

The Effects of a Four-Day Workweek on Gender Equality in Lebanon

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Introduction

While progress toward gender equality has been made globally, gender inequality persists with women still being disproportionately affected by gender norms and stereotypes across all sectors and parts of life, including the workplace. According to the UN Women's report *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2021*, 50% of women worldwide are restricted in some way or another from working in certain jobs. The report also adds that in 2020, the number of women in the workforce decreased by 54 million, with women suffering from unpaid care also at home, an issue that was exacerbated because of COVID-19. Other challenges that women face in the workplace are sexual assault and harassment. According to *Measuring #MeToo: A National Study on Sexual Harassment and Assault* (Kearl et al., 2019), 38% of women have experienced sexual harassment at work. While data and detailed numbers are lacking for the Lebanese context, an article from the World Bank mentioned a noticeable rise in Lebanese women speaking up about sexual harassment at work (Char et al., 2022).

Women also face a gender pay gap at work. Dah et al. (2014) mentioned that regardless of the high level of education of Lebanese women, women on average earn 71% of what a man earns. Women also struggle to keep an appropriate balance between work life and family life along with childcare because of gender normative expectations that women should provide free childcare and domestic work. Consequently, studies have shown that women do adjust their careers more than men for the sake of their family lives (Parker, 2020).

This paper argues that the implementation of a four-day work week can help to reduce the challenges that women experience in the workplace. While more research is needed, the studies that do exist about the four-day workweek emphasize that it can be a positive contributing factor to increasing gender equality for working women.

The idea of a four-day workweek is not new: Policy attempts to decrease the number of work hours per week from 40 to 30 hours in the U.S., for example, date back to the American New Deal during the 1930s (Meisenzahl, 2019). However, it is only recently that experiments to implement a four-day workweek are being performed and studied by companies and countries. According to CNBC, dozens of countries such as Ireland, Spain, and the UK have tested a four-day workweek (Smith, 2023). The four-day workweek has also been demanded by various politicians such as Bernie Sanders, according to Business Insider (Kaplan & Sheffey, 2023). Broadly, many researchers suggest that the recent push to implement a four-day workweek is linked to the effects of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic changed how work happens around the world. Importantly, the realization of the realities of difficult and oppressive working conditions globally has led to an increase in union activity to demand better labor protections in places like the U.S, for example (Smith, 2023). Further, the ways that COVID-19 lockdowns and work from home policies negatively affected women—who were tasked with the majority of care and domestic work tasks prior to the pandemic—have equally pushed employers to think differently about the ways that work is structured and how work can be more accommodating for workers with family responsibilities.

Looking at the outcomes of a four-day workweek through a gender lens is necessary to analyze any potential this policy might have in fighting gender inequality in the workplace. This paper will include information from academic articles and other grey literature that analyzes the challenges women face in the workplace. This will be paired with an analysis of the outcomes of several important four-day workweek trials, which will be examined through a gender lens to determine whether a four-day workweek can alleviate the pressures facing women in the workplace and working women more broadly.

Common Challenges and Barriers for Working Women

To assess the potential positive effects of a four-day workweek on gender inequality in the workplace, and due to the lack of data on this topic, it is important to begin with a review of the types of inequality and challenges that working women face. A major obstacle is the gender pay gap. Schneider et al. (2021) studied the presence of a gender pay gap among women on European executive boards, which included individual pay data from 359 boards in 75 companies across several European countries. Schneider et al. (2021) found an unfair pay penalty of 17% and a gender pay gap of 11%. According to data from Eurostat (2023), the difference between the hourly earnings of women and those of men as a percentage of men's gross earnings is around 12.7% in the European Union. There are many reasons behind the existence of the gender pay gap. Wagner (2015) mentions that women are more likely to work in part-time jobs than full-time jobs, which can lead to lower work experience compared to men; lower work experience then leads to lower pay. Another reason is the implicit bias that comes during the hiring process, with employers offering starting salaries 15% higher for male applicants than female ones.

The gender pay gap is also tied to the gender division of labor and gendered expectations that push women to perform most of the childcare and domestic work in their households. The gender pay gap starts to get larger after women become

mothers, which is known as the “motherhood penalty.” According to the United Kingdom’s Institute for Fiscal Studies, by the time a child gets to 12 years of age, the gender pay gap is 33% between men and women (Francis-Devine, 2022). According to the World Economic Forum, a major reason behind mothers being paid less and working less is their prioritization of childcare and homework, since this work is mostly attributed to women (Werber, 2019). Argyrous et al. (2017) studied the effect of a firstborn child on work and childcare. It was shown that the effects of a firstborn on work are a “women’s issue,” with the father’s own work life experiencing little to no changes at all following the birth of a first child. Argyrous et al. (2017) add that, in Australia, which is where their study took place, it seems to be the norm that only women sacrifice their professional lives and goals in order to take care of children, rather than men.

Paid maternity plays an important role in decreasing gender inequality and reducing the challenges working women face when it comes to childcare. Its absence in turn promotes inequality between men and women. Chai et al. (2021) found that longer paid maternity leave supported more egalitarian economic decision-making in the household. Such a policy also encourages women to return to work, which goes against traditional norms and increases women’s participation in the labor force. However, the World Economic Forum explains that in countries where paternal leave is offered, cultural norms might lead employers to prefer paid leave for working women, while paid leave for men will be more restrictive; this unfortunately reinforces more work for women, relative to childcare and domestic work (Werber, 2019).

When it comes to Lebanon, working women face the same challenges. The Lebanese Labor Code in 1994 was updated to include mandatory maternity leave for seven weeks, which was later increased to 10 weeks in 2014. However, according to an article from *L’Orient Le Jour*, the law remains discriminatory (Tabbara, 2022). The lack of paternal leave in the law reinforces the idea that childcare is women’s prerogative. In addition, maternity leave does not apply to all women workers. For example, the Lebanese Labor Code excludes several women-dominated sectors of the labor market, including domestic labor and civil service.

Another important challenge women face at work, which is considered one of the most dangerous challenges to women’s health and wellbeing, is workplace sexual assault and harassment. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), sexual assault at work can take two forms (Sexual harassment at work: Factsheet, n.d.). The first is called *quid-pro-quo* abuse; this occurs when sexual behavior is demanded in exchange for a pay rise or a better job position, or something else in exchange. The second type of workplace sexual harassment is when the work environment itself can lead to an increased prevalence of sexual harassment, known as a hostile work environment. This type of work environment can create a setting where sexual harassment perpetrators are not punished and act with impunity. In Hong Kong, 25% of workers interviewed were sexually harassed, of whom two-thirds were women (ILO, n.d.). In the European Union, 40-50% of women have come out stating that they have been sexually harassed at work. A report from the Institute for Women’s Policy Research lists the detrimental consequences sexual assault has on working women (Shaw, 2021). Sexual harassment leads to negative effects on the mental and physical

health of women, which affects the work performance of women. Furthermore, sexual assault decreases on-the-job learning opportunities and experiences for women. Sexual assault can also force women to change jobs.

The Outcomes of a Four-Day Workweek and its Potential Contributions to Gender Equality in the Workplace

Academic studies analyzing the outcomes of a four-day workweek on gender equality are scarce. To address this lack of information, this section summarizes and analyzes findings from four-day workweek trials that were undertaken in companies and their potential impacts on gender equality in the workplace. This is an exploratory analysis; more research is needed to make definitive claims about four-day workweeks and their positive implications for gender equality.

The most recent experiment with a four-day workweek was undertaken in the United Kingdom. The World Economic Forum (Ellerbeck, 2023) reported that it involved 60 companies and 2,900 UK workers, who implemented a four-day work week for six months, between June and December of 2022. The model followed was the "100-80-100" model, where workers would work 80% of their normal hours while getting paid the same, while maintaining the same level of productivity. The results were overwhelmingly positive. Out of the 61 companies in the trial, 56 mentioned their willingness to continue to try this workplace model, with 18 of them making the change permanent. The trial was done by 4 Day Week Global along with other organizations and academic researchers. Several important findings emerged from this experiment. A shorter work week was found to lead to fewer absences and reduced burnout among employees. In numbers, 71% of employees stated that it had reduced their level of burnout at the end of the trial, with 43% indicating that their mental health had also improved. The World Economic Forum also mentions that 37% of workers reported an improvement in physical health. One of the most important outcomes of the trial was that 60% of workers reported that they were more able to combine work with their family life, house chores, and childcare responsibilities (Ellerbeck, 2023).

As discussed above, the issue of balancing between work and family life is a challenge often thrown on women. One less day of work per week can help women and even men in dividing tasks when it comes to childcare and domestic work. According to 4 Day Week Global (2023), a four-day workweek can improve household discussion when it comes to dividing the caring responsibilities between parents, while also reducing childcare costs. During a four-day workweek, men take a bigger share of childcare and housework, with 21% of all workers experiencing a reduction in caring costs and responsibilities. Other trials in different countries experienced similar results. 4 Day Week Global (2022) provides an example from a four-day work week pilot program in Iceland implemented between 2015 and 2019. The results included improved well-being and work-life balance for the 2,500 employees who participated. In short, the four-day workweek can have a great effect on gender equality by giving women more control over their professional careers and their personal lives because they are guaranteed an additional day off. Such a model can fight against the burden of childcare on women, since it also gives more time for men to engage in childcare by dividing responsibilities and tasks with their partners.

The four-day workweek model also plays an important role in reducing the gender pay gap. According to the think tank Women's Budget Group (2022), a four-day workweek can help reduce the gender pay gap and can even help the environment. Their report points out that the countries who had lower average annual working hours such as Germany, Denmark, and Norway in 2019, also had smaller gender pay gaps than their European counterparts. The report also stated that shorter work weeks make men engage more in unpaid care and domestic work. However, the report does mention that this might not be always the case. This is because the equitable distribution of childcare and housework is also related to a variety of other gender equitable workplace policies, including parental leave. For that reason, a four-day workweek should not be used as a substitute, or in the place of a wide spectrum of gender equitable workplace policies like parental leave. Instead, the four-day workweek should complement these efforts.

The Women's Budget Group (2022) emphasizes that shorter work weeks can lead to better productivity in many sectors, especially in women-dominated sectors, such as healthcare. It also creates a more stress-free workplace environment, which leads to better productivity. Better productivity can, in turn, create the opportunity to implement even shorter workweeks, which can ultimately lead to a better work-life balance for women and men. However, while a four-day workweek can lead to a healthier and less stressful environment, it is not clear whether this can directly help to reduce sexual assault at work.

Policy Recommendations and What Can Be Done in Lebanon

When it comes to Lebanon, the gender pay gap remains high despite the level of education of many Lebanese women. Dah et al. (2014) mention that women earn 71% of what Lebanese men earn. According to UN Women, Lebanon also has one of the highest overall gender gaps in the world. A study by the World Bank (Char et al., 2022) states that 60% of Lebanese women mention childcare responsibilities as the main reason behind not joining the workforce in the first place.

It is clear that women in Lebanon face the same workplace challenges as women globally. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that like their global counterparts, working women in Lebanon would equally benefit from the implementation of a four-day work week. With the current economic and political situation in Lebanon, which is fueled by instability, it would be impractical to focus on passing and implementing laws and regulations which would lead to shorter work hours per week or a four-day work week in specific. However, the private sector can take independent steps towards implementing a four-day work week in the absence of government-level policies and legislation. For example, the Lebanese Private Sector Association, which includes business owners, can implement this model in several companies. Owners' associations and worker unions can also contribute to implementing this model. The main incentive would be the shared benefits of a shorter work week, which include the improvement of the well-being of workers, a healthier working environment, and increased productivity, which in turn helps the company grow and generate profit. These incentives will also lead to the improvement of gender equality in the Lebanese workplace overall.

Conclusion

The global four-day workweek trend that has taken off in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic needs to be taken advantage of, especially in countries like Lebanon that face high levels of gender inequality in the workplace and beyond. With the many challenges that working women face, which either keeps them from joining the workforce in the first place or discourage them from continuing their careers after having children, it is important to implement immediate policies to alleviate these gender barriers. This study has argued that a four-day workweek can lead to a better distribution of childcare and housework responsibilities between men and women, which ultimately leads to the closure of the gender pay gap and gender inequality for working women more broadly. Moreover, it also creates a healthier environment for both women and men and a more productive atmosphere, leading to a more stress-free environment.

While other countries can take legislative steps to implement such changes in the workplace, Lebanon currently lacks the government willpower to make such changes in light of the ongoing economic and political crises plaguing the country. Thus, this paper urges the Lebanese private sector to take on the four-day workweek this initiative considering the major benefits that this schedule has not only on women workers, but on all workers.

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