

Equal Pay Day 2023: Making flexible working the default.

With a gender pay gap of 10.7%, Equal Pay Day falls on 22nd November this year – this is the day in the year when, based on average pay, women overall stop being paid compared to men.

To mark Equal Pay Day 2023, the Fawcett Society commissioned Survation to poll working-aged people on their experiences of flexible work¹ – a crucial factor in closing the gender pay gap.

True flexible working means choice and opportunity. If flexibility were available as standard and normalised in workplace cultures across a greater variety of career paths – and taken up by men as well as women – this would mean a more equal division of unpaid labour between the genders, provide greater opportunity for people with disabilities, promote women's career progression, and attract and retain a more diverse talent pool in the workplace. In turn, this would lower the gender pay gap.

Critically, all available flexible work options must be advertised in job descriptions – with employers to broaden their perception of what high quality flexible work can mean and truly consider what is possible in their workplace.

In our survey:

- **40%** of women who are not currently working said that if flexible work was available to them, it would enable them to do paid work – indicating a sizeable number locked out of the labour market due to a lack of employer flexibility.
- **77%** of women agreed that they would be more likely to apply for a job that advertises flexible working options.
- **70%** women and 60% men would be more likely to vote for a party that required employers to include the possible flexible working options in job adverts. This included the vast majority of people who intend to vote Labour, Conservative, SNP or Liberal Democrat at the next general election.
- **48%** Black and minoritised women would like greater flexibility in their work but are worried about the implications for their careers. This highlights the higher standard to which Black and minoritised women are held to progress at work, and the need for flexibility to be normalised as the default practice for all.

We are calling on Government to require employers to advertise all reasonable flexible work options available to applicants, with flexibility built-in and offered as default, and to all political parties to include this policy in their manifestos ahead of the next general election.

¹ The Fawcett Society commissioned Survation to survey the working aged general population in the UK, exploring views on flexible work. 2844 adults aged 18-65 were surveyed between 26th September and 16th October 2023. Data were weighted to the profile of UK adults aged 18-65 by age, gender, and region. Survation is a Market Research Society company partner and a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org>

What types of flexibility do UK workers have?

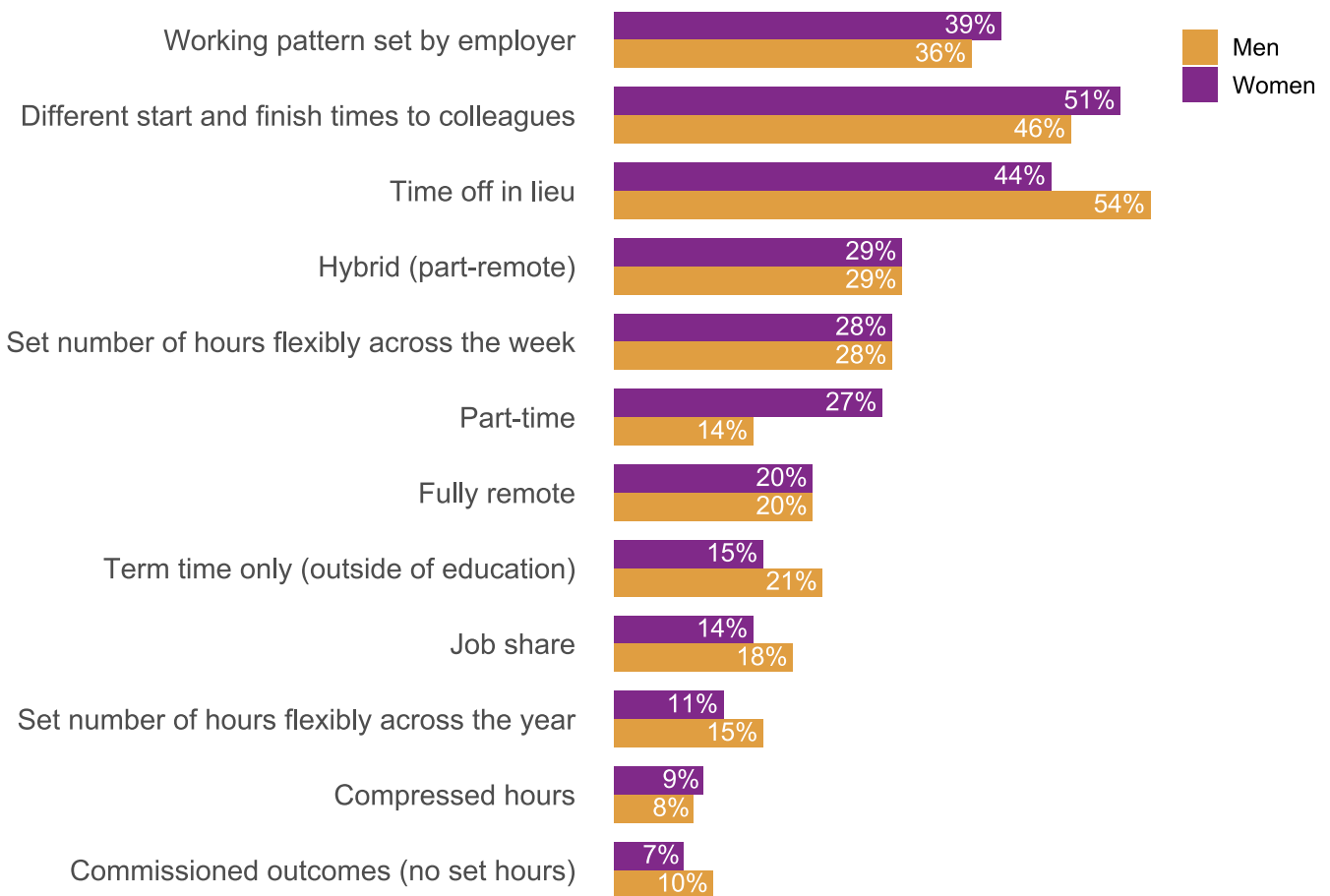
Our representative survey identified a sizeable minority (**37%**) of working people aged 18-65 saying that they worked to a pattern their employer had set, rather than having any adjustments to their working arrangements in place.

For people with access to flexibility, the most common types of flexibility available were different start and finish times to colleagues (**49%**) and access to time off in lieu (**49%**) – although these options do not necessarily reflect choice around how and when to work, and the former may simply indicate shift work. The least common types of flexibility were working to commissioned outcomes rather than a set number of hours (**8%**) and compressed hours, i.e. doing the same number of hours in fewer days (**9%**).

There were differences in the types of flexible work accessed by gender (**Figure 4**), with women significantly more likely to work part-time or have different start and finish times to their colleagues, and men significantly more likely to:

- Work a set number of hours flexibly across the year
- Work to commissioned outcomes (rather than a set number of hours)
- Have access to time off in lieu
- Work term time only (in a setting outside of education)
- Work as part of a job share

Figure 4. % of working survey respondents accessing each working arrangement, by gender. ²

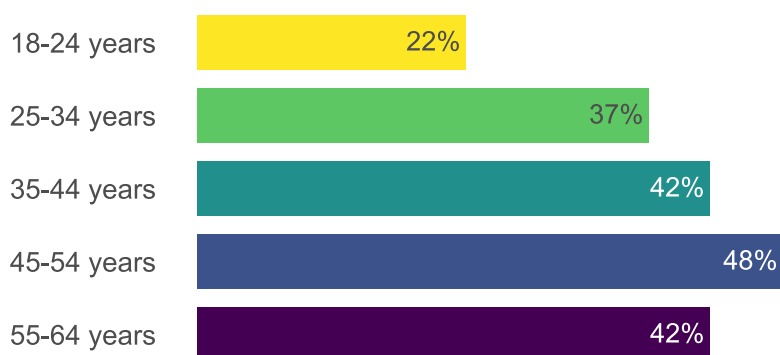


² Sample of 2334 survey respondents aged 18-65 who are currently working, including 1172 women (1103 after weighting) and 1149 men (1217 after weighting).

The types of 'flexible' work that women are accessing - such as part-time work and different start times and finish times to colleagues – may not reflect true flexibility and can often be associated with lower pay and insecurity. Research from the Work Foundation suggests that women are nearly twice as likely as men to be in severely insecure work – and this is increased further for mothers, disabled women, and women from Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds.³ As the TUC highlights in their recent report *Insecure Work in 2023*, some workers turn to insecure employment to manage their work alongside other commitments.⁴ Flexibility must therefore be available across all types of roles, and be accompanied by secure employment.

Overall, younger people (both women and men) were more likely to be accessing flexible work, compared to older people. Looking at differences by age for women, those aged 45-54 were the most likely to be working to a pattern their employer had set (48%), rather than having any adjustments to their working pattern in place (Figure 5). Women in this age group are particularly at risk of leaving their roles due to menopause symptoms – with 1 in 10 menopausal women doing so.⁵ Therefore, it is highly concerning that they are the least likely to be accessing flexible work, which would support many to manage their symptoms and progress at work.

Figure 5. % women selecting 'I work to a pattern my employer has set', by age.⁶



What difference does flexible work make to people's lives?

We asked people who **were accessing some form of flexible work or adjustment to their working pattern** about how it helps them. The most common response to 'What does working flexibly allow you to do?' was 'be in paid employment', with 41% of people choosing this option, including 42% of women and 39% of men (Figure 3). Furthermore, 67% people (71% women and 64% men) agreed that 'I am more likely to stay in my current job if flexible working is available to me'.

Similarly, 37% people who were **not working** (including 40% of women and 32% of men) said that if flexible work was available to them, it would enable them to do paid work. 25% of respondents in the survey overall (27% of women and 24% of men) reported that they have had to leave a job because their request for flexible work was denied. **Together, these figures point to flexibility being critical in enabling people to work and suggest a sizeable number of people locked out of the labour market due to a lack of flexible work.**

In an open text box, we asked survey respondents to describe any positive or negative experiences of requesting, accessing or not being able to access flexible work. **Box 1** below highlights some experiences of people locked out of work due to a lack of flexible work.

³ Florisson, R. & Gable, O. The Gender Gap: Insecure work in the UK. 2022. <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/work-foundation/publications/the-gender-gap-insecure-work-in-the-uk>

⁴ Creagh, M. TUC Insecure work in 2023. <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/insecure-work-2023>

⁵ Bazeley, A., Marren, C., & Shepherd, A., Fawcett Society. Menopause and the Workplace. 2022. <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/menopauseandtheworkplace>

⁶ Sample of 1172 women (1103 after weighting) aged 18-65 who are currently working.

Box 1. Survey responses: Locked out of work.

"I am currently unable to work because I cannot find a job that enables me to care for my disabled son and fits around his school hours."

"I was returning from maternity leave and requested flexible working hours to suit childcare, however this was denied. I had to leave my job position due to this... I was a team manager who had been there 4+ years."

"I was denied flexible work hours. I had the school runs to do in the morning and afternoon and asked if the times can be altered and they refused. I had to leave the job."

Flexible work is an essential adjustment for many disabled people and for people with health conditions. In our survey, **44%** disabled people who are currently not accessing flexible work said they would be able to improve their health if they worked flexibly. Previous research has also highlighted the importance of flexible work for women experiencing menopause in enabling them to carry out their work.⁷ In our open text survey question, many people with disabilities or long-term health conditions outlined their experiences of flexible working or a lack thereof (**Box 2**).

Box 2. Survey responses: Experiences of disabled people and people with health conditions .

"I have cancer and I would have been able to work flexibly while I was under treatment but I couldn't find a flexible job."

"[Flexible work] has meant I can take care of my mental health much better... [it] allows my anxiety to be minimum and therefore I am able to be more efficient and produce better work as well."

"Flexible working has made it more possible to manage the pain caused by my long-term medical condition."

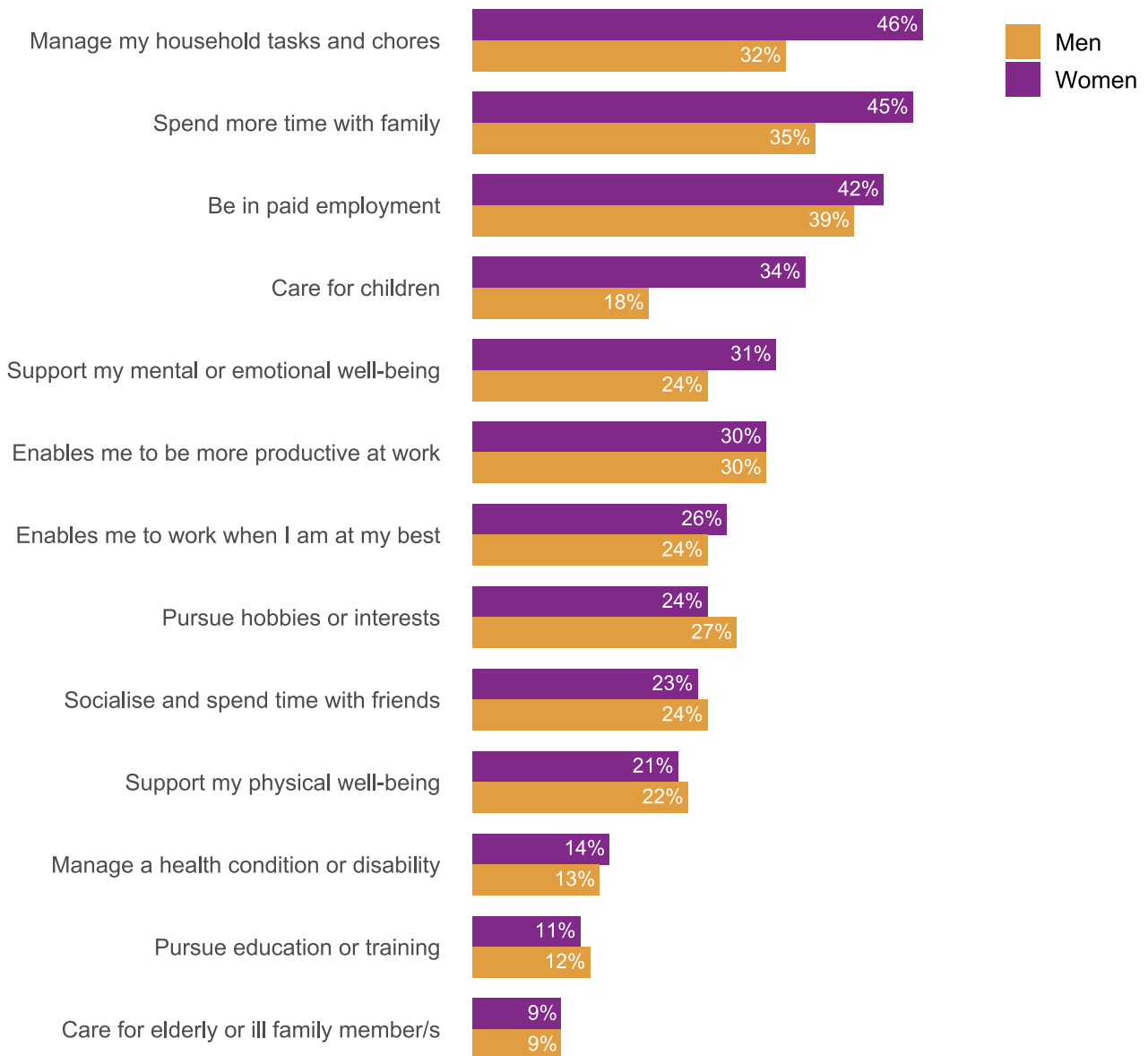
"I was diagnosed with physical conditions and ADHD. In my last job, I was struggling mentally and suggested to my manager that I could potentially cut down my hours slightly... I was refused... I was eventually then signed off and me and my manager decided it was better for me to leave because we could not find a resolution. I felt very let down."

Our survey found that women accessing flexible work were significantly more likely than their male counterparts to report that flexible work enables them to manage household tasks (46% vs 32%), spend more time with family (45% vs 35%), care for children (34% vs 18%), and support their mental or emotional wellbeing (31% vs 24%) (**Figure 1**). These figures reflect the reality that women continue to hold the lion's share of caring and household responsibility, and the need for high quality flexible work to make progress on closing the gender pay gap. In the open text survey question, one respondent highlighted their positive experience of working flexibly:

"After returning from mat leave in 2023... my employer and HR worked with me to find a compressed working arrangement that worked for both of us and I am definitely more likely to stay in this position as a result." **[Survey respondent]**

⁷ Fawcett Society. Menopause in the Workplace: Impact on Women in Financial Services. 2021. <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/menopause-in-the-workplace-impact-on-women-in-financial-services>

Figure 1. 'What does working flexibly allow you to do?' Responses by gender.⁸



⁸ Sample of 2107 survey respondents aged 18-65 who are currently accessing flexible work, including 1047 women (983 after weighting) and 1149 men (1106 after weighting).

Perspectives on flexible work

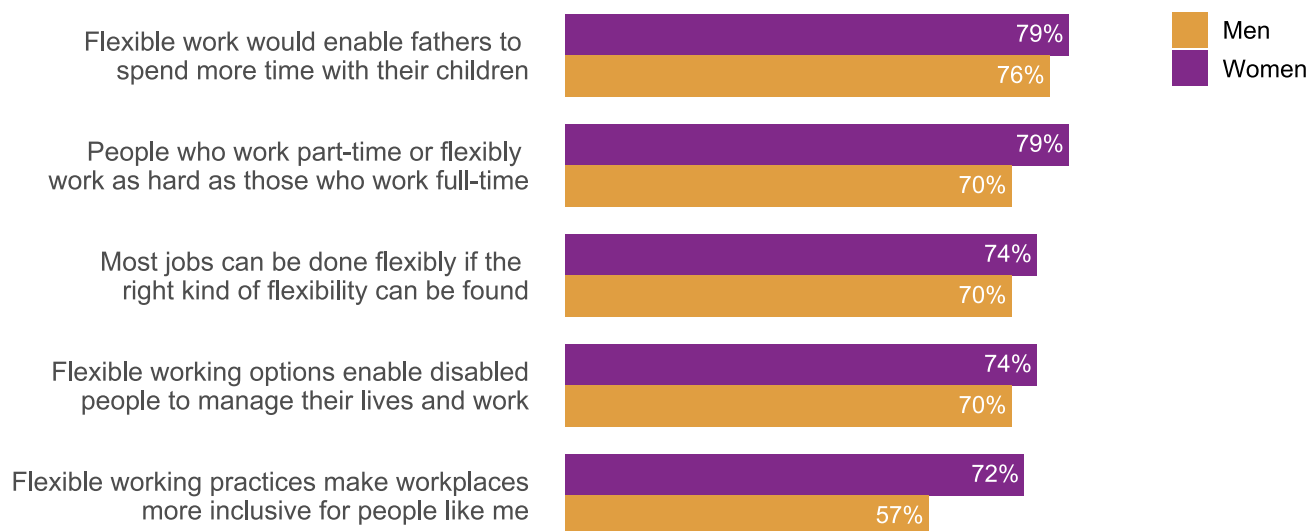
Attitudes to flexible work were positive among women and men (**Figure 2**). Supporting men to work flexibly and take a greater share of caring responsibility (which evidence suggests that they would like to do⁹) is a crucial part of reducing women's unpaid workload and ultimately closing the gender pay gap. This was reflected in our survey, in which **77%** of respondents (79% of women and 76% of men) agreed that flexible work would enable fathers to spend more time with their children.

Recent evidence from Fawcett exploring the experiences of women in tech roles highlighted attitudes toward flexible work can be negative in workplace cultures where it is an uncommon practice – with flexible work seen as a privilege above other colleagues. However, this survey highlighted that overall, perspectives toward flexible work are positive – **74%** of respondents (79% women and 70% men) agreed that people who work part-time or flexibly work as hard as those who work full-time, and **65%** (72% women and 57% men) agreed that flexible working practices make workplaces more inclusive.

72% respondents (74% women and 70% men) agreed that most jobs can be done flexibly if the right kind of flexibility can be found. Clearly, flexible work can mean a variety of things, and it is essential to expand the options available to employees beyond simply hybrid and remote working – to job sharing with another person, compressed hours (i.e., the same number of hours work across fewer days), term-time only working, and flexible hours across the day, week, month, or year, and many more options.

Analysis from the TUC highlights a disability pay gap of 14.6%.¹⁰ Disabled women, who are at the intersection of the disability and gender pay gaps - consistently earn less than disabled men, non-disabled women, and non-disabled men. Respondents recognised the importance of flexible work to disabled people, with **72%** (74% women and 70% men) agreeing that flexible working options enable disabled people to manage their lives and work.

Figure 2. % respondents agreeing with each statement, by gender.¹¹



⁹ Olchawski, J. Parents, work and care: Striking the balance. 2016. <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/parents-work-and-care-striking-the-balance>

¹⁰ TUC slams "zero progress on disability pay gap in last decade. 2023. <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/tuc-slams-zero-progress-disability-pay-gap-last-decade>

¹¹ Sample of all 2844 survey respondents aged 18-65, including 1480 women (1400 after weighting) and 1347 men (1428 after weighting).

Whilst overall attitudes were positive, there were some concerns about flexible work. In our survey, **37%** respondents agreed that ‘flexible working means that I have to be available all the time’. Flexible work is sometimes conflated with shift work, zero-hours contracts, or being ‘on call’ – with choice about when and where to work remaining in the hands of the employer. Flexible work should not be insecure work, and must be accompanied by fair, secure employment contracts, whilst also being available across a variety of sectors and levels of pay. In their report on *The Future of Flexible Work*, the TUC highlights how all too often, working-class people experience “conditions masquerading as ‘flexibility’... in the form of zero-hours contracts and other forms of insecurity” with fewer employment rights and choice.¹²

In our open text survey question, one respondent highlighted that flexibility was on the employers’ side, rather than theirs:

“I have to be flexible in my hours, not my choice, and I have to work my hours over the full week in whatever denominations they set me.” **[Survey respondent]**

The survey also highlighted concerns that flexible work means lower pay or lower-quality work, and impacting career progression (**Box 3**) – which is often the case.

Box 3. Survey responses: Flexible working for people with caring responsibilities

“I have had to leave a well-paid role for a lesser level and pay role because needing flexibility.”

“I am extremely grateful for my current employer offering me working hours around school and term time, however I do feel as I work less than everyone else my chances for progression are limited. I know most mothers have this same issue and it’s so debilitating.”

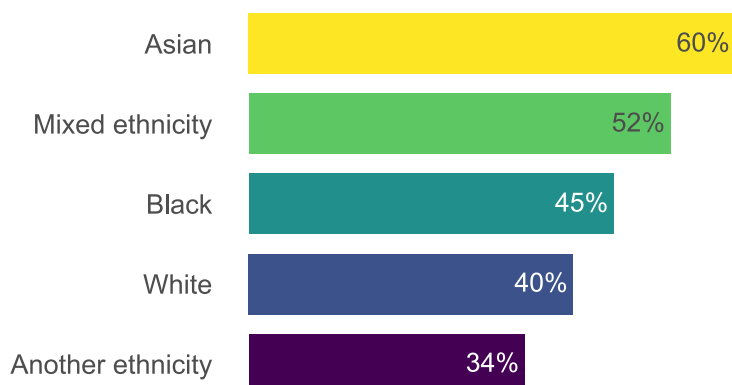
Black and minoritised people were more likely than white people to agree with the statement ‘I would like greater flexibility in my work but am worried about the implications for my career’, with **52%** agreeing (48% women and 57% men), compared to 40% of white people (40% women and 40% men) (**Figure 3**).

Similarly, **35%** Black and minoritised people (31% women and 38% men) agreed that ‘working flexibly has a negative impact on promotion and pay’, compared to 27% white people. These concerns may be valid all too often – particularly for Black and minoritised women who experience the unique, compounded effects of racism and misogyny, experience combined gender and ethnicity pay gaps, and are often held to higher standards to be able to progress at work.¹³ These findings highlight the need for flexibility to be offered as the default and across job types and pay levels, so that it does not create career setbacks when accessed by minoritised groups.

¹² TUC. *The Future of Flexible Work*. 2021. <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/future-flexible-work>

¹³ Gyimah, M., Azad, Z., Begum, S., Kapoor, A., Ville, L., Henderson, A., & Dey, M. Fawcett Society and Runnymede Trust. *Broken Ladders: The myth of meritocracy for women of colour in the workplace*. <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/broken-ladders>

Figure 3. % 'I would like greater flexibility in my work but am worried about the implications for my career', by ethnicity.¹⁴



Why do we need an employer 'advertising duty' for flexible work?

It is a step forward that employees now have the right to request flexible work from Day 1 at the job – but our research shows this is not enough for flexibility to truly be unlocked. Workers must be provided with the available flexible working options during the application stage, so that they know whether the job is right for them and do not risk prejudice during the application stage or unfavourable treatment from their employer by having to request flexible work in their first week of the role.

This is why Fawcett are calling for Government to legislate for an employer **advertising duty** for flexible work. **That is, employers must think about how a job can be done flexibly and advertise all reasonable flexible work options available to applicants, such as flexible hours, compressed hours, job sharing, remote working, or part-time work – with flexibility as the default.** Where a particular form of flexible work is not possible for a role employers must fully justify this – and work to expand the types of flexibility they can offer.

Our survey showed that **30%** of respondents (30% of women and 30% of men) had experienced applying for a job but having to turn it down when the employer was unable to offer the flexible working they needed – indicating that a lack of flexible work options are locking people out of roles they are suitable for. What's more, **61%** of women agreed that they would feel uncomfortable making a flexible work request in the first week of the job (compared to 53% men and 57% respondents overall).

Furthermore, provision of flexible working options encourages women to apply for roles, with **77%** women agreeing that they would be more likely to apply for a job if it advertises flexible working options (compared to 67% men and 72% respondents overall). Women need to know if a role is right for them before they spend time on an application – with **57%** agreeing that they would not apply without knowing if they could fit working patterns around their caring responsibilities (compared to 45% men and 51% respondents overall) and **49%** agreeing that they would not apply to a job without knowing if it would give them the flexibility to manage their health condition and/or disability (compared to 47% respondents overall and 45% men).

This is a vote-winning issue. The majority of women and men who intend to vote for all of the largest political parties in the next election said that they would be more likely to vote for a party which requires employers to include the possible flexible working options in job adverts (**Figure 6**). This was the most popular policy out of those we included in our survey.¹⁵ What's more, research highlights that women are both more likely to

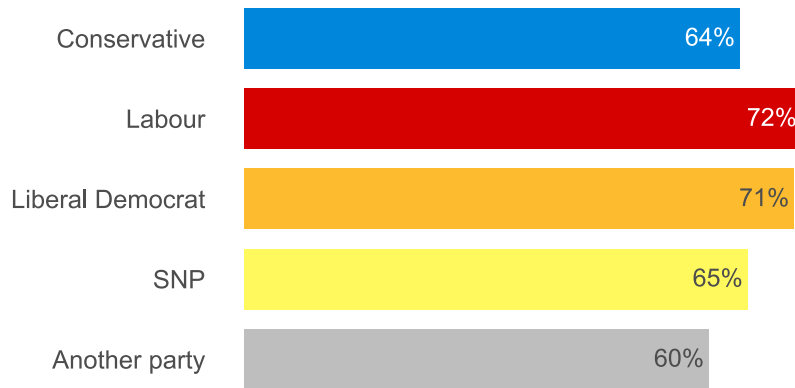
¹⁴ Sample of 2107 survey respondents aged 18-65 who are currently accessing flexible work.

¹⁵ Respondents were also polled on reform to the childcare system, a statutory right to appeal employer decisions of flexible work requests, more paid parental leave for fathers and co-parents, narrowing the reasons employers reject flexible work requests,

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vote then men, and more likely to be undecided approaching a general election.¹⁶ With flexible work a top priority for women, this is a significant election issue.

Figure 6. % respondents agreeing that they would be more likely to vote for a party which has the policy to 'make flexible work the default, by requiring employers to include the possible flexible working options in job adverts', by party they intend to vote for at the next election.¹⁷



strengthening maternity rights and protections, tackling pay discrimination against women, stopping employers asking about salary history during recruitment, giving women who suspect pay discrimination the right to know what a male colleague doing the same work is paid, mandatory employer gender pay gap action plans, and mandatory employer ethnicity pay gap reporting.

¹⁶ Campbell, R. The "women's vote" is a myth: the average voter is a female voter. 2019. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/the-womens-vote-is-a-myth-the-average-voter-is-a-female-voter>

¹⁷ Sample of all 2844 survey respondents aged 18-65, including 1480 women (1400 after weighting) and 1347 men (1428 after weighting).