

# Perceived workplace flexibility among Dutch older workers: The role of gender

Marleen Damman, Kène Henkens

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Marleen Damman<sup>12</sup>, Kène Henkens<sup>123</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI-KNAW), The Hague, The Netherlands

<sup>2</sup>University Medical Center Groningen, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

<sup>3</sup>Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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## **Abstract**

Flexibility in work schedule and work location have been suggested as being work features that may promote prolonged employment among older workers. This study focuses on the question whether access to workplace flexibility differs between male and female older workers and how potential differences can be explained. Analyses are based on data collected in 2015 among 4,813 Dutch older workers (age 60-65) who were employed in the government, education, care, and welfare sectors. Results show that the studied women on average perceive to have less workplace flexibility than men, both in work schedule and work location. The gender difference in perceived location flexibility can be fully explained by differences in the human capital and job characteristics of male and female older workers. The gender difference in perceived schedule flexibility can be captured less clearly by these factors. This disadvantaged position of late-career women warrants attention in discussions about prolonged employment.

**Key words:** Schedule flexibility, Flextime, Location flexibility, Flexplace, Prolonged employment

## Introduction

In ageing Western populations, flexibility in terms of work schedule and work location have been suggested as being beneficial work features that may promote continued employment of older workers (e.g., Dropkin, Moline, Kim, & Gold, 2016). Access to workplace flexibility (i.e., “the ability of workers to make choices influencing when, where, and for how long they engage in work-related tasks”, Hill et al., 2008, p.152) may, however, differ considerably between workers (OECD, 2016). Given that persistent gender gaps are observed in many aspects of working lives – e.g., in labor participation, job quality, representation in leadership positions, earnings (OECD, 2017) – an important question is whether a gender gap in workplace flexibility can be observed among older workers as well. Such a gender gap would suggest that older women face less beneficial working conditions than men, making prolonged employment relatively more demanding. Our research question is: To what extent do older male and female employees differ in their levels of perceived workplace flexibility and how can these potential gender differences be explained?

The existing literature on workplace flexibility of older workers is mainly focused on the consequences of workplace flexibility for late-career employment and retirement. Recent studies on flexibility interventions (Cahill, James, & Pitt-Catsouphes, 2015; Moen, Kojola, Kelly, & Karakaya, 2016; Morelock, McNamara, & James, 2017) and personalized flexibility agreements (Bal, De Jong, Jansen, & Bakker, 2012) suggest that workplace flexibility is beneficial for prolonging working lives, although there are also studies – using broader flexibility concepts – that do not observe the hypothesized effects (e.g., Van Solinge & Henkens, 2014). Little is known, however, about antecedents of workplace flexibility among older workers (Damman, 2016). Studies carried out among prime-age workers suggest that women have less flexibility in the time they begin and end work than men (Golden, 2001, 2008, 2009; Lyness, Gornick, Stone, & Grotto, 2012), and have less schedule control (Chung, 2018).

The current study contributes to the literature on gender differences in late-career employment in three ways. First, we use subjective indicators of workplace flexibility as our outcomes of interest. Perceptions of workplace flexibility capture a broader phenomenon than just the use of organizational flexibility policies; they may for instance also capture flexibility resulting from personalized arrangements, or flexibility resulting from the increasing adoption of Information and Communication Technology (cf., Van Yperen, Rietzschel, & De Jonge, 2014). Another important reason for using subjective outcome measures is that it has been argued that the benefits of flexibility function primarily through individual’s perceptions of agency or control (Besen, Matz-Costa, James, & Pitt-Catsouphes, 2015; Hill et al., 2008; Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006; Lyness et al., 2012). Two dimensions of perceived workplace flexibility – *schedule* and *location* flexibility – are studied separately.

Second, this study improves our understanding of potential gender differences in perceived late-career workplace flexibility, by examining underlying structural mechanisms. Literature on workplace flexibility has shown that human capital and job characteristics relate to the level of workplace flexibility workers have (e.g., Lyness et al., 2012). Literature on gender differences in employment outcomes has shown that men and women differ considerably with regard to the jobs in which they work (OECD, 2017). The structurally different situation in which older women work, may therefore offer an explanation of why their level of perceived workplace flexibility differs from the level of male older workers. In the literature on gender inequality in employment outcomes, however, a common finding is that gender differences cannot be fully explained by these structural dissimilarities (OECD, 2017). We therefore examine to what extent human capital characteristics (educational level, years in the labor market), and job characteristics (work hours, occupational level, supervisory position, sector of employment) can explain late-career gender differences in perceived workplace flexibility. Third, to see whether schedule and location flexibility are indeed beneficial work characteristics for older workers, we pay attention to the question how workplace flexibility is associated with late-career work satisfaction.

## **Method**

### *Study Sample*

This study is based on data of the first Wave of the NIDI Pension Panel Study (see Henkens, Van Solinge, Damman, & Dingemans, 2017 for details). These data were collected in 2015 among older employees (age 60-65 years), who were sampled via three of the largest Dutch Pension Funds. Almost 15,500 questionnaires were sent out; 6,793 were completed (response 44%). For this study, we focus on employees working in four of the studied sectors in which relatively many women are employed: the government, education, care, and welfare sectors (N = 5,460). A sub-sample of workers who received a shorter version of the questionnaire that did not include all relevant variables were excluded (n = 499), as well as respondents that did not answer all four dependent variables (n = 148). This resulted in a study sample of 4,813 older workers. To deal with the structure of the data (employees nested within organizations), standard errors that allow for intra-organizational correlation were used in the analyses.

### *Measures*

The measures of the dependent, independent, and control variables are presented in Table 1. In general, item non-response on the predictor variables was low (maximum 1.21% missing on occupational skill level). Missing values were imputed 25 times by a multiple imputation procedure (Stata 14: mi impute chained).

## Results

### *Descriptive findings*

The descriptive results in Table 1 show that on average the studied older workers report more flexibility in work schedule ( $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ), than in work location ( $M = 2.26$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ );  $t(4812) = 59.76$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . Gender differences were consistently observed across the four workplace flexibility items (see Figure 1). Among men, for instance, 47 percent perceives to have a lot of influence on their working hours, versus 32 percent of the studied older women. The percentage of male older workers who can decide themselves where they work (23 percent), was more than two times as large as the percentage among the studied female older workers (10 percent). Table 2 provides the descriptive statistics of the predictor variables by gender, and highlights that men and women differ significantly in many aspects of their human capital and job situations.

### *Multivariate findings*

The results of Model 1A (Table 3) show that women report less perceived flexibility in their work schedule than men. When taking control variables, human capital indicators, and job characteristics into account (see Model 1B), the gender coefficient is reduced (from -0.28 to -0.18), but remains statistically significant. This suggests that the gender difference in perceived schedule flexibility can only partly be explained by the observed structural differences between men and women. The results show that older workers in higher level occupations, in managerial positions, and in government sector employment have a relatively high score on the perceived schedule flexibility measure. This is also the case for older workers in small part-time jobs, and for those who are older, and in better health.

Model 2A shows a statistically significant gender difference in terms of perceived location flexibility. Interestingly, as shown in Model 2B, this gender difference can completely be explained by the human capital and job situations of the studied older men and women. The studied male older workers are on average higher educated, work more hours, are employed in higher level occupations, and are more likely to work for the government (see also Table 2), which can fully explain their higher scores on the perceived work location flexibility measure.

### *Workplace flexibility and satisfaction with work*

The observed gender gap in workplace flexibility suggests that women approach their retirement in less favorable working conditions than men. Figure 2 illustrates the impact of the lack of workplace flexibility on older workers' well-being at work. Workplace flexibility – and in particular schedule flexibility – is clearly positively related with work satisfaction. Among those having very low scores on the perceived

schedule flexibility scale, about 30 percent indicates being “very / extremely” satisfied with their work, while among those with very high schedule flexibility scores about 70 percent is highly satisfied with work ( $r = 0.21, p < 0.01$ ). For perceived location flexibility the relationship is weaker, but also in the expected direction ( $r = 0.05, p < 0.01$ ).

## **Discussion**

In debates about prolonged employment, flexibility in work schedule and work location have been suggested as valuable work features, which may enable the continued employment of older workers. This study focused on the question which older workers actually have access to these two dimensions of workplace flexibility, and shows clear gender differences. On average older women perceive to have less workplace flexibility than men. The gender gap in work location flexibility could completely be explained by differences in the human capital and job characteristics of men and women. These findings suggest that flexibility in work location is a feature that “comes with the job,” and is particularly observed among those in the higher socio-economic strata. For schedule flexibility, however, gender differences could only be explained to a limited extent by the studied structural factors.

The unexplained gender effect for perceived schedule flexibility suggests that unobserved processes in the work context (e.g., gender differences in manager support) or unobserved employee characteristics (e.g., aptitude to ask for schedule flexibility) may play an explanatory role. Previous research among prime-age workers has highlighted the importance of informal arrangements in the assignment of schedule flexibility to employees. Golden’s (2009) findings showed that women “are clearly hampered by their gender status toward getting equal access to flexible schedules” (p.39), and it appeared that this gender difference was completely due to women’s limited access to non-formal schedule flexibility. Consequently, a potential fruitful direction for future research among older workers may be to distinguish between access to formal and non-formal flexibility arrangements.

The disadvantaged position of late-career women we observe in this study (for schedule flexibility even regardless of their work situation) warrants attention, especially because flexibility – and schedule flexibility in particular – appears to be a highly beneficial work characteristic. For older women it may be more demanding than for older men to continue working until or beyond the increasing state pension age, and consequently to act in line with policies aiming to prolong working lives. When women retire already before the state pension age, this will have negative financial implications, which may even aggregate already existing gender differences in individual pension incomes (e.g., Möhring, 2015). Our study findings, combined with other recent findings showing that older women experience more worry about their ability to keep up physically in the job until state pension age than men (Van Solinge &

Henkens, 2017), clearly highlight the need to pay attention to gender-specific implications of policies and practices being developed to stimulate the extension of working lives.

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*Table 1 Means, standard deviations, coding of variables, and wording of survey questions<sup>a</sup>*

	M / %	SD	Coding and psychometric properties	Wording (questions translated from Dutch)
<i>DEPENDENT VARIABLES</i>				
Perceived schedule flexibility	3.16	1.02	Scale value is based on the mean score of the two items; range 1 (limited schedule flexibility) to 5 (a lot of schedule flexibility). Cronbach's alpha = 0.77	Questions: I can easily adapt my working hours to my personal circumstances; I have a lot of influence on my working hours (1 = completely agree to 5 = completely disagree; reversed)
Perceived location flexibility	2.26	1.08	Scale value is based on the mean score of the two items; range 1 (limited location flexibility) to 5 (a lot of location flexibility). Cronbach's alpha = 0.82	Questions: I can do my job well at several locations (e.g., from home); I can decide myself where I work (office, at home, train, etc.) (1 = completely agree to 5 = completely disagree; reversed)
<i>INDEPENDENT VARIABLES</i>				
Gender	55%		Dummy variable coded 0-1; 1 = woman	Question: Are you a man or a woman? (1 = man, 2 = woman)
<i>Control variables</i>				
Age	62.06	1.61	Continuous variable; range 60-65 years	Question: In what year were you born? The year of birth was subtracted from the year of data collection (2015)
Subjective health	3.22	0.87	1-item scale; range 1 (poor health) to 5 (excellent health)	Question: How would you characterize your health in general? (1 = excellent to 5 = very poor, reversed)
Has a partner	80%		Dummy variable coded 0-1; 1 = has a partner	Question: Do you have a partner? Response options 1, 2 and 3 (yes, I am married/ cohabit with a partner/ do have a partner, but we do not live together) were coded as 1; Response option 4 (no, I am single) was coded as 0.
<i>Human capital characteristics</i>				
Educational level	13.47	2.59	Continuous variable; range 6-17 years	Question: What is the highest level of education you completed? (1 = elementary school to 7 = university). The responses were recoded into the minimum number of years necessary to reach the respective educational levels
Years in the labor market	38.00	6.37	Continuous variable; range 7-51 years	Questions: At what age did you start working? How many years in total have you been out of the labor market since you started working (i.e., the time you temporarily stopped working)? The responses were used to determine the length of labor career at interview

<i>Job characteristics</i>		
<b>Work hours</b>		
Small part-time job	31%	Three category variable; Small part-time job (12-24 hours), large part-time job (25-35 hours), full-time job (36 or more hours; reference group)
Large part-time job	30%	
Full-time job	39%	
<b>Occupational skill level</b>		
ISCO level 1	4%	Four category variable; with 1 referring to occupations involving the performance of “simple and routine physical or manual tasks” and 4 (reference group) referring to occupations involving tasks that require “complex problem-solving, decision-making and creativity” (ILO, 2012, p.12/13)
ISCO level 2	23%	
ISCO level 3	20%	
ISCO level 4	53%	
Supervisory position	21%	Dummy variable coded 0-1; 1 = has a supervisory position
<b>Sector</b>		
Government	32%	Four-category variable; government (reference group), education, care, and welfare
Education	28%	
Care	17%	
Welfare	23%	

Question: How many hours a week do you work on average (excluding overtime employment)?

Question: What is your job or profession? Please describe as clearly as possible. The answers were coded (by two coders) according to the 2008 version of the International Standard Classification of Occupation (ISCO-08)

Question: Do you have a supervisory position? (1 = no, 2 = yes)

Sector in which the respondent is employed, as provided by the Pension Fund

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<sup>a</sup>The descriptive statistics are based on the values prior to imputation of missing values.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of predictor variables by gender<sup>a</sup>

	Men		Women		Sig.
	M / %	SD	M / %	SD	
<i>Control variables</i>					
Age	62.17	1.63	61.96	1.59	$t = 4.49, p < 0.01$
Subjective health	3.23	0.87	3.21	0.88	$t = 0.89, p > 0.05$
Has a partner	90%		71%		$Chi2 = 245.10, p < 0.01$
<i>Human capital characteristics</i>					
Education	13.77	2.66	13.23	2.51	$t = 7.13, p < 0.01$
Years in the labor market	40.55	4.57	35.94	6.85	$t = 26.73, p < 0.01$
<i>Job characteristics</i>					
Work hours					
Small part-time job	10%		47%		$Chi2 = 1.3e+03, p < 0.01$
Large part-time job	25%		35%		
Full-time job	66%		18%		
Occupational skill level					
ISCO level 1	2%		5%		$Chi2 = 106.35, p < 0.01$
ISCO level 2	20%		26%		
ISCO level 3	17%		23%		
ISCO level 4	61%		46%		
Supervisory position	30%		14%		$Chi2 = 185.65, p < 0.01$
Sector					
Government	50%		18%		$Chi2 = 739.05, p < 0.01$
Education	28%		27%		
Care	6%		26%		
Welfare	15%		28%		

<sup>a</sup>The descriptive statistics are based on the values prior to imputation of missing values.

Table 3 Results of regression analyses to explain differences in levels of perceived workplace flexibility, coefficients and standard errors<sup>a</sup> (N = 4,813)

	Models 1A/B: Perceived schedule flexibility			Models 2A/B: Perceived location flexibility		
	Coef.		SE	Coef.		SE
<b>MODEL A</b>						
Gender	-0.28	**	0.04	-0.43	**	0.04
Constant	3.31	**	0.04	2.49	**	0.04
<i>F</i>	56.68	**		90.66	**	
<i>Mean R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.02			0.04		
<b>MODEL B</b>						
Gender	-0.18	**	0.04	-0.07		0.04
<i>Control variables</i>						
Age	0.02	**	0.01	0.01		0.01
Subjective health	0.11	**	0.02	0.01		0.02
Has a partner	-0.01		0.04	-0.00		0.03
<i>Human capital characteristics</i>						
Educational level	0.01		0.01	0.09	**	0.01
Years in the labor market	0.00		0.00	0.00		0.00
<i>Job characteristics</i>						
Work hours						
Small part-time job	0.10	*	0.04	-0.28	**	0.05
Large part-time job	0.00		0.04	-0.11	*	0.04
Full-time job	Ref.			Ref.		
Occupational skill level						
ISCO level 1	-0.05		0.09	-0.46	**	0.09
ISCO level 2	-0.13	*	0.06	-0.40	**	0.06
ISCO level 3	-0.13	*	0.05	-0.27	**	0.06
ISCO level 4	Ref.			Ref.		
Supervisory position	0.15	**	0.04	0.07		0.05
Sector						
Government	Ref.			Ref.		
Education	-0.93	**	0.06	-1.00	**	0.06
Care	-0.34	**	0.06	-0.52	**	0.09
Welfare	-0.13	**	0.05	-0.22	**	0.07
Constant	1.67	**	0.54	0.95		0.63
<i>F</i>	34.18	**		61.22	**	
<i>Mean R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.15			0.24		

\*  $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$

<sup>a</sup>Standard errors in all models were adjusted for 862 organizational clusters.

*Figure 1 Gender differences in perceived workplace flexibility among Dutch older workers*

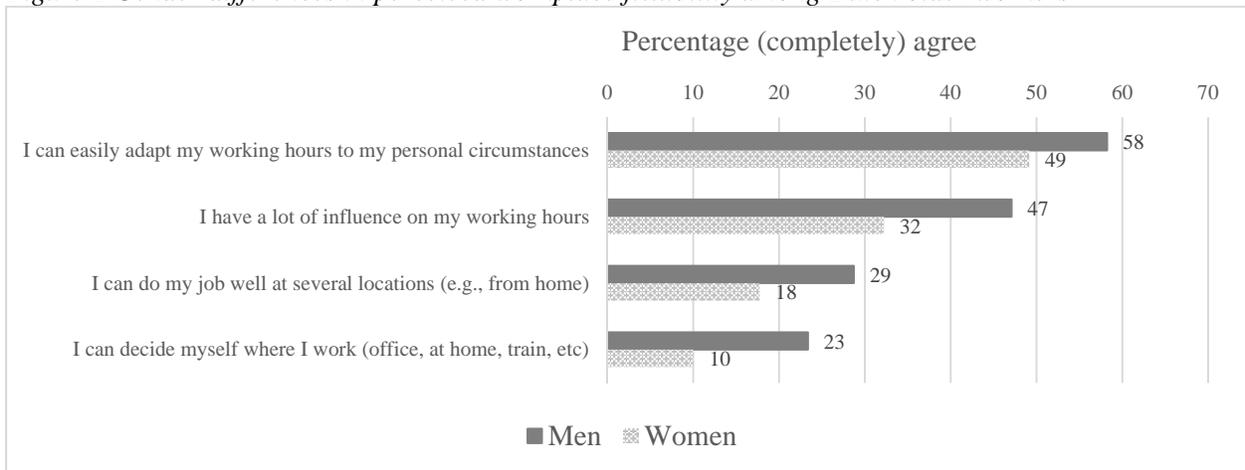
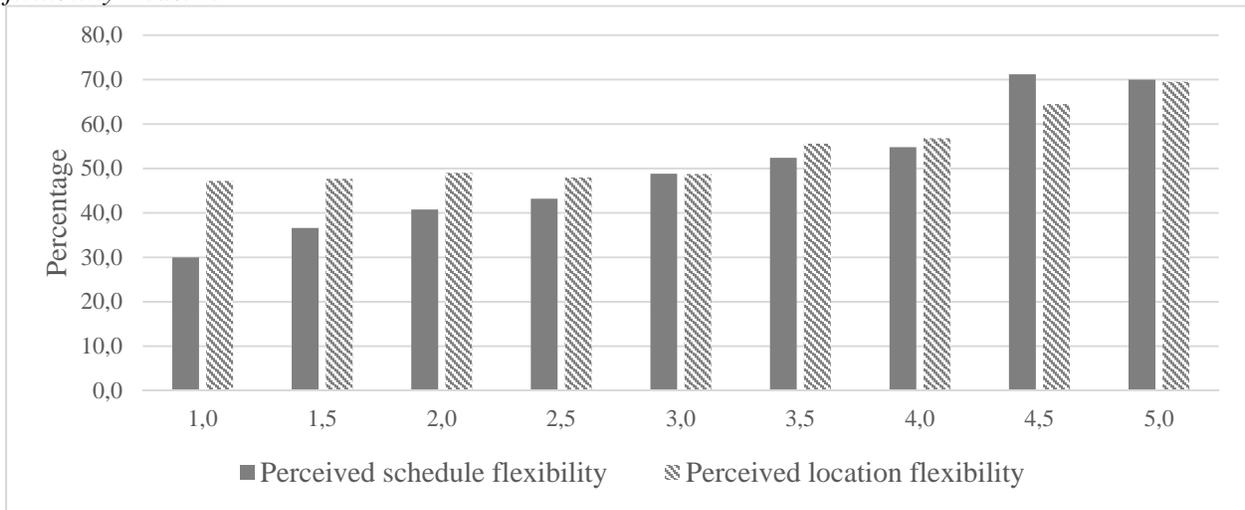


Figure 2 Percentage of respondents being “very / extremely” satisfied with their work<sup>a</sup>, by workplace flexibility measure



<sup>a</sup>Satisfaction with work was based on the question: “How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your life: Your work?”; Range 1 = Extremely dissatisfied to 7 = Extremely satisfied.