

The Juggle

the industry's biggest consultation into
work-life balance for women



in partnership with **timewise**

Foreword by Elizabeth Anyaegbuna, Bloom President 2023-24

Bloom's role in helping women better their experiences and opportunities from the marketing, media and communications industry is our critical KPI. It's with great pride that I write this foreword to the research results from our seminal study, The Juggle.

At Bloom, we know that for many women, the lines between work and life are increasingly blurred. The demands of careers intertwine in complex ways with responsibilities and identities outside the workplace. That's why with The Juggle, we set out to uncover realities and drive positive change around this elusive concept of 'work-life balance'.

The data confirms many women shoulder a disproportionate burden, especially those facing intersectional challenges. COVID-19 exacerbated domestic workloads for many. This study comes as we have returned to a 'new normal'. Today, work-life imbalance hampers careers, relationships and wellbeing. But the research provides a roadmap forward. By examining disparities, we can now shape bespoke solutions.

For working mothers, boundaries are porous – children affect work and vice versa. Marginalised groups like women of colour handle added financial stresses. For all, work and life intersect, not exist as separate spheres.

Bloom believes progress requires truth, empathy and collaboration. With The Juggle, we aim to equip managers and leaders to foster supportive, equitable workplaces. The goals are simple: policies, cultures and spaces where women can thrive holistically, with their needs understood.

Most managers want to support their teams. This data will help overcome unconscious biases and drive change. Employees too can advocate more effectively for support by making the business case with the findings from The Juggle.

The courageous women who shared their stories hope for a better future; we want to honour them by using these lessons to take action together. A more inclusive industry that allows women to fully contribute will benefit us all.



Introduction

Concerns about work-life balance are cited as a key factor in women's continued underrepresentation in particular job roles. To uncover why this is and explore the intersectional differences contributing to this disparity, we launched the industry's biggest ever consultation into work-life balance.

The research, which was conducted between July and November 2023, saw 704 women take our survey to tell us their lived experiences in the world of work, and was complemented by a further 21 in-depth interviews. We've taken care to seek input from women from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, sexualities, parental, reproductive and care-giver status, those with disabilities, physical and mental health conditions, neurodivergence, and those experiencing perimenopause and menopause, as well as seeking a representative sample from across different sectors within the marketing and communications industry.

While data is only ever current for a moment in time, our sample is strong, and what follows are the findings of real women working in our industry; their attitudes to work-life balance, the impact work has on their personal relationships and vice versa, their experiences at work and whether their employers could or should be doing more.

“To me, work-life balance is having a life outside of work that you have the energy and excitement to participate in. Being able to maintain existing relationships, see loved ones and pursue new interests and connections outside of work. Having time to be creative. Having a job that doesn't feel like work and being a part of a team where you can bring your full self everyday so you don't feel like you have to go home in order to live your real life.”

This consultation sought to explore whether certain groups of women are disproportionately affected by a lack of work-life balance more than others – and while it was a hypothesis we were testing, seeing the results in black and white has been quite stark. As such, in response to our findings, we've created guidance for businesses and individuals to address these issues and work to fix them in a truly equitable way. Because for all women to succeed, we need to move beyond equality and beyond treating all women as one homogenous group. Instead, we must recognise that different groups of women have different needs, and work to ensure that the worst affected are given the specific appropriate resources, support and opportunities needed to achieve better work-life balance, like their less-impacted colleagues.

<https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/bjso.12411>

Whenever we refer to women in this report, we mean those who identify as women.

The state of play: an executive summary



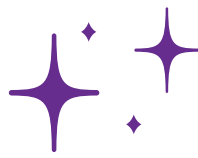
We asked women what work-life balance means to them and there were lots of commonalities; the ability to manage pressure without overwhelm, having adequate time to fulfil both commitments at home and in the workplace, achieving personal and career goals, and feeling in control. Ultimately, a lot of the answers boiled down to one thing: women don't want to have to make sacrifices – at work or outside of it.

But currently, they are. Although 97% of women consider work-life balance important, a quarter rate their own balance as poor or very poor. Over half (54%) of women frequently feel overwhelmed by their workload, and a third have limited or no control over the amount of work assigned to them. Two thirds of women engage in overtime at least once a week, but only 16% say they're happy to do it. It seems we've accepted overtime work as part of the job, but we're not being fairly compensated, with 57% saying their employer doesn't compensate them financially or with time in lieu for additional hours worked.

"I feel I'm not able to ask for flexible help as if I'm not there 9am to 6pm, they'll get someone who is. It's a company-wide feeling."

Working in a service-based industry where there is no end to the work, it's widely felt that we as employees and delivery partners can always do more. As much as that creates an exciting environment and is the reason so many of us love working in this industry, it's also a threat; as individuals we need to set boundaries with our employers and clients. The onus cannot be on our employers alone to 'fix' work-life balance.

"I am clear about how much work can be done, even though with Marketing you never get to the end of your task list. It means I can pack up and do my own activities in the evenings without being judged. Some of this is my workplace and some of it is me setting health boundaries for me and my team."



So how, then, is life outside of work being impacted? Primarily, it's being internalised; 93% of women say a lack of work-life balance has negatively impacted their mental health to some extent, with almost half of women (48%) saying their mental health has been significantly impacted. Three-quarters of women have experienced negative changes in their mood and emotional wellbeing due to a lack of work-life balance, two fifths (43%) have experienced symptoms of stress, anxiety or burnout, with 13% experiencing this daily, and more than 4 in 5 (83%) have experienced physical health issues as a result.

And when it's not internalised, it's impacting relationships; 4 in 5 women find it difficult to disconnect from work and take time for personal activities and relationships, and three-quarters say a lack of work-life balance has negatively impacted their relationships with family and friends. Only 36% of women feel they're 'sometimes' able to balance work and personal life, and a third think work doesn't allow for a healthy integration of personal and professional life. How, then, can we as individuals find the right tools and skills to help with this separation of personal and professional, and what is the role of our employers to help us do this?

Just half of women (53%) are satisfied with the flexible working arrangements their employer offers. It's clear that the status quo isn't working and more needs to be done. Flexible working – which is so much more than a hybrid office / work from home set up, or early finish Fridays – is undoubtedly a factor in improving work-life balance, it is just one aspect. Being properly financially compensated for the job you do, having an appropriate workload, and feeling fulfilled, respected and supported in your professional and personal life are all factors in getting better work-life balance, cited by women in this study.



“My employer offers formal flexible working, which I use, but also takes a hybrid approach generally. My own department also allows me to generally manage my own time, i.e. shift my hours in order to accommodate family needs.”

How different groups of women are impacted

While we intentionally sought the views and experiences of a diverse group of women across the sector they work in, their parental status, ethnicity, sexuality, age, seniority, whether they have health conditions, are neurodivergent, are experiencing perimenopause or menopause, we are also conscious that not every woman fits neatly under a specific label, and that intersectionality is key to ensuring an equitable future for all women.

Here, we've highlighted the main findings for each of the following groups, in the knowledge that there is undoubtedly crossover between them (for example, a woman could be Black, living with a chronic condition and trying to conceive):

Sector within the industry



Ethnicity

Parental status

Sexual orientation

Disabilities, neurodivergence and physical or mental health conditions

Perimenopause and menopause

Sector-specific findings

Women's experiences of work-life balance vastly differ depending on the sector of our industry they work in. Generally, those who place more importance on achieving good work-life balance tend to work in sectors where they currently have better balance.



Those who state work-life balance is 'very' important:

Ad tech: 86%

Media owner: 83%

Media agency: 81%

Creative agency: 81%

In-house: 79%

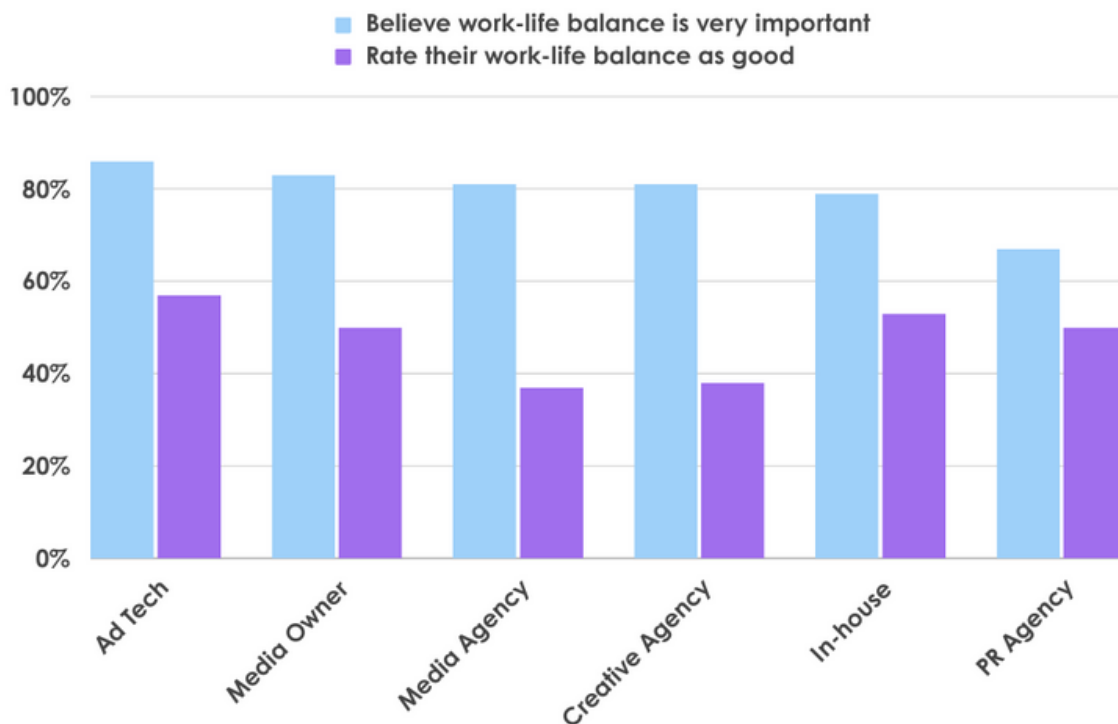
PR agency: 67%



While the desire is clear, what women are experiencing is very different. The numbers of those rating their current work-life balance as good or excellent are lower across all sectors:

Ad tech: 57%
In-house: 53%
PR agency: 50%
Media owner: 50%
Creative agency: 38%
Media agency: 37%

Work-life balance in different sectors



Almost two thirds of those working for media owners 'frequently' or 'very frequently' feel overwhelmed by their workload (63%), followed by over half of those working for media agencies (58%), PR agencies (53%) and in-house (53%). At the other end of the spectrum are those working in ad tech, although two fifths (41%) still frequently feel overwhelmed.

Two-fifths of those working in creative agencies (42%) and media agencies (39%) say that work doesn't allow for a healthy integration of personal and professional life. Even worse, half of those working in creative agencies and media agencies frequently experience symptoms of stress, anxiety and burnout as a result of poor work-life balance. And while this drops for PR agencies, in-house workers and media owner staff, it's still a third of all employees frequently experiencing this.

But why is it that agency employees are suffering the most?

"There is a cultural expectation of working overtime, and if not doing so being perceived as slacking - some employees treat this as competition to prove they work the hardest, and it's affecting others"

✦ ✦ ✦ Creative agency employee

There are common themes to explain why agency employees are struggling more than other sectors: the nature of prioritising client needs and juggling multiple clients, plus the pressure around pitching and the expectation that pitches come first, above all else.

So what can employers do to help lighten the load? Seemingly, they need to up their game, as satisfaction with current flexi working policies could be higher, with the following stating they're somewhat or very dissatisfied:



Creative agencies - 24%
Media owner - 21%
In-house - 20%
Ad tech - 17%
Media agency - 16%
PR agency - 16%

But it's not all bad news. When it comes to satisfaction with time for personal time outside of work, 75% of those in ad tech are satisfied or very satisfied, followed by 63% of those working in-house, compared to just 53% of those in creative agencies.

It seems, then, that more women working in ad tech have a better work-life balance than those in many other sectors. And yet, 65% of those women have experienced negative changes in their mood or emotional state as a result of poor work-life balance. Even those sectors where women are seemingly 'doing better' are still struggling, with three quarters of those in ad tech and PR agencies experiencing physical health issues as a result of poor work-life balance.

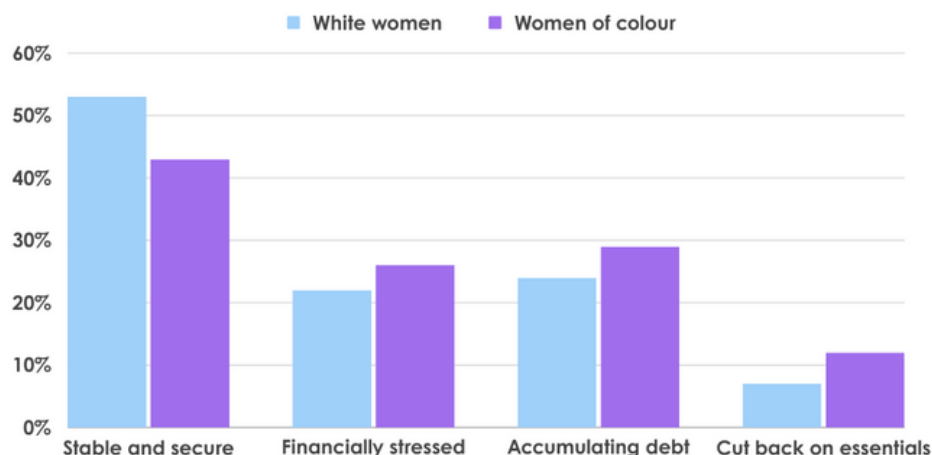
Sadly, the picture is worse in other sectors, with 86% of those working in-house having experienced physical health issues, followed by 84% of media agency and media owner workers and those in creative agencies.

Ethnicity

It is perhaps sadly unsurprising but no less reprehensible that women of colour experience poor work-life balance more than their white colleagues. Overall, more women of colour have been negatively impacted, and as a group they are less satisfied with the current status quo. They are sadly more likely to have experienced financial challenges in the last year than white women.

Looking at financial status specifically, women of colour are less likely to describe their financial status as 'stable and secure' than white women (43% vs 53%), feel financially stressed more than white women (26% vs 22%). Additionally, in the last 12 months, they are more likely to have accumulated debt or increased credit card balances (29% vs 24%), as well as skipped meals or cut back on essentials (12% vs 7%). Given the ethnicity pay gap, it's evident that women of colour face the additional burden of financial stress.

Financial status of women by ethnicity

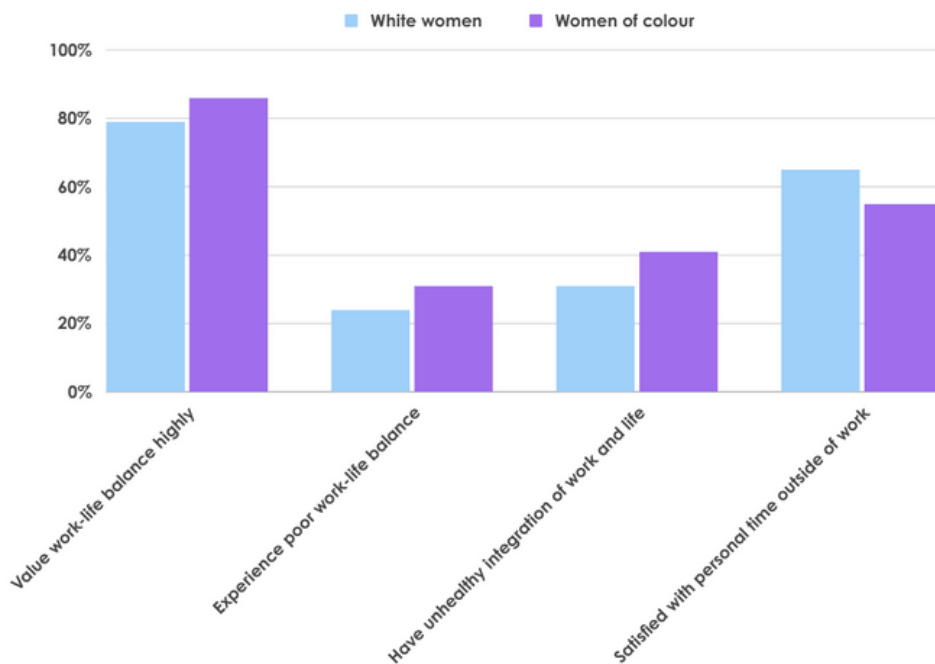


The impact of this on mental and physical health and personal relationships cannot be overlooked. Women of colour are more likely to have experienced negative changes in their mood as a result of work-life imbalance, compared to white women (82% vs 74%) and four fifths of women of colour say a lack of work-life balance has negatively impacted their personal relationships, compared to three-quarters of white women.



More women of colour say work-life balance is 'very' important (86%) than white women (79%). Yet despite valuing it more highly, women of colour are more likely to rate their current work-life balance as 'poor' or 'very poor' (31%), more so than white women (24%). Two fifths of women of colour (41%) don't feel their work allows for a healthy integration of personal and professional life, compared to a third (31%) of white women. Just 55% of women of colour are satisfied with the time they have for personal time outside of work, compared to 65% of white women.

Work-life balance by ethnicity



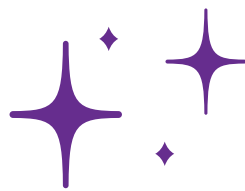
Looking at workplace experience specifically, two thirds of women of colour feel their ethnicity means they face unique challenges or barriers in achieving work-life balance. Over half (54%) say there's a lack of representation or inclusion in decision-making processes in comparison to white colleagues, a third (35%) have experienced microaggressions or stereotypes related to race or ethnicity, a quarter (24%) have experienced discrimination or bias in the workplace, and one in ten (11%) say they have more limited access to flexible working arrangements compared to their white colleagues.

In the same way this report seeks to stop all women being treated the same, we cannot explore differences between ethnic groups by only looking at women of colour in comparison to white women. There are clear differences in the data between mixed race, Asian, Black and other backgrounds. For example, Black women are twice as likely as Asian women to be experiencing financial hardship. They're also significantly more likely than any other ethnic group to rate their own work-life balance as poor/very poor.

South Asian women are significantly more likely than other ethnic minority groups to frequently feel overwhelmed by their workload, and they're more likely to say that work doesn't allow for a healthy integration of personal and professional life.

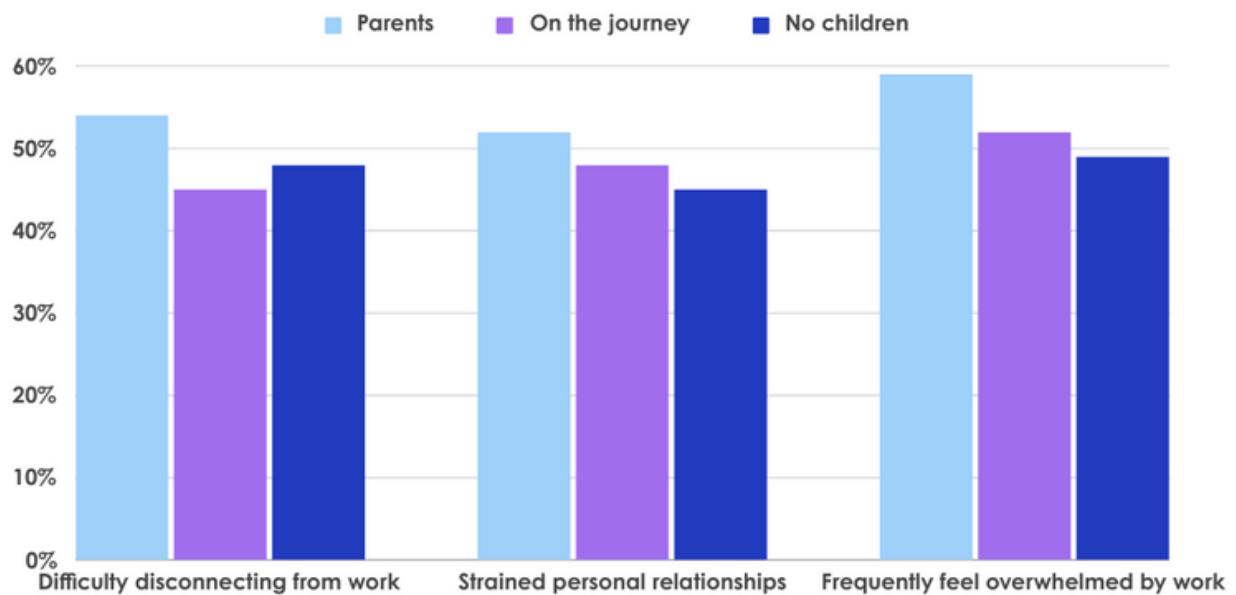


So what can employers do differently? For starters, giving women from different ethnic backgrounds the same support and access to initiatives or policies. While that sounds obvious – and is a legal requirement – our findings show that women of colour don't feel like they're being treated equally to their white colleagues. When asked what employers could do differently to benefit women of colour, equality came up high, as they perceive they don't receive the same solutions and benefits as their white colleagues. Half (54%) want pay policies targeted at equality of remuneration, a third (32%) want equal access to flexible working arrangements, and a quarter (25%) want equal access to enhanced parental leave or caregiver support.



Equality is one thing, but to be truly equitable, women of colour need to be given additional support to ensure they're able to achieve better work-life balance, just like their white colleagues. Two-thirds (65%) of women of colour would like to see their employer offer mentorships, coaching or sponsorship programmes for women of colour, and over half (52%) would like to see mandatory cultural sensitivity and diversity and inclusion training rolled out in their workplace.

Work-life balance challenges: parental status



When it comes to those on the journey, they're more likely to agree that work allows for a healthy integration of personal and professional life. This group is also more likely to say they're satisfied with the work-life balance policies and initiatives on offer. This could suggest that employers are better at allowing people to take personal time when pregnant, and that current policies are designed around or potentially even favour women expecting.

It seems then, that parents have it hardest. Those on the journey are largely happy and feel more supported, but seemingly this support wanes when mothers return to work.

"The demands on both sides are huge; I work part-time and somewhat need to keep up with the demand of the job when everyone else is doing full-time. No changes or adapted expectations for me, I still have to deliver so end up working full-time in 4 days. Home is equally demanding with a lot of travel to take my older one to secondary school. This is without counting the housework and ongoing management of the household."

~ Mother of two working part-time

In fact, a fifth of women with children or who are pregnant say they don't or didn't feel supported by their colleagues and supervisors in maintaining work-life balance as a pregnant woman/mother.

And when it comes to those without children, perhaps unsurprisingly, they rate their current work-life balance slightly better than the other two groups (50% excellent or very good vs 45%). That said, those without children are less satisfied with the current flexible working arrangements available to them, with a fifth (21%) saying they're 'somewhat' or 'very' dissatisfied, vs 15% of mothers.

There's a feeling amongst those without children that having them provides a socially accepted justification for requesting flexible working arrangements. Flexing around school pick up and drop off or reduced hours are deemed a valid request, but other reasons not related to children don't carry as much weight with employers.

"I requested condensed and/or reduced hours, which many of the mothers in my company already take, but my request was denied. I genuinely believe if I had children, they would have accepted my request."

Regardless of parental status, all women are struggling. There's little difference between the groups for regularly experiencing symptoms of stress, anxiety and burnout as a result of poor work-life balance (40-44%), and half of those with and those without children say their mental health is significantly impacted.

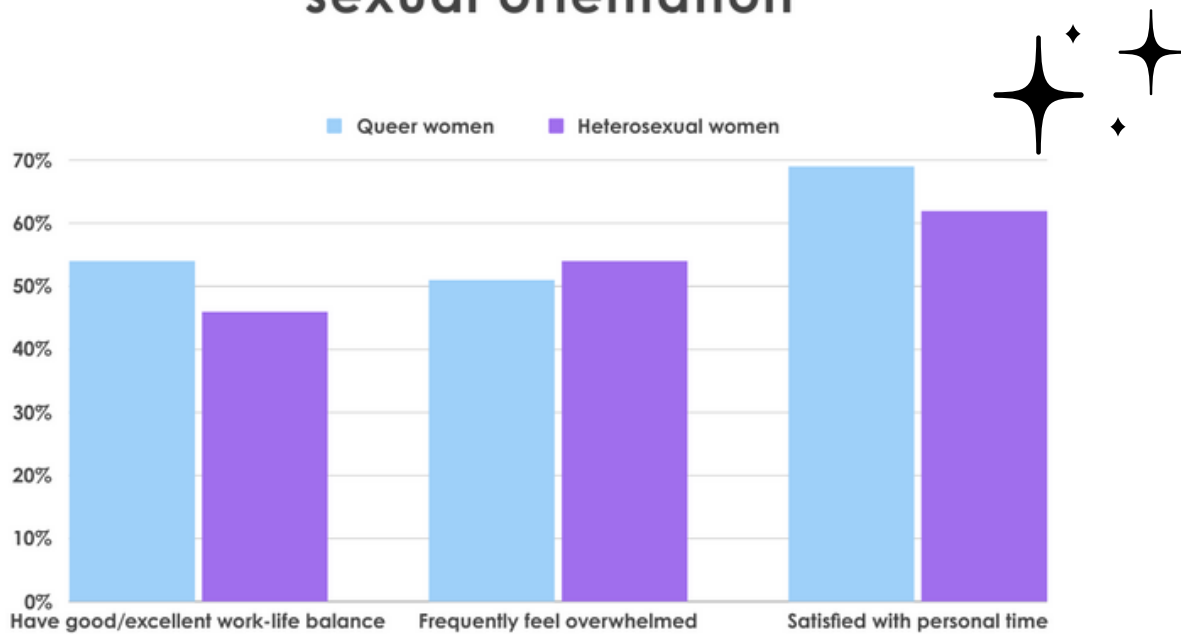


Sexual orientation

As part of our research, participants were asked to disclose their sexual orientation. We understand that the term 'queer' isn't one that all women will choose to use to self-describe, but where we refer to queer women here, we're using the term to include all those who are part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Overall, queer women rate their current work-life balance higher than heterosexual women (54% versus 46% who rate it good or excellent). Queer women are slightly less likely to frequently feel overwhelmed by their workload, although 51% still do (compared to 54% of heterosexual women), and in fact, 69% of queer women say they're satisfied with the time they have for personal time outside of work, compared to 62% of heterosexual women.

Work-life balance: sexual orientation



But it's not all rosy; compared to heterosexual women, queer women are slightly less satisfied with the current flexible working arrangements on offer, and they're more likely to say they're dissatisfied with the work-life balance policies and initiatives on offer from their employer (21% vs 16%). In fact, 15% say there's a lack of inclusive policies or benefits for LGBTQ+ employees in their place of work.

The workplace isn't doing enough for queer women; 15% feel their work-life balance is impacted by their queer identity, and 15% have experienced microaggressions or stereotypes related to being LGBTQ+.

"Not much discrimination personally, as I have seen others be treated differently, so I have kept it quiet. Just being a woman has caused me problems, so being queer is something I can keep to myself."

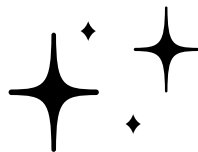
With some queer women choosing to keep their sexuality private for fear of experiencing discrimination at work, and not being able to be their authentic selves, and with others facing microaggressions or bias, there's a clear impact on the mental health of these women.

They are more likely to regularly experience symptoms of stress, anxiety and burnout as a result of work-life imbalance, compared to heterosexual women; half (49%) experience this frequently / almost every day, versus two fifths (42%) of heterosexual women.

Queer women are significantly more likely to agree that a lack of work-life balance has negatively impacted their personal relationships (62% vs 47% of heterosexual women), and they're significantly more likely to say they've experienced physical health issues as a result of poor work-life balance (61% vs 42%).

There are clear differences in financial security too; two thirds of queer women describe themselves as financially stressed, compared to half (55%) of heterosexual women, just two fifths of this group describe their financial status as stable and secure, versus half (52%) of heterosexual women, and one in five (20%) has skipped meals or cut back on essential spending to save money, compared to just 7% of heterosexual women.

Over half (54%) of queer women would like their employer to offer LGBTQ+ inclusive diversity training, and 46% would like enhanced parental leave or caregiver support inclusive of LGBTQ+ families. Two fifths (42%) would like their employer to offer support groups or networks for LGBTQ+ employees, and a third (32%) would like access to gender-neutral and inclusive bathroom facilities.



Disabilities, neurodivergence and physical or mental health conditions

Under the Equality Act, a mental health condition is considered a disability if it has a long-term effect on your normal day-to-day activity. In our research, we asked about different types of physical and mental disabilities, as well as mental health conditions, to enable us to uncover differences between the groups.

We also looked at neurodiversity, which describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways. A person who is neurodivergent processes information differently to a person who is neurotypical. While the terms neurodiversity and neurotypical could be seen as problematic in their binary nature (not to mention that an individual by their very nature cannot be 'diverse'), for the purposes of this report, we'll use neurodiverse to describe anyone who has autism, ADHD, ADD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, OCD, Tourette Syndrome, or any other form of neurodivergence.

While there's very little difference between how those with a disability / mental health condition rate their own work-life balance versus those who don't, it's important to note some key themes in how they experience work. One in ten of those with a mental health condition (10%) or a disability (11%) say they have no control over their own workload, versus 6% of those without.

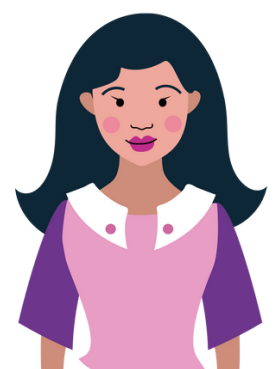
Two fifths of those with a disability say work allows for no integration of personal and professional life, versus 31% of those who aren't disabled. Plus, over a quarter of those with a disability are dissatisfied with the work-life balance policies and initiatives offered by their employer, compared to 15% of those who have a mental health condition, and those without either.

It's clear that these policies and initiatives need an overhaul, as there's a heavier mental and physical health toll as a result of poor work-life balance for those with a disability or mental health condition – they're twice as likely (22%) to say that a lack of work-life balance impacts their mental health in an extreme way, versus those without a condition or disability (11%). A fifth of those with a mental health condition (20%) or disability (23%) experience symptoms of stress, anxiety and burnout almost every day, compared to 13% of those without.

Two thirds of those with a disability (66%) or mental health condition (65%) find it challenging to disconnect from work, compared to half of those without a condition or disability, and 70% of those with a mental health condition have experienced physical health issues as a result of poor work-life balance, alongside 62% of those with a disability, compared to just 39% of those without either.

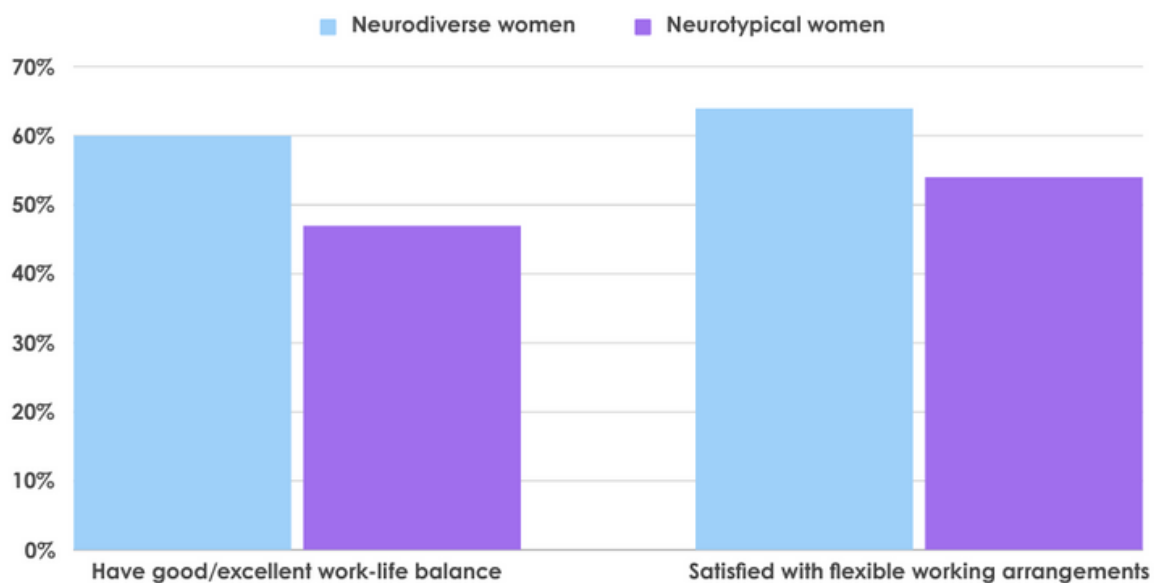
One reason for this could be financial pressure. Women with mental health conditions or disabilities are significantly more likely to have experienced financial challenges in the past year, versus women without, and they're more likely to describe themselves as being regularly financially stressed (38% of those with a mental health condition and 32% of those with a disability, versus 21% of those without either). Perhaps they're staying in jobs that don't give them the support and headspace they need because they're financially challenged – or because they don't feel there's a better alternative elsewhere. What's more, almost a quarter of women (23%) with disabilities or mental health conditions have experienced discrimination or bias from colleagues or managers, and 47% find it difficult to manage their workload alongside health-related demands.

“My employer doesn't seem to have any policies in place but says they will look into it and have offered that I be the main touch point in the company. This doesn't really help as it's a recent diagnosis and I'm looking for support, not to be the support.”



Interestingly, when we look at women who are neurodiverse, they're overall more satisfied with their work-life balance; 60% rate their current work-life balance as good or excellent, vs 47% of neurotypical women, and two-thirds (64%) are satisfied with their current flexible working arrangements, versus 54% of neurotypical women.

Work-life balance: neurodiverse vs neurotypical



There's little difference between the two groups when it comes to feeling overwhelmed by their workload (four fifths of both groups), but neurodiverse women are twice as likely (21%) to experience symptoms of stress, anxiety and burnout almost daily as a result, and they're significantly more likely to have experienced physical health issues (91%) as a result of poor work-life balance than neurotypical women (80%).

So what can employers do differently? Over two-thirds of those with a disability, mental health condition or neurodivergence would like to see increased flexibility in working hours and remote working options (68%), and additional training or awareness programmes on disability inclusion (64%). Half (47%) would like collaborative support networks or employee resource groups, and 29% want enhanced accessibility measures in the workplace.



Perimenopause and menopause

At any one time, it is estimated there are around 13 million perimenopausal or menopausal women working in the UK; equivalent to a third of the workforce. As we highlighted in the Bloom Menofesto, around 80% of these women will experience any number of 48 physical and psychological symptoms to a greater or lesser extent and it will sadly take a hefty toll on 1 in 4, seriously affecting their career, confidence, ambition & progression. 1 in 4 will consider leaving their jobs, 1 in 10 will eventually quit, and tragically, 1 in 10 will feel suicidal.

It is unsurprising then, that menopausal women are significantly more likely to rate their work-life balance as poor or very poor (38% versus 24% of those not experiencing symptoms of menopause). The psychological toll is echoed here in our findings; while 52% of those who aren't experiencing the menopause frequently feel overwhelmed by their workload, this rises to 58% of perimenopausal women, and 70% of menopausal women.

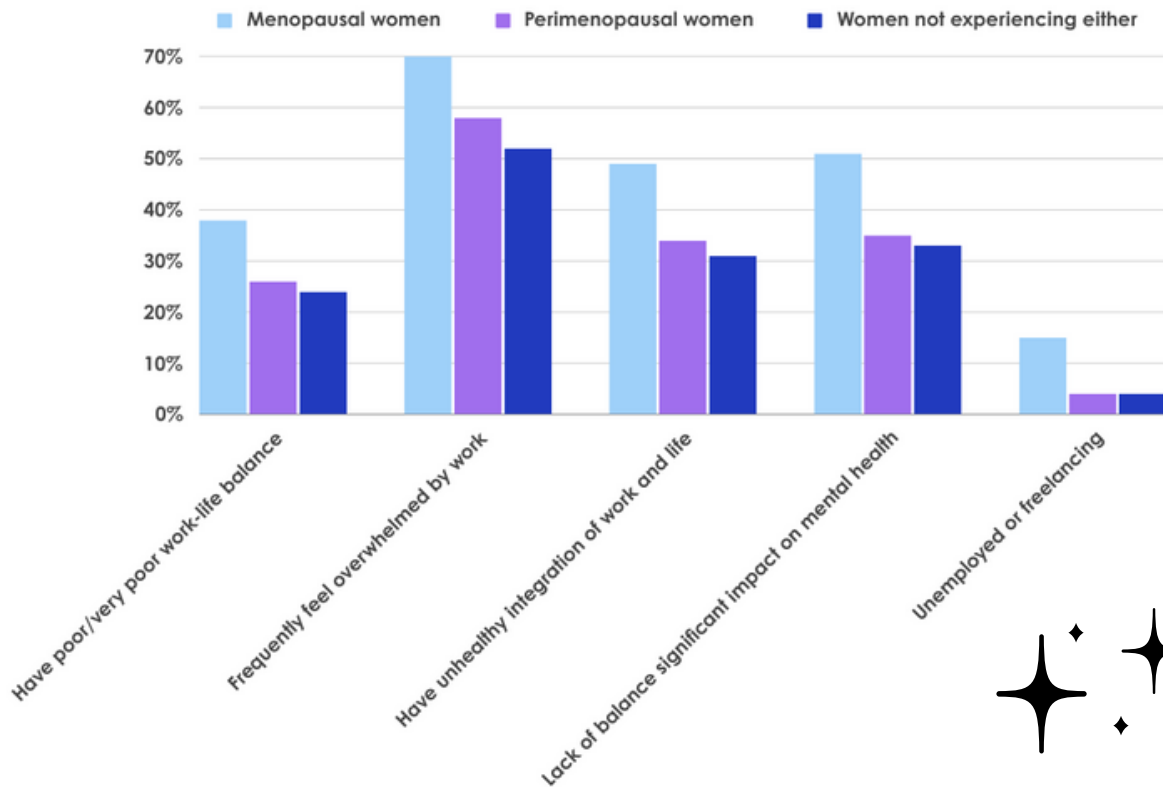
Half of menopausal women (49%) don't believe work allows for a healthy integration of personal and professional life – way above a third of perimenopausal women (34%) and women who aren't experiencing symptoms (31%). Plus, menopausal women are much more likely to say a lack of work-life balance 'significantly' impacts their mental health (51% vs 35% perimenopausal women and 33% of those not experiencing symptoms). Is it then, that those experiencing menopause symptoms are struggling more with the juggle, or are they struggling more because of their debilitating symptoms?

Interestingly, menopausal women are significantly more likely to be unemployed or freelance (15% vs 4% of the rest of the workforce), which could suggest that they have chosen to leave full or part-time jobs. Or perhaps – as has been suggested many times before – we're operating in an ageist industry which forces older women to leave the workforce when employers fail to cater to what they need.

[ps://www.engage.england.nhs.uk/safety-and-innovation/menopause-in-the-workplace/#:~:text=It%20is%20estimated%20that%20there,can%20last%20for%20several%20years.](https://www.engage.england.nhs.uk/safety-and-innovation/menopause-in-the-workplace/#:~:text=It%20is%20estimated%20that%20there,can%20last%20for%20several%20years.)

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Work-life balance: menopause status



Through an intersectional lens

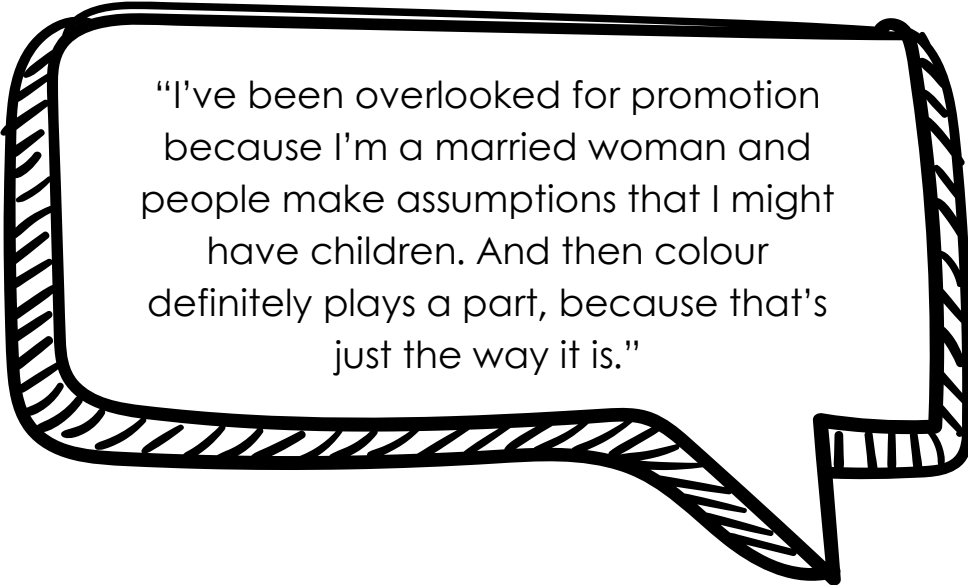
While it's clear that different groups of women are negatively impacted due to their ethnicity, their religion or sexuality, their parental status, whether they have a health condition or are neurodiverse, their age, or even the sector of this industry they work in, what can't be covered by data alone is how these different groups intersect.

Without looking to address women's experiences of work-life balance through an intersectional lens, we may inadvertently perpetuate the very systems of oppression that have led to the current status quo; a queer woman's experience of bias against motherhood will be very different to that of a heterosexual woman's, for example.

Through a series of in-depth interviews, we sought the lived experiences of a multitude of multi-hyphenate women: Black-queer-women, South-Asian-mothers, mixed-race-women-trying-to-conceive, Black-neurodiverse-women, white-mothers-and-caregivers-with-mental-health-conditions, and so on.

There were clear themes that came out of these discussions.

Women of colour who are mothers are being held back at work, and they can't say if it's because of their ethnicity, or their family commitments. Many feel that their male managers don't truly understand what the juggle is like when it comes to kids, and there's a certain amount of resignation that as women of colour, they're already on the back foot when it comes to being considered for promotion.



"I've been overlooked for promotion because I'm a married woman and people make assumptions that I might have children. And then colour definitely plays a part, because that's just the way it is."

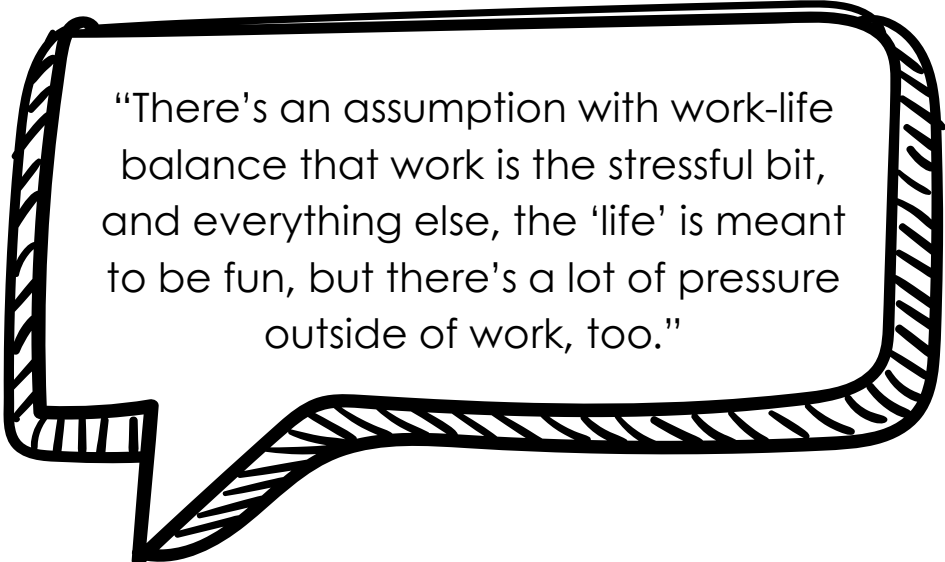


The cultural juggle is real; working in a white-dominated and traditionally Christian country – if you are neither of those – means having yet another thing to juggle, alongside caring responsibilities, health issues, etc. Those whose clients or employers don't understand their cultural or religious background, often feel obliged to justify why they want to take time off to mark specific celebrations or holidays. It's just one more thing to add to the mental load.

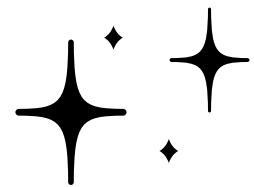


"I don't have family around me and it's important for me to mark [Diwali] for my kids. There's a lot of chat in the family WhatsApp groups about how we're all celebrating and it's a lot of pressure to prep for when you're working full-time, and being a mother, and you really want to be a part of it and create that space, but it's a lot of cultural pressure to juggle alongside client pressures".

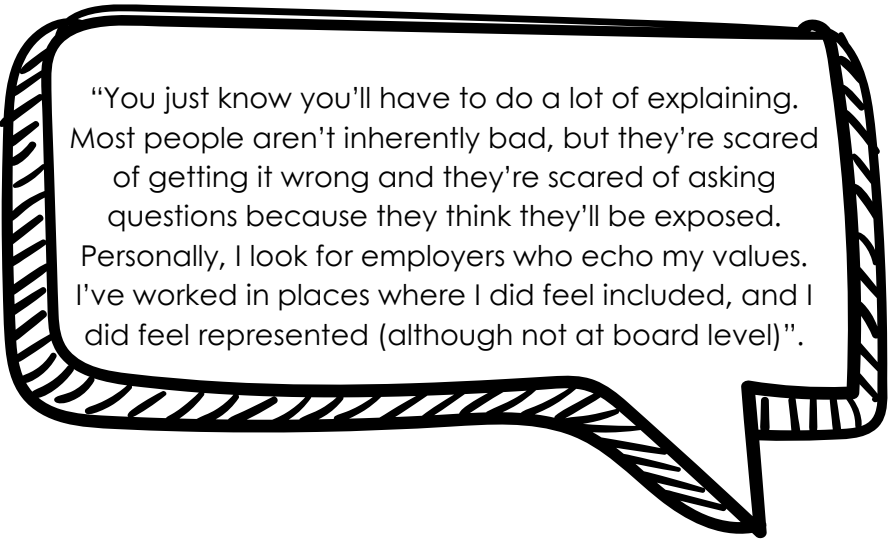
There are expectations of what you're meant to do or how you're meant to act in the workplace as a woman, and when you start to layer on other elements, like being a mother, being a woman of colour, being someone's partner or carer, there's an element of friction between all of those things, each with their own set of unwritten rules. And that's before you get to think about you as an individual and your personal wants and needs.



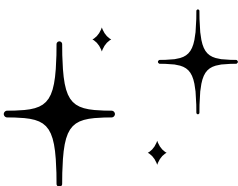
"There's an assumption with work-life balance that work is the stressful bit, and everything else, the 'life' is meant to be fun, but there's a lot of pressure outside of work, too."



Queer women of colour have to be more selective about where they choose to work, as they're looking for places where they feel more included. There's a certain amount of scrutiny done too; needing to consider where you might not be supported, rather than where you might be. Women of colour and queer women are familiar with code-switching (the practice of changing one's speech, behaviour, appearance or expression to suit a different environment), but there's an acceptance that this happens more for queer women of colour, than for example queer white women, or heterosexual women of colour.

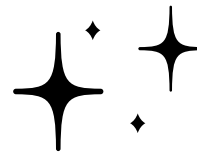


"You just know you'll have to do a lot of explaining. Most people aren't inherently bad, but they're scared of getting it wrong and they're scared of asking questions because they think they'll be exposed. Personally, I look for employers who echo my values. I've worked in places where I did feel included, and I did feel represented (although not at board level)".



A suggested way forward:

Guidance for employers



While there's undoubtedly been progress made in diversifying workforces in recent years, inclusivity is another matter. Our research clearly shows that many women are being failed by a probably very-well intentioned approach to diversity, inclusion and flexibility from employers.

To ensure all women are able to achieve better work-life balance and thrive, we've created this guidance with input from Timewise, to help senior leaders make change in their organisations. Because change starts at the top.

- Openness, genuine willingness to learn and understanding is the main thing women from underrepresented groups want from their employers. Start by listening. Consider staff forums or anonymous surveys to uncover how people really feel.
- Use that intel to make change. Define what you're going to do – with input from those with lived experiences you're seeking to support – whether that's reviewing existing policies, initiatives and benefits, or starting something new.

Checklist of policies and initiatives you may want to introduce into your organisation

A flexible working policy which details standard working practices, as well as how to request additional flexibility and what that may look like. Examples include the more formal arrangements which change the total hours worked or working pattern and affect pay and/or benefits (e.g. compressed or reduced hours, or job sharing), as well as the more informal arrangements that have no impact on the total number of hours you work, your pay or your benefits (e.g. additional working from home days). UK legislation is due to change in April 2024, giving all staff the right to request flexible working arrangements from day one of employment, so employers need to make sure their policy is up to date.

A path to parenthood policy that covers every element of the reproduction journey; from egg freezing and IVF support to pregnancy allowances, plus considerations for those on the adoption journey, to maternity and paternity benefits (including Shared Parental Leave) and all important the return to work support. This could also include support for carers, not just parents.

A period, perimenopause and menopause policy to support all those who menstruate and those going through menopause. Bloom's Menofesto is a great place to start if you need to create one of these from scratch.

A mental health at work initiative which spans support for those experiencing mental health challenges, as well as preventative measures to ensure employees don't get to breaking point. This might include training up specific employees as Mental Health First Aiders, employee assistance programmes or specific policies such as paid leave when experiencing a mental health challenge. It may also include specific benefits to support physical and mental health such as gym membership discounts, counselling and mentoring support services, cycle to work schemes, etc.

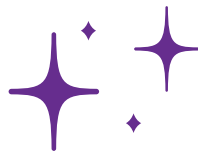
An equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policy or strategy which outlines what the organisation expects of employees and, in turn, what employees can expect of management when it comes to discrimination, as well as outlining steps that will be taken to ensure the business becomes more equitable and inclusive. This should go beyond what is required by law and the Equality Act 2010, instead looking at specific initiatives or actions bespoke to that organisation that will ultimately ensure its employees feel more supported. This could include everything from celebrating and supporting minority groups, to company-wide education and training.

- Stress-test your new approach. Having equality, diversity and inclusion strategies and initiatives are all well and good, but they need to be worked through with those they directly impact to ensure they're fit for purpose.
- But be careful. Don't make your minority groups (e.g. women of colour, those with neurodiversity, the LGBTQ+ community, etc) solely responsible for representing that particular area within your business. This is tokenistic and, as our research shows, these underrepresented groups already have enough to deal with without the added pressure of being the company spokesperson put upon them.
- Challenge cultural norms. Breakfast meetings to boozy lunches, the all-nighters for pitches to evening networking events; these are all standard practice in our industry, and aren't inclusive. They're barriers to flexible working and better balance. Leaders must challenge these to ensure inclusive options are considered wherever possible, or they risk reinforcing old stereotypes and exclusive networks.
- Make more role models. Senior men demonstrating good work-life balance (being seen to be working flexible hours, from different locations, around their family or personal commitments, without apologising for doing so) is key. But so is platforming successful senior women doing the same. Employees need role models at all levels within the organisation, so they can see good work-life balance is supported for more junior staff, too.
- Judge people based on their outputs and impact, not the hours they put in. If the work is being done, and it's being done well, why does it matter if someone works different hours, or doesn't attend the work social, or is working remotely? Progression and promotions should be measured in this way too to avoid presenteeism.
- We need a mindset shift for when people request additional flexibility. To make your organisation truly inclusive, set out flexibility as standard for all from day 1. That means, according to Timewise, asking 'why not?' rather than 'why?' when flexible working requests are made. Take a 'reason neutral' approach to flexibility – meaning it doesn't matter why someone wants to work flexibly. To bring about a true cultural shift, it needs to be encouraged regardless of reason, with no value judgement. Of course, that doesn't mean saying 'yes' to any form of flexible working that's requested, but it's about trying to find the sweet spot that meets the needs of the individual and the needs of the organisation. This will vary depending on the person, their role, the team arrangements they're part of. It isn't one size fits all.
- Empower and equip line managers and middle management to have effective conversations about maintaining work-life balance with their teams. Their confidence and capability is key for success. Rather than waiting for an employee to make a request, encourage managers to regularly discuss wellbeing, work-life balance and flexible working in a proactive, supportive way. Line managers make or break the success of a policy or an initiative; they need support and training to lead and manage teams well, and the ability to know what is and isn't going to work in a particular role or team.



Guidance for employees

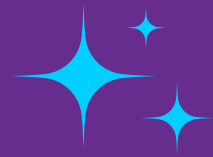
The onus to make change cannot sit with employers alone, although change must come from the top. Our research shows that we've become disillusioned with the current state of play and we're stuck in a self-fulfilling cycle; we don't request additional support because we think we won't get it. And it's not being given because we're not requesting it en masse.



The following guidance has been developed to empower women to achieve better work-life balance.

- Define your current work-life balance, and what your ideal split looks like. Think about how you chunk your time currently; how much time across a week is spent at work, spending time with family, socialising with friends, travelling, on health and wellbeing, on hobbies, studying etc. What does that split look like now, and what would your ideal split be?
- Beyond time spent (on work commitments or commuting), what other elements would improve your work-life balance? Is having more control over your workload a factor? Is it being able to be your true self at work? Is it about camaraderie or support from teams or managers? Is it about remuneration, or additional holiday allowance? What about the day-to-day experience in the workplace could be improved?
- Define what you'll need to do as an individual to make this happen. What actions can you take to shift the status quo? Is it a conversation with a partner about redistributing responsibilities at home? Is it making time for exercise or wellbeing a non-negotiable each week? Is it about enforcing downtime – away from emails, from the laptop, from being contactable all hours for clients?
- Define the support you need from your employer to make this happen. Is it about more flexible working options, and if so, which and how might they impact your teams or clients? Is it the need for more education across the business about your specific set of circumstances or lived experience? Is it about support groups so you don't feel so othered? Is it the need for specific policies or initiatives which you think would benefit multiple people in the organisation?

impacts.



- **Set out the business case.** You're essentially trying to persuade your organisation to make change, so you'll need a compelling argument that outlines both the benefits to you (and others like you), and to the business. Think about objections your manager may have, and how you'd counter these. Consider using examples of other organisations within the industry who have implemented these practices successfully. Outline what you'll commit to make change as part of the deal. For example, you could offer to assist in setting up employee support programmes, or with sharing draft policies and examples to help shape new initiatives.
- **Track the commitments.** Both what you're setting out to do as an individual, and for the business. That might be keeping a calendar of your commitments and dates to stay on track, or reporting back on progress. Consider using staff satisfaction surveys to measure longer-term impact on new company-wide initiatives, and personal annual reviews for individual



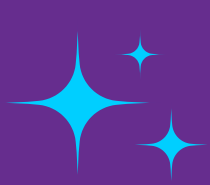
If you're a business or individual with a success story about improving work-life balance, we want to hear from you.

Contact us on bloomorguk@bloomnetwork.uk, or find us on LinkedIn and Instagram.

About Bloom

Founded in 2010, Bloom is a professional network for women in communications. It is on a mission to ensure women have equal opportunity in the communications industry. By harnessing the power of their real voices, Bloom strives to future-proof women's careers, spearhead industry change and pay it forward to the next generation. Today, Bloom UK has over 500 members and continues to grow. Bloom members are active in a mix of events and initiatives, with skill-sharing, mentoring, and working to drive real change in the industry, all part of the Bloom world.

Bloom is a proud partner of Women's Aid.



women's aid
until women & children are safe



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Thank you to Timewise, for their input into our guidance. Timewise is an award-winning social business, leading innovation on flexible and inclusive working practices since 2005. Its team of highly experienced, passionate professionals have held senior roles across the private and public sectors and are driven by the vision of fairer working futures. Timewise provides consultancy to organisations of all sizes and industries, with particular expertise in large and complex workforces.