

November 2023

Part-time managers: A review of the literature

Where are the part-time manager roles?

In 2022–23, fewer than one in 14 (7%) managers worked part-time. For Key Management Personnel, the percentage falls to 5%, and for CEOs it is 3%.

Quality part-time work can be hard to find,ⁱ and research suggests that an increase in the proportion of women working part-time in senior roles is driven more by women already in these roles seeking reduced hours, rather than part-time employees being promoted into manager roles.ⁱⁱ Women who work part-time in low-paid occupations are particularly at risk of falling victim to the ‘sticky floor’ phenomenon, where opportunities for progression are scarce.ⁱⁱⁱ

A lack of part-time manager roles for women can also stem from a significant gender pay gap at manager levels: research conducted by the Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC) using WGEA data found that gender pay gaps at the combined management level work to reduce the share of part-time women managers by 7.9 percentage points.^{iv}

The gender pay gap for part-time managers

For part-time managers, the gender pay gap in 2022–23 was 24% in favour of men, slightly higher than the 21.3% gap for full-time managers.

The difference between the gender pay gaps for full-time and part-time managers significantly widens when we look at gender-dominated industries:

- For full-time managers in male-dominated industries, the gender pay gap is 7.9%. It is more than twice as large for part-time managers at 17.3%.
- For full-time managers in female-dominated industries, the gender pay gap is 16.1%. Again, this more than doubles for part-time managers, who face a 36.5% gap.

Women are more likely to be part-time managers in male-dominated industries

The gender pay gap for part-time managers working in female-dominated industries is more than twice as large as the gap for part-time managers working in male-dominated industries (36.5% versus 17.3%).

This difference could go some way to explaining why, in 2022–23, women working part-time were more likely to be in manager roles in male-dominated industries (6.3%) than their counterparts in female-dominated industries (2.8%). A gap at the combined level of manager occupations in an organisation has been found to reduce the share of part-time women managers by 7.9 percentage points.^v

However, this area requires further research, given that women working in male-dominated industries have expressed that access to part-time work – and in particular, access to part-time work that does not compromise future career opportunities – is limited.^{vi,vii,viii}

The part-time work narrative so far

Australia has the second-highest rate of part-time employment among OECD countries (behind the Netherlands),^{ix} with women almost three times more likely to work in part-time roles than men. In 2022–23, 30% of women worked part-time compared to 11% of men. Women make up almost three quarters (74%) of all part-time roles, and men slightly more than one quarter (26%).



The narrative attached to these patterns¹ suggests, on the one hand, that part-time work increases women's workforce participation,^x enables women to balance career and family responsibilities^{xi} and, as a result of these two factors, contributes to a reduction in gender inequality. With sufficient incentives, part-time roles do not have to signal a 'dead-end trajectory' but can be used as a viable and useful temporary option – a 'flexibility tool' for organisations and workers.^{xii}

On the other hand, the over-representation of women in part-time work reflects:

- a higher likelihood of women reducing their working hours to care for children or other family members because they have historically earned less than men^{xiii}
- an uneven split of caring responsibilities between parents^{xiv,xv}
- the high costs and limited availability of childcare in Australia,^{xvi} which in some cases can function to remove the financial incentive for women to return to work following parental leave.^{xvii}

In addition, part-time work can negatively affect career growth opportunities for women.^{xviii,xix} There is also the risk that while part-time employment can increase women's workforce participation, it can also reinforce gendered industrial segmentation^{xx} and a gender-unequal division of unpaid caring work.^{xxi}

How can we increase the availability of part-time manager roles – and make them accessible to all genders?

Existing literature identifies a number of strategies to increase the availability of part-time manager roles in general.

Research commonly articulates the need for role models, leadership support and representation to increase the number of women working part-time in manager roles. A genuine demonstration of top-down commitment to supporting part-time work,² as well as flexible working more broadly, can address barriers to women accessing these arrangements;^{xxii} leadership support can also come in the form of 'gender champions', who use their influence to challenge norms that reinforce gender inequality and drive change.^{xxiii} In addition, an organisation that moves from zero representation of women on company boards to an equal share can see the share of women part-time managers increase by 13.7 percentage points.^{xxiv}

Research focusing on women middle managers in the public sector comments on the effectiveness of the presence of women role models in senior leadership for the career progression of middle managers^{xxv} – but acknowledges that the leaders' gender could be less important than the patterns of work they model (with leaders who model flexible working being viewed more favourably than those who work long and inflexible hours).^{xxvi}

To this end, organisations can use formal flexible working policies to normalise flexible and part-time working arrangements. These policies will be most effective alongside a broader cultural shift within an organisation to remove the stigma attached to part-time and flexible working: without cultural change, such policies can reinforce gender inequality if part-time and flexible working arrangements are equated with a lack of commitment.^{xxvii,xxviii}

The recent Women's Economic Equality Taskforce report underscored the importance of making these arrangements available and protecting people seeking to use them from discrimination in multiple recommendations to government.^{xxix} Further, BCEC found that when organisations indicate formal support for flexible work through implementing a designated policy, the share of part-time female managers increases by 7.5 percentage points. When this flexible work policy is reinforced by formal reporting to company boards, the share increases by 13.6 percentage points.^{xxx}

Organisations should also commit to designing and offering part-time manager roles: a lack of these kinds of roles is a key barrier to women's participation at senior levels of an organisation,^{xxxi} and part-time management opportunities can signal a challenge to outdated assumptions about leadership.^{xxxii} Organisations should ensure the availability of part-time manager roles for women across their career, in light of the finding that the representation of women in manager roles begins to decline after age 35.^{xxxiii}

¹ For a detailed look at part-time work more broadly in Australia, including demand, supply and institutional factors that have contributed to the rise in this kind of employment since the 1980s, see National Skills Commission (2021), *State of Australia's skills 2021: Now and into the future*, available: <https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/reports/state-of-australia-skills-2021>

² Part-time work is a specific type of flexible working arrangement.

Finally, to ensure that all genders can take advantage of part-time working arrangements, organisations should implement policies that specifically encourage the uptake of part-time and flexible working arrangements by men in an effort to reduce the stigma that can attach to these ways of working and challenge gender norms that ascribe greater childcare responsibilities to women.^{xxxiv} A lack of men role-modelling part-time work in senior roles has fuelled the belief among middle managers that senior roles and part-time hours are incompatible.^{xxxv}

ⁱ Fagan, C, Norman, H, Smith, M & González Menéndez, MC (2014), In search of good quality part-time employment, International Labour Organization, viewed 31 October 2023, available:

https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_protect/@protrav/@travail/documents/publication/wcms_237781.pdf

ⁱⁱ Jones, L (2019), Women's progression in the workplace, Government Equalities Office, viewed 31 October 2023, available:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65200aa3aea2d0001321993a/KCL_Main_Report.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre & Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2019), *Gender equity insights 2019: Breaking through the glass ceiling*, WGEA, viewed 30 October 2023, available: https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/BCEC-WGEA-Gender-Equity-Insights-2019-Report_0.pdf

^v BCEC & WGEA, *Breaking through the glass ceiling*.

^{vi} Oxenbridge, S, Cooper, R, Baird, M (2019), 'One of the boys'? The work and career experiences of Australian women working in automotive trades occupations, The University of Sydney, viewed 30 October 2023, available:

<https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/21255>

^{vii} Oxenbridge, S, Cooper, R, Baird, M. (2018), 'Non-traditional investors'? The work and career experiences of Australian women working in investment management, The University of Sydney, viewed 30 October 2023, available:

<https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/21258>

^{viii} Bryce, T, Far, H & Gardner, A (2019), Barriers to career advancement for female engineers in Australia's civil construction industry and recommended solutions, *Australian Journal of Civil Engineering*, vol, 17, issue 1, pp. 1-10,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14488353.2019.1578055>

^{ix} OECD (2023), Part-time employment rate (indicator), viewed 31 October 2023, available: <https://data.oecd.org/emp/part-time-employment-rate.htm#indicator-chart>

^x Barbieri, P, Cutuli, G, Guetto, R & Scherer, S (2019), Part-time employment as a way to increase women's employment: (Where) does it work? *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, vol. 60, issue 4, pp. 249-268, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020715219849463>

^{xi} National Skills Commission (2021), State of Australia's skills 2021: Now and into the future, viewed 31 October 2023, available:

<https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/reports/state-of-australia-skills-2021>

^{xii} Barbieri et al., Part-time employment as a way to increase women's employment.

^{xiii} Littleton, E & Jericho, G (2023), The times they aren't a-changing (enough), Centre for Future Work at the Australia Institute, viewed 31 October 2023, available: <https://futurework.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/03/Centre-for-Future-Work-Gender-Pay-Gap-WEB.pdf>

^{xiv} NSW Government (2022), Women's workforce participation, viewed 31 October 2023, available: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/womens-opportunity-statement/background/womens-workforce-participation>

^{xv} WEET, A 10-year plan to unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy 23-33.

^{xvi} Littleton & Jericho, The times they aren't a-changing (enough).

^{xvii} NSW Government, Women's workforce participation.

^{xviii} Littleton & Jericho, The times they aren't a-changing (enough).

^{xix} WEET, A 10-year plan to unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy 23-33.

^{xx} Littleton & Jericho, The times they aren't a-changing (enough).

^{xxi} Barbieri et al., Part-time employment as a way to increase women's employment.

^{xxii} Jones, Women's progression in the workplace.

^{xxiii} Gould, JA, Kulik, CT & Sardeshmukh, SR (2023), Gender targets and trickle-down effects: Avoiding the 'decoupling dynamics' that limit female representation in senior roles, *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 82, issue 2, pp. 147-166,

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12576>

^{xxiv} BCEC & WGEA, *Breaking through the glass ceiling*.

^{xxv} Williamson, S, Colley, L, Foley, M, Cooper, R (2018), The role of middle managers in progressing gender equity in the public sector, UNSW Canberra, viewed 30 October 2023, available: <https://www.psc.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-10/Middle%20Managers%20and%20Gender%20Equity.pdf>

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- ^{xxvi} Durbin & Tomlinson (2014) as cited in Williamson et al., The role of middle managers in progressing gender equity in the public sector.
- ^{xxvii} Jones, Women's progression in the workplace.
- ^{xxviii} Gould et al., Gender targets and trickle-down effects.
- ^{xxix} Women's Economic Equality Taskforce (2023), A 10-year plan to unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy 23-33, Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, viewed 31 October 2023, available: <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/womens-economic-equality-taskforce-final-report.pdf>
- ^{xxx} BCEC & WGEA, *Breaking through the glass ceiling*.
- ^{xxxi} Williamson et al., The role of middle managers in progressing gender equity in the public sector.
- ^{xxxii} Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2022), Age and the gender pay gap, viewed 31 October 2023, available: <https://www.wgea.gov.au/age-and-the-gender-pay-gap>
- ^{xxxiii} Ibid.
- ^{xxxiv} Jones, Women's progression in the workplace.
- ^{xxxv} Williamson et al., The role of middle managers in progressing gender equity in the public sector.