

# Helping men get work-life balance can help everyone

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Women's increased participation in the labour force over the past 50 years has [outpaced changes](#) to work organisation and social attitudes. This is true for issues of [work-life balance](#), which continue to [polarise](#) workers and managers.

But work-life balance and gender equality are not only women's issues. [They belong to men, too.](#)

## Times are changing

In 2001, the Australian Bureau of Statistics [declared](#) that the model of a male breadwinner with a wife at home looking after the family was no longer the Australian norm. Having more women in the workforce is certainly a good thing. Gender equality is not only [a matter of social justice](#), but it has also been shown to [create business benefits](#), when [managed properly](#).

Of course, the [increase in the number of women in paid employment](#), particularly mothers, and the [changing composition of families over the past 50 years](#) has made the organisation of paid work and care more diverse and complex.

Flexible work has been identified as a significant way for employees to balance their work and outside life. [Flexible work entails a variety of measures](#) that may include reduced hours, working from home, a compressed working week and taking time in lieu. Working flexibly can be beneficial for both employees and employers, such as through [increased commitment and productivity, and reduced absenteeism](#).

## But our thinking hasn't really changed

Yet despite these clear changes in family and work structure, those with caring responsibilities are marginalised in many workplaces. The "ideal worker" is still conceptualised as [someone who works full-time](#) and does not let outside responsibilities impinge on their work availability or duties. [Australians work long hours](#), in places where being present and seen is still often [equated with being productive](#).

This may be one reason why employees often have [difficulty accessing flexible work](#). And where it is made available, working flexibly may still have career repercussions, since using such arrangements is often equated with a lack of career ambition, meaning flexible workers are overlooked for promotion. Indeed, flexible working in poor quality jobs may [increase, rather than relieve](#), stress about work-life balance.

## Actually, maybe times haven't changed so much

Not surprisingly, research shows that [women are more likely to request and be granted flexible work than men](#), particularly women with children, to accommodate their caring responsibilities. Women continue to do more unpaid household work than men, often doing a "second shift" of housework after paid work, [though men are doing more work than in the past, particularly in relation to childcare](#). Plus, women working flexibly often experience "[gendered trade-offs](#)", where career is sacrificed for care, stalling progress on workplace gender equality more broadly.

## So let's really change the way we think

[A recent article in \*The Conversation\*](#) discusses the need to challenge how we perceive women and men's roles in society, starting with how we talk to our children (and especially our boys).

Similarly, to change our ingrained social and workplace attitudes, we need to assert the value of life outside work and normalise working flexibly for both women and men alike. A large part of this change therefore involves encouraging and helping more men achieve equilibrium between work and life, through flexible working arrangements.

The Australian Government Workplace Gender Equality Agency is encouraging this with its [Equilibrium Challenge](#) campaign. The first initiative of the campaign is the production of a series of micro-documentaries. The series follows the journeys of five corporate men embarking on flexible work arrangements. Each week features a new short episode about their pursuit of equilibrium between work and life, whether that entails spending more time with family, less time commuting, or just more time pursuing their dreams.

Increasing flexibility for men is not the entire answer to workplace gender inequality, but it is a necessary and often neglected piece of breaking down the norms and beliefs that impede our progress towards a more just and productive society. Conversations like those taking place in the Equilibrium Man Challenge make a promising start in challenging our preconceptions about work and workers, ultimately dismantling the illusory trade-off between career success and life outside work.