership among other factors contributing to the widespread acceptance of overwork culture “highlights the need for better understanding of the determinants of the demand for overwork” (Cortes & Pan, 2017, 109).

Although not predominately observed in this study, past research demonstrates “the fact that women saw their burnout levels significantly reduced compared with men by increasing time invested in domestic tasks may indicate that more time outside work may be necessary to recover from work demands” (Beauregard et al., 2018, p. 433). Further study is recommended to determine how these potential moderators will affect feelings of gender inequality.

## APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Office of  
Research Integrity



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### NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident template on Cayuse IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.
- Face-to-Face data collection may not commence without prior approval from the Vice President for Research's Office.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-20-288

PROJECT TITLE: The exacerbation of gender inequality: The effects of overwork on work-family spillover

SCHOOL/PROGRAM: Management

RESEARCHER(S): Beth Fitzgerald, Jacob Breland

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved

CATEGORY: Expedited

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: August 20, 2020

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.

Institutional Review Board Chairperson

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