

## SOCIOLOGY

### Why gender gaps persist

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Significantly fewer women achieve positions of power within organizations than men, and the widely accepted explanation is conflict between women's professional and family obligations. Sociologists have challenged this work–family narrative as over-simplistic, and new research provides deeper insights into the reasons for women's stalled advancement.

Through interviews with employees and HR personnel at a mid-sized global consultancy firm with a scarcity of women in top roles, Irina Padavic of Florida State University and colleagues found that work–family conflict preoccupied men

and women equally. Also, against the firm's impression, turnover rates were similar among men and women and could not account for women's failure to achieve partner status at the firm. Both female and male employees experienced distress with the 24/7 work culture, and this distress was not alleviated by flexible working policies: the employees (mostly women) who took advantage of such policies were stigmatized, which reduced their chances at promotion. The work–life narrative was pervasive in the organization and Padavic et al. show how this narrative was used as a social defence strategy by the firm's leadership in order to fend off employee anxieties raised by a 24/7 work culture. This allowed the organization to avoid challenges to the notions that women's stalled advancement is inevitable and long hours are a necessity.

Despite progress in the 1970s and 1980s, women's professional advancement has stalled. Understanding the reasons why requires identifying what lies beneath pervasive, hegemonic narratives that perpetuate the current status quo.

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