

BOOK REVIEW

The Flexibility Paradox: Why Flexible Working Leads to (Self-)Exploitation

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Why do workers end up working more and harder when they have more control over when and where they work? 'The Flexibility Paradox' offers an explanation to this question while paying particular attention to the gendered logic that underlies flexible working and informs the way it is differently experienced by men and women.

Heejung Chung, Professor of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Kent, is arguably one of the most qualified international experts on flexible working. It would not be an understatement to say that Chung's academic career has been dedicated to the study of how people could work more flexibly and equitably. As Chung notes in the front matter, the "book was written as a part of [her] lifelong goal to make our society one where everyone can work shorter, flexible, autonomous and thus more productive and socially meaningful hours." Chung's commitment to flexible working goes back to her doctoral thesis under the title "Flexibility for Whom? Working time flexibility practices of European companies" (2009). Since then, she has authored more than 20 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters on flexible working and related issues. The book is impressive and concentrated evidence of Chung's genuine commitment to and passion for people's right to work more equitably and autonomously and her magnum opus so far.

Chung skillfully guides the reader through a total of 11 chapters which are systematically laid out so that each chapter builds seamlessly on the one before it. After introducing the background and outline of the book in Chapter 1, Chung examines the what, who, why, and how of flexible working in the subsequent chapters. In Chapter 2 she offers a definition of and trends in flexible working, highlighting the stagnant increase in access to flexible working in comparison to the demand for and provision of such arrangements around the world. In Chapter 3 Chung turns to examine why companies offer flexible working arrangements and to which workers. She contends that while work-life balance is indeed a consideration, an extensive body of literature points to stronger evidence of companies providing flexible working to high-status/performing employees to enhance their work productivity and performance. In Chapter 4 Chung further explores this 'business case' hypothesis, examining the outcome of flexible working on work-family conflict based on summaries of existing studies as well as further analysis of recent European data. It is here that Chung introduces the idea of the 'flexibility paradox', where flexible working leads to the blurring of the boundaries between work and (family) life, inducing workers to experience a higher level of work-family conflict. Chapter 5 draws on various theories to explain that among other structural reasons, the internalization of capitalistic understandings of the self and family as entrepreneurial subjects contributes to making workers work longer and harder when they are given greater freedom and control over work.

It is from Chapter 6 onwards that Chung's discussions pay particular attention to the gendered nature of the flexibility paradox. In Chapter 6 Chung offers more empirical evidence of the flexibility paradox, including variations by gender, parental status, occupation, and different types of flexible working arrangements. In Chapter 7, she focuses on the gendered dimension of the flexibility paradox in greater detail, highlighting that flexible working results in the expansion of paid working hours for men while it results largely in the expansion of unpaid hours for women. In Chapter 8 Chung demonstrates how gendered assumptions and expectations around work and care lead to women experiencing more flexibility stigma—namely, the discrimination that workers experience when working flexibly due to the perceived deviation from the image of the ideal worker—than men. Chung then investigates the role of context in shaping the flexibility paradox and its gendered outcomes including flexibility stigma in Chapter 9. She does so by highlighting cultural norms around gender roles and the centrality of work and institutional conditions such as family policies and workers' bargaining power as some salient factors. Importantly, she suggests "the flexibility paradox and its gendered outcomes are not inevitable" (p.148) and that where flexible working is more common, less flexibility stigma will be experienced.

In Chapter 10 Chung considers the large-scale use of flexible working arrangements as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic by offering an up-to-date snapshot based on recent data. She finds that while there have been significant reductions in the stigma associated with flexible working, much of the flexibility paradox remained constant. Hence, she suggests that "the widespread use of flexible working alone may not be enough to tackle the problems of the flexibility paradox" and that "[w]ithout disrupting norms around work, work-life balance and gender roles, [and changing] workers' bargaining powers, we are unlikely to see the flexibility paradox disappear" (p.167). Finally, in Chapter 11 Chung concludes with some future projections and recommendations for governments (providing better rights and protection for flexible workers, reshaping normative views around work-life balance and gender, and changing the long working hours culture), companies (redefining productivity and key performance indicators, ensuring a clearer boundary between work and non-work spheres, and removing the stigma around flexible working for care purposes), and individuals and families (maintaining clear boundaries, equalizing the gender division of housework and childcare, and doing less work) to tackle the flexibility paradox and make flexible working better for all.

While Chung sets out to answer why greater freedom in and control over work makes workers work longer and harder, she presents more than just empirical evidence of and theoretical discussions around the flexibility paradox. There were multiple memorable parts from the book, but I would like to highlight the top three that I particularly enjoyed and/or learned from. The first was Chung's convincing job in introducing flexible working as an arrangement that is not, or does not have to be, limited to a small portion of the population. Even in the context of jobs in the manufacturing or services sectors where working from home may be difficult to imagine due to the temporal and spatial restrictions that come with performing the job, Chung suggests that elements of flexibility could be introduced through measures such as 'self-rostering', 'work schedule patching', or 'team flextime' (p.22). Giving the example of healthcare workers, she also notes that the pandemic has further demonstrated that our perceptions of jobs which were previously considered unfit for flexible working have been changing and that the trend toward greater freedom and flexibility could be expected to continue.

Another noteworthy focus that is of particular relevance to the readers of *Gender, Work & Organization* was Chung's discussions around the multiple layers of gendered inequalities that inform flexible working. Chung first demonstrates that those who need flexible working the most may not be able to access the arrangement by debunking the common association of flexible working with work-life balance. She furthermore illustrates how flexible working not only has differential outcomes for men and women but also entails higher levels of stigma for women and those with disabilities and/or caring responsibilities. Perhaps most central to Chung's argument is the idea that flexible working is an amplifier of "many of the problems we have in our society in terms of work culture and gender norms" (p.190). Because flexible working is not taken up in a vacuum, Chung argues for the need to rethink the dominant values around work, work-life balance, rest, and gender roles in order for flexible working to not result in a paradox.

Finally, I appreciated Chung's discussion around ways forward in the final chapter. What particularly stuck with me was her point that the current nine-to-five working days are "artifacts of the industrialization stage of capitalism, where hours worked in the production line were thought to be equated to outputs generated [...] in factories in the 1920s" (p.181). A different era calls upon us to imagine a different way of working. In this context, Chung proposes a "collective move toward shortening the full-time working hours norm [...] through the introduction of a four-day week" where the full-time working week will be reduced to 30–32 h without a reduction in pay (p.179). She convincingly explains how this is an attractive shift; a shorter working week would contribute to shorter working hours and a more positive working culture that allows for not just greater worker well-being, work-life balance, gender equality, and productivity, but also help the battle against climate change. It may come across as far-fetched to some, but having witnessed the change from a six to a five-day working week in the early/mid-2000s in South Korea as a child, I could see how a four-day working week could be both a reality and a strategic agenda to collectively mobilize around.

This book has multiple strengths. More than anything, it is a timely piece of work. The majority of workers around the world have experienced flexible working as well as the flexibility paradox in the past couple of years during the global pandemic. Why greater flexibility in work leads to self-exploitation is a pressing and topical question that many would have struggled with and wondered about. Chung elucidates this puzzle and does so in an accessible, clear, and direct language and manner. Although Chung presents findings from an extensive body of academic research, much of which is quantitative, the presentation is done so that even readers without training in statistics or an academic background should be able to easily follow and comprehend without being bogged up in details. The book's originality lies primarily in three aspects. The first is its comprehensive synthesis of considerable existing research on flexible working into a single coherent volume. The second is its international and comparative scope. While it makes extensive use of comparative European data with a particular focus on Germany and the UK, it also includes discussions of non-European countries such as Australia, China, India, South Korea, and the United States, offering a diverse and global perspective. The third is that it provides an up-to-date account of the scholarly literature on flexible working by dedicating a whole chapter to changes and continuities since the pandemic.

That being said, the book did leave me with some lingering questions and unmet anticipations. For one thing, the author's decision to offer a broad and international comparative view of flexible working at times felt like depth was being compromised for breadth. Given that Chung stresses the importance of context for flexible working and its outcomes, a more detailed and in-depth examination of a few countries reflecting varying cultural and institutional arrangements through a case study approach could have been helpful. Also, the theoretical explanation of the flexibility paradox was one of the most interesting and enjoyable discussions of the book but I felt theoretical discussions were somewhat limited compared to the extensive presentation of the empirical evidence. As an extension of the author's argument against the inevitability of the flexibility paradox and her concrete recommendations on the national, company, and individual levels, I would have particularly appreciated an attempt to theorize an alternative understanding of self and family as one that is not based on capitalistic and entrepreneurial understandings. While I appreciate that the author may have wanted to maintain a broad and accessible outlook with an empirical rather than theoretical focus, I would have gladly read a few more chapters or sections, especially on these aspects. Though these do not diminish the distinct contributions of this book, I hope future works will explore these directions.

All in all, this book is a welcome and timely contribution to the disciplines of sociology, social policy, and management studies. Readers of *Gender, Work & Organization* interested in gender inequalities in the interface between work and family life would find this book interesting and informative. Given the wide range of literature it covers, the book would be an excellent primer for anyone researching or studying flexible working. In addition to serving an academic audience, it would be of interest to modern-day workers who experience the flexibility paradox or would like to reflect on their working style or their organization's working culture. While this book is not intended to be a self-help book, it could accompany existing books such as the ones that Chung mentions and recommends (p.184): *Solo* by Seal (2021), *CEO of Me* by Kossek and Lautsch (2008), *Rest* by Pang (2017), and *Overwhelmed* by Schulte (2015). It also updates and complements key edited volumes published in the last two decades on flexible working (e.g., Christensen & Schneider, 2011; Cooper & Norgate, 2020; Peper, van Doorne-Huiskes & Dulk, 2005) with a unique focus on the flexibility paradox and greater attention to gender inequalities, as well as the latest findings from the pandemic.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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