



**FLEXIBLE WORKING:  
THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN  
KNOWLEDGE WORKERS**

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## Abstract

Work organisations in the knowledge economy depend on a different talent: knowledge workers, whose tacit knowledge is valuable to employers in the quest for a competitive advantage. Knowledge work and its concomitant reliance on information and communication technologies facilitate flexible work arrangements (FWA), which in turn enable crossing of spatial and temporal boundaries. These new ways of working are often recommended for women to retain their careers, resolve work-life balance issues and achieve their full potential. However, there is a dearth of studies into experiences of women knowledge workers who use FWA. Furthermore, existing research on knowledge workers not only largely neglects women's perspectives, but it also presents utopian ideals of freedom, autonomy and prestige often adopting high-status, exclusive knowledge worker conceptualisations. Moreover, FWA and knowledge work fused under one theoretical framework is still under-explored and under-theorised. Therefore, the aim of this research is to better understand how women knowledge workers obtain, experience, and manage FWA. A qualitative approach was adopted involving semi-structured interviews with 30 women knowledge workers in South West England. Template analysis was used to make sense of the data. The research findings emerged inductively and structuration theory (ST) guided the exploration of the participants' accounts. This study found that the women knowledge workers drew upon their internal and external structures, such as occupational capital, knowledge and people to obtain FWA by the practices of *leveraging*, *rationalising* and *bargaining*. Once they had secured FWA, these women engaged in practices to *emulate normativity*, *compensate*, *conceal* their flexible status, *reciprocate* flexibility, and *create impact*. Furthermore, the women's perceived consequences of utilising FWA were explored in relation to their lives and careers. This study proposes an inductively emergent theory of women knowledge workers' experiences of FWA with the concepts of *Becoming* and *(Un)becoming Flexible*. Although the women knowledge workers had a strong human capital to firstly *Become Flexible*, then they strived to *(Un)become Flexible* by realigning with the expectations of constant presence, availability and performance in the eyes of organisational audience. These practices contributed to the weakening of their professional currency, strengthening the ideal worker and gender norms, and reproducing neoliberal values making these women responsible for the unwanted daily incursions of outside commitments. This study fills a number of gaps in current scholarship. Firstly, by focusing on women, this study contributes to a largely gender-neutral knowledge work literature. Secondly, by exploring women's experiences in the context of the right to request flexible working, this study enhances our knowledge of how FWA are negotiated and obtained. Thirdly, by adopting ST to make sense of the data, this study helps us better understand how women knowledge workers are simultaneously leveraging structures for agentic practices and reproducing structures that may ultimately constrain them.

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*For Lana*

## **Abbreviations**

ACAS - The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service

CIPD – Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

CT – critical theory

FT – feminist theory

FWA – flexible work arrangement(s)

HRM – human resource management

ICT – information and communication technology

IM – impression management

IT – information technology

IWN – ideal worker norm

KIS – knowledge-intensive services

QNS – quadripartite nature of structuration

R&D – research and development

SET – science, engineering and technology

ST – structuration theory

WLB – work-life balance

# Chapter 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Introduction

This study's overall aim is to critically examine the perceptions of women knowledge workers who use flexible work arrangements (FWA) in order to better understand how they obtain, manage and experience FWA. This research is positioned at the scholarly intersection of knowledge work, flexible working and women in work organisations. The theoretical underpinning for this research comes from the recognition of a social paradox that affects women. That is, despite women's newfound agency afforded by education, post-industrialism, the equal opportunities and work-life balance (WLB) agenda, technological advances and flexible working, women are still subjected to structural *constraints* through organisational work regimes, gendered organisations, and managerial hegemony that prevent them from achieving full potential. Thus, this research hopes to illuminate why and how this paradox is sustained by studying women who symbolise such *agency* afforded by their knowledge worker and flexibility status, and the concomitant *structures* imposed by employing organisations and wider social expectations.

To date, the joint exploration of FWA and women in work organisations has had limited consideration within the knowledge work literature, which is viewed largely as gender-neutral. Moreover, previous research in the context of knowledge work emphasises an organisational-interest agenda, and provides a myriad ways of managing reified knowledge workers to leverage, share, and create valuable tacit knowledge needed for competitive advantage. However, not much scholarship concentrates directly on the experiences of individual knowledge workers (and especially women) as human beings. Moreover, existing literature in the context of flexible working also tends to emphasise organisational gains, such as talent attraction or retention, or largely negative individual repercussions linked to career derailment and marginalisation. The recent right to request flexible working legislation introduced in the U.K. provides another angle for the focus of this research, as the way the legislation is constructed can prove challenging in terms of widening take-up and creating a flexibility-accepting organisational culture.

This research uses a qualitative inductive approach to fulfil the research aim and is based on semi-structured interviews with 30 women knowledge workers. By asking women knowledge workers *how they experience flexible working*, this study explores why and how these women may be actively partaking in the production and reproduction of structures that make up organisational and wider social systems.

This study makes an important contribution to understanding the women knowledge workers' perspectives on FWA. One of the outcomes of this study is the development of a theoretical model which offers insights into the experiences of women knowledge workers, and ways of obtaining and managing FWA.

The purpose of this chapter is to present the background of the study, and provide a rationale for researching the experiences of women knowledge workers of FWA. Next, the aim, research questions, and objectives of the study will be proposed. A theoretical framework will be suggested along with potential contributions. Lastly, the organisation of the thesis will be provided.

## **1.2. Rationale for Researching Women**

Some observers claim we have entered an era of significant freedoms, an epochal change (Beck 2000), and a time of unprecedented opportunities for women thanks to the past achievements of feminism, which as a consequence, has now become obsolete. This postfeminist landscape is characterised by the focus on agency, egalitarianism, self-direction, individual rights, choice and preference (Lewis and Simpson 2017). Agency in this study is defined as a human's capability to carry out their intended actions, or their interventions into the existing situation that brings about change through intended or unintended consequences (Giddens 1986, p. 9). Such *agency* is particularly manifested through women's participation in white-collar occupations, which have recently been transformed into knowledge work, concomitant with the rise of the knowledge economy in the West (Eikhof 2016). Furthermore, the psychological contract characterising knowledge work is underpinned by new values, such as expectations of WLB and employee-driven flexibility to allow women to engage in the labour market (Beaumont and Hunter 2002). As Pamela Stone observed, "given the centrality of 'choice' to our understanding of women's decisions about work and

family” (2007, p. 15), it is important to study women who, at least theoretically, have this choice.

Yet, at the same time, we can observe a return to gender stereotypes disguised in traditional familialism and reconciliation of feminism and femininity (Crompton 2002), which occurs even within the new economic sphere, such as in creative industries (Dent 2016). This means that the work sphere (feminism/change/agency) and the home sphere (femininity/stability/structure) should “have a symbiotic co-existence, with women expected to excel in both arenas” (Lewis and Simpson 2017, p. 119). This implicit expectation creates tensions in women’s lives through the never-ending pursuit of “having it all” with the interlocking issues around economic freedom and motherhood, but also further exacerbated by beauty, fitness and body culture regimes. Eikhof (2016, p. 371) argues that this expectation can create disappointments and disillusion often on a career-damaging scale. Through gaining a better understanding of the intricacies of women’s issues in the society as a whole, and especially in work organisations, we can appreciate that there are still deeply ingrained problems that need addressing, and that we are far from gender parity.

For example, there are persisting structural issues, such as pay gap (The Institute for Fiscal Studies [IFS] 2016; The Workplace Gender Equality Agency [WGEA] 2016), pension pay and poverty in retirement (Steventon and Sanchez 2008; Norton and West 2014), horizontal (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA] 2016) and vertical segregation (Office for National Statistics [ONS] 2015), feminisation and devaluation (Reskin and Roos 1990; and Pfeffer and Davis-Blake 1987 cited by Fondas 1997). Stereotypical gender roles (Oakley 1972), and organisational cultures influence how work is organised on male models of availability and commitment which can stifle women’s progress and career development (Williams 2000).

Therefore, those who are arguing that the zero-sum game is still being played and the winners are men, have both the quantitative and qualitative empirical evidence to support their claims. It is also important to acknowledge that even in the organisations where gender equality is on the agenda, inequality may develop over time, as men continue to dominate local and global organisations (Acker 2006). Therefore, any progress in gender parity should not be taken for granted. Moreover, dominant discourses can partially or fully obscure women’s experiences in workplaces. For

instance, Lewis and Simpson (2017) have warned that postfeminist discourse currently dominant in the media and politics champions the ideas of agency, and self-directedness in women's work and life spheres, but at the same time it obfuscates structural constraints impeding women's choices and freedoms. For example, equality in education and employment have been assimilated into:

“everyday (western) life such that feminism now has a taken-for-granted status, with the expectation of equality in all aspects of life being unremarkable” (Lewis and Simpson 2017, p. 119).

Therefore, it is important that researchers continue to explore women's experiences and struggles in order to identify and critique structures, barriers and closure regimes that prevent women from thriving in organisations (Burke 1999; Cuddy et al. 2004; Cross and Linehan 2006; Bolton and Muzio 2007; Bolton and Muzio 2008; Carter and Silva 2010; Teasdale 2013; Cahusac and Kanji 2014).

On the other hand, this exploration of structures is often conducted to the detriment of identifying women's active agency and practices deployed in response to social structures, with a few notable exceptions (see: Betz 1984; Cabrera 2007; Dikkers et al. 2010; August 2011; Buse et al. 2013). Thus, although existing research has shown that women experience reduced status and inequality in organisational structures (Glass 2004; Walsh 2012), what is less clear is whether and how they are deploying their agency in response to these structures (Orser et al. 2012). Drawing on Structuration Theory (ST) (Giddens 1986), and in particular on the Quadripartite Nature of Structuration (QNS) (Stones 2005), this study appreciates both structure and agency, and hopes to illuminate how flexible women knowledge workers participate in the process of structuration defined as:

“the two-way process by which we shape our social world through our individual actions and are ourselves reshaped by society” (Giddens 2001, p. 700).

By focusing on women, this study addresses a call for academics to “increase their efforts to *think* and *do gender*” (Eikhof 2016, p. 370, my emphasis). Specifically, this study critically explores and contests whether knowledge work and flexible working are as liberating and furnishing women with opportunities to thrive in work organisations.

### 1.3. Knowledge Work and Gender

Knowledge work provides a contextual backdrop for the examination of women's experiences of flexible working in this study. It is now widely accepted that the knowledge economy has replaced the industrial economy and British, as well as global organisations much depend on the cognitive talents of their workforce to provide and sustain a competitive advantage (Harrigan and Dalmia 1991). The development of the information and communication technologies (ICT), and especially access to the Internet have transformed how productivity and organisational operations and activities are undertaken (Castells 2000). Employers now hope to attract and retain a workforce that can effectively harness the opportunities the knowledge economy brings and engage in the generation, production and application of knowledge (Davenport et al. 1996). This has opened opportunities for reconceptualisation of work, as the flexibility of time and space has been significantly enabled by knowledge work and the ICT (Duxbury and Smart 2011).

Firstly, it is apposite to present how the term *knowledge worker* has been conceptualised in this study, since the manifold ways of defining this concept significantly colour the way in which knowledge work is understood and how it is positioned both organisationally and socially. This is covered in depth in Chapter 2.2.2. However, this is a brief summary of the most important elements of the adopted knowledge work conceptualisation: (1) processing large amounts of information, (2) use of ICT, (3) problem solving, (4) both routine and routine-free work, (5) increased autonomy, (6) collaboration, (7) knowledge as the main tool and (8) output of work, and (9) thinking as the core task. Knowledge workers are well-educated (degrees, masters, PhDs), possess a specific skill set (for instance, CIPD, IT qualifications), or have experience in a given knowledge-intensive industry or organisation. They are able to work outside the confines of traditional office time and space structures (e.g. homeworking, working flexible hours), as their role is conducive to working flexibly. Knowledge workers have a limited contact with client, customer, or end user, which facilitates flexible working. Such conceptualisation of knowledge worker allows a more democratic focus, going beyond the emphasis on elite, white-collar workers and high-

status professions, such as lawyers (Epstein et al. 1999), accountants (Fenwick 2012), and consultants (Donnelly 2006) as in previous research.

Compared to workers employed in non-knowledge-intensive roles, knowledge workers arguably hold a “strong set of cards”. This is because the concept of knowledge worker is tightly linked to tacit knowledge (Taylor 2010), which is difficult for employers to substitute or imitate (Reed 1996). Therefore, turnover of such staff is viewed as an expensive loss of intellectual capital that can take a long time and effort to replace (Buckingham 2000). Also, the loss of social capital can be detrimental to the organisation as relationships, social links and networking that aid communication and knowledge sharing are decreased (Dess and Shaw 2001). What distinguishes knowledge work from labour or capital-intensive sectors is its reliance on the willing contribution of skilled and educated workforce (Truss et al. 2012). Hence, employees are seen as a valuable asset requiring a unique HRM approach (Beaumont and Hunter 2002). Consequently, since it is in the employers’ interest to retain knowledge workers, this could arguably strengthen the bargaining advantage of employees in the negotiation of workplace concessions (Darr and Warhurst 2008).

In the context of gender, it is understood that the knowledge economy could also make gender egalitarian goals possible to achieve, since some of its sectors are more female-friendly as compared to the economy as a whole. For instance, even though the IT and high-tech manufacturing is still marred by low participation rates of women, knowledge-intensive service (KIS) industry is the most egalitarian, with a slight majority of women employed in this sector (Walby 2011). Some scholars suggest that, at first glance, knowledge work is indeed ideal for women as it could offer freedom, autonomy, self-directedness and opportunities for seeking balance (Eikhof 2016), and addressing the infamous dual burden of productive and reproductive tasks that have been historically encumbering women (Hochschild and Machung 2003).

The synergy of gender and knowledge work is firstly founded on the premise that physical strength traditionally advantaging men in industrial and agricultural work is irrelevant to knowledge workers, so it does not advantage anyone in particular (Eikhof 2016). Moreover, as Eikhof (2016) argues the possession of talent or knowledge transcends gender if we believe in meritocracy. Additionally skills that are valued specifically in the KIS sector actually tend to be held by women, which could



strengthen their position (Walby 2011). This advantage is developed during women's education where they significantly outperform boys (Higher Education Policy Institute [HEPI] 2016) and can hone highly effective social and communication skills (Walby 2011). These characteristics emphasise the individual efficiencies of women which enable them to enter knowledge-intensive organisations.

However, there might be some obstacles to gender equality for women knowledge workers. These are, for example, the relationship with the employing institution implicated in the problematic of *gendered organisations* (Acker 1990, 2006), and organisational expectations what an *ideal worker* should behave or look like (Williams 2000; Peterson 2017). Thus, inequality issues do not emerge from the problem of being male or female, but from "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987; Butler 1988) in a socially constructed way, which may impact the lives and careers of human beings (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). This is because gender is based on a social constructionist understanding of gender and sex, conceiving of these as social processes. This means that gender is seen as:

"an emergent feature of social relations, not something one 'has', but something one 'does' as an ongoing accomplishment of social life" (Calas et al. 2014, p. 26).

Therefore, women knowledge workers may not be necessarily immune to these problems, despite their arguably strong social and occupational positioning (Reed 1996). This is particularly pertinent in the context of women knowledge workers, because:

"[w]e are witnessing only the second generation of educated women to combine work and family in large proportions. For this group, the combination is relatively recent and potentially most fragile" (Stone 2007, p. 13).

This is because, firstly, knowledge workers still tend to be employed as members of organisations, rather than freelance, deeming them not as autonomous and independent as some utopian literature claims (Donnelly 2009b). This makes women especially vulnerable to Acker's (1990) gendered organisations, as gender does not "stand" outside of organisational structures, but it defines them. The cumulative processes of division, construction, interaction, identity, and conceptualisation

contribute to the generation and reproduction of gender inequalities and discrimination in work organisations (Giddens 1986; Acker 1990).

Secondly, a vast body of knowledge identifies gender inequality in organisations in relation to the ideal worker norm (IWN), and the struggles of the employees with balancing careers and family commitments (MacDermid et al. 2001; Smithson et al. 2004; Gatrell 2007; Carney 2009; Brown 2010; Campbell et al. 2012; Walsh 2012; Cahusac and Kanji 2014; Michielsens et al. 2014). The IWN is often concomitant with organisational cultures that reward full-time commitment and availability (Bailyn 1993; Williams 2000; Rapoport et al. 2002; Blair-Loy 2003) and expectations that employees will internalise and become intrinsically motivated by organisational interests (Moen et al. 2013). How employees' commitment and performance are perceived is linked to their temporal conduct and obligations (Kunda 1992). This is also taking place in the context of knowledge work, as despite the rise of the ICT, traditional face-to-face communication, collaboration and interaction are still important ingredients needed for knowledge workers to thrive (Felstead et al. 2005; Eikhof 2016). Moreover, research has shown that women, especially mothers, not only fail to conform to the IWN because of retraditionalisation of gender (Dent 2016), but they also suffer identity dissonance based on the impossible reconciliation of work and family roles (Stone and Lovejoy 2004; Christopher 2012).

Thirdly, knowledge workers rely on the development of networks and social capital building in order to enhance their career prospects (Tymon and Stumpf 2003). The career and work strategies knowledge workers need to engage in are linked to the capabilities of *knowing-why*, *knowing-whom* and *knowing-what* (Arthur et al. 1995) and this requires constant collaboration, communication, self-marketing, presence and time resources (Eikhof 2016). However, research has shown that women do not necessarily exceed in these activities as well as men (Eagly et al. 2007; Kumra and Vinnicombe 2010), or stumble upon "old boys' networks" (Arthur et al. 2011), which can limit their networking capabilities.

Despite these problems, still relatively little is known about how knowledge work is experienced by women. Some scholars have even called this body of literature as gender-blind, or gender-neutral (Alvesson 1998; Styhre et al. 2001; Luring and Selmer 2012; Truss et al. 2012). Gender has only been given peripheral attention in the

appraisal of knowledge work (Nicolopoulou et al. 2011), or no explicit attention at all (Scarborough 1999; Flood et al. 2001; Thompson and Heron 2005; Cushen and Thompson 2012; Kinnie and Swart 2012; Wolfram and Gratton 2014). Albeit, a few notable studies address this shortcoming (see: Walby 2007; Caprile and Pascual 2011; Walby 2011; Donnelly et al. 2012; Natti et al. 2012; Truss et al. 2012; Donnelly 2015; Olsen 2016; Tammelin et al. 2017). More recently, new studies have emerged that focus on women knowledge workers. However, they are set in the context of transnational corporations which utilise IT talent sourced from lower-cost geographical locations globally (Peterson 2017).

Therefore, as Eikhof (2016) in her appraisal of knowledge work and gender argues, it is important to explore how women knowledge workers experience these workplace developments. Firstly, this is to better understand if the knowledge economy works for women, and secondly, to ensure that if there are any mechanisms of discrimination then they can be illuminated and challenged. Thus, this study addresses Eikhof's (2016) call to explore knowledge work contexts, especially combined with non-standard employment patterns, such as FWA. The current study focuses on women knowledge workers in the U.K., as this country's economy is particularly dependant on the knowledge economy (Chang 2016; ONS 2017a).

## **1.4. Flexible Work Arrangements**

Flexible work arrangements (FWA) in this study are understood as part of a progressive HRM agenda primarily benefitting employees and fulfilling their WLB and work-family requirements. This conceptualisation is different from the employer-driven flexibility, such as zero-hour contracts, numerical or skill flexibility, which mainly serve the flexible-firm agenda (Kossek and Friede 2006). This study's definition of FWA includes flexi-time, flexi-space and homeworking both on a full-time or part-time basis. Flexible working is currently underpinned by the U.K. nationwide legislation which entitles eligible employees the right to request flexible working, albeit this request can be rejected for a number of business-related reasons (The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service [ACAS] 2016).

Flexible schedules address the needs of working (or wishing to work) parents, as childcare in the U.K. has long been considered unaffordable (Harding et al. 2017). As

much as 85 per cent of professional mothers qualified to a degree level engage both in paid work and childcare, which makes them particularly sensitive to WLB provisions (ONS 2014). These alternative work arrangements have been heralded as the workplace provisions enabling women (and increasingly men) to manage their WLB needs and to address their childcare and elderly care needs, even though this perspective is now more inclusive to encompass other, more varied needs of employees (ACAS 2016).

Flexible working is also one of the ways in which work organisations can retain an otherwise lost female talent, as women tend to gravitate towards the home and seek balance when they become mothers (Hewlett and Luce 2005; Kossek and Lee 2008; Sullivan and Mainiero 2008). Some feminist critics argue that flexible working policies also seek to resolve the state's unpaid care impasse posed by the aging British population, and they serve to boost economic growth (McRobbie 2013; Grabham 2014).

Moreover, knowledge workers have higher expectations in relation to WLB than their non-knowledge worker counterparts, and human resource (HR) practitioners are now being educated by organisations such as the British Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) about the knowledge workers' unique set of needs and motivations, and how WLB policies and practices such as FWA can address these new challenges (Beaumont and Hunter 2002). Flexible working is facilitated by the ICT which helps to eschew the rigidity of spatialities and temporalities of office work (Felstead et al. 2005). As knowledge work both depends on *and* is enabled by the ICT, at least in theory, flexi-time, flexi-space, mobile working and homeworking could not only become a cultural tenet, but also the new way work is done in organisations employing knowledge workers (Stanworth 1998). Thus, knowledge work combined with FWA could offer ideal structural conditions for women to balance their work responsibilities with outside commitments. Moreover, flexible working could be a win-win solution for all, as employers retain and motivate their talented female employees, and women combine work with care.

However, existing research has illuminated a number of issues relating to individual-level outcomes of flexible working. Particularly, these problems are linked to work outcomes and career prospects (Cohen and Single 2001), WLB issues (Hofäcker and König 2013), and the so-called "dual burden" (Hochschild and Machung 2003; Hill et al. 2004). Recent flexible working legislation in the U.K. also poses new challenges

that arise from the mechanisms built into the right to request these options (Lewis and Campbell 2007; van den Broek and Keating 2011; Atkinson 2016).

Firstly, when employees utilise FWA they may suffer career penalties, such as pay gap (Glass 2004; Smithson et al. 2004), promotion and training opportunities (Cohen and Single 2001; Tomlinson 2006b; Harrison and Gregg 2009; Walsh 2012; Durbin and Tomlinson 2014), marginalisation and even stigma (Evans et al. 2000; Hoque and Kirkpatrick 2003; Lawrence and Vivien 2003; Glass 2004). They can be perceived as uncommitted and not as loyal as their full-time counterparts (Rogier and Padgett 2004; Moen et al. 2013). It is argued that these undesirable consequences of working flexibly stem from work organisations valuing behaviours that are modelled on full-time availability and a complete commitment to work (Williams 2000). Even though these outcomes can negatively affect both men and women, it is women who are more likely than men to seek WLB provisions, and therefore also more likely to suffer undesirable consequences (Vandello et al. 2013).

Secondly, contrary to its main and most obvious goal, flexible working can have a detrimental effect on employees' experiences of WLB. It has been shown that utilising FWA can enable or impose work intensification (Kelliher and Anderson 2010) and working a reduced schedule does not guarantee achieving WLB (Higgins et al. 2000; Hofäcker and König 2013).

Thirdly, flexible working has become a women's issue and has been blamed for facilitating the "dual burden" of productive and reproductive tasks historically troubling women (Hochschild 1997; Hochschild and Machung 2003; Hill et al. 2004). Take-up of these provisions by women tends to be primarily in response to childcare commitments, looking after the elderly, or caring for other dependants. However, when men utilise FWA, they do so for reasons unrelated to care responsibilities (Death and Honey 2011). Thus, reduced hours and homeworking arrangements may be reinforcing stereotypical gender roles, and simultaneously allowing women to remain in work during childrearing years (Glass 2004).

Therefore, in order to abolish these stereotypes and "de-gender" flexible working, the U.K. right to request flexible working legislation was significantly expanded in 2014. This new amendment to the policy entitles all eligible employees to request flexible working without the prescribed reason which had previously concerned care

needs. However, recent figures suggest that women continue to outnumber men in the take-up of FWA, as the numbers of men requesting flexibility have not significantly increased (Bright Horizons 2017).

Another area of concern relates to the mechanisms of the legislation. Eligible employees are not automatically entitled to having their flexible working request granted. The request can be rejected on the grounds of at least one of eight possible business-related reasons, and moreover, it prevents the employee from reapplying for flexible working for a year (ACAS 2016). This could effectively leave the employee in a weaker bargaining position, as a business agenda can clash with the WLB needs of the employee. Indeed, previous studies have shown that the U.K. prioritises the business-case for FWA, and there is only the rhetoric of meeting the employees' needs (Den Dulk et al. 2011). This can result in work intensification and competitive pressures, whilst FWA for family and WLB remain only utopian ideals (Smith 2016).

Despite the above caveats in relation to FWA, relatively few studies have narrowed their focus to the knowledge work context. For instance, studies have tended to exclusively explore idiosyncratic work contexts and single professions, such as academia (Donovan et al. 2005), academic medicine (Brown et al. 2003), nursing (Lane 2004), hospitality (Tomlinson 2006a), and accountancy (Johnson et al. 2008). Some studies explored the knowledge economy, i.e. the IT and SET sectors (Walby 2011) but have shown that these are not necessarily promising places for women to thrive (Hill et al. 2003; Hill et al. 2004; Herman and Lewis 2012).

Therefore, it is apposite to contribute to this scholarship and explore how women knowledge workers experience FWA, particularly in the KIS sector known for being egalitarian (Walby 2011). As Eikhof (2016) argues, more research is needed to understand how recent workplace regulations and equality policies, such as flexible working, intersect with the individual experiences of women knowledge workers and organisational contexts.

## **1.5. Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on ST to better understand if and how women experience agency and structures afforded by their knowledge work and flexibility status. ST assumes that both human agency and the structures of social systems should be given

equal importance when attempting to understand how social phenomena are experienced by human beings, and how our society is produced and reproduced by our actions (Giddens 1986). It offers an opportunity for researchers to examine “the role of power and domination in structuring processes that underlie organisations” (Poole and McPhee 2005, p. 180), such as gendering processes that can negatively impact women’s experiences in employment (Acker 1990).

Felski has observed that ST and its duality (rather than dualism) of structure and action enables a researcher to eschew conceptualising structures as “exclusively coercive forces” and stop viewing women as “helpless victims of an all-pervasive patriarchal ideology” (1989, p. 224). She argues that it is important to “account for the potential of women’s creativity and agency within limited options” (Felski 1989, p. 225).

This study’s key elements are underpinned by both *agency* and *structure*, therefore ST appears to be an especially appropriate framework to adopt. Firstly, the concept of a reasonably advantaged well-educated woman knowledge worker working flexibly signifies *agency*. This social positioning together with her relatively strong bargaining power in the employee-employer relationship (Reed, 1996; Pringle and Mallon 2003) highlights a significant promise of change in gender relations. This change is undergirded by postfeminism and a newfound freedom which begins with women’s educational achievements and inroads they have made in labour market participation (Rubery 2015, p. 634; Department of Education [DoE] 2016; Universities and Colleges Admissions Service [UCAS] 2016; HEPI 2016).

On the other hand, the social system that “pre-dates” individual women (Giddens 1986, Stones 2005) consists of social (i.e. gender roles), legislative (i.e. right to request flexible working legislation), economic (i.e. knowledge economy) and organisational *structures* (i.e. gendered organisations, ideal worker norms). These structures are independent of humans, and they can enable as well as constrain women. Therefore, ST allows a researcher to escape a one-sided exploration of either structure or agency, and it helps to combine the two perspectives, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Kahlert 2012).

A tendency to focus on structural constraints in existing women-centred research in the context of work is manifested in numerous studies, which nevertheless make an

important contribution of identifying barriers, obstacles, and closure regimes that prevent women from succeeding at work (Burke 1999; Cuddy et al. 2004; Cross and Linehan 2006; Bolton and Muzio 2007; Bolton and Muzio 2008; Carter and Silva 2010; Teasdale 2013; Cahusac and Kanji 2014). Moreover, specifically in relation to existing scholarship on FWA, studies tend to focus on exploring structural constraints that impede flexible employees' career progression and deteriorate their experiences of status (Cohen and Single 2001; Brown et al. 2003; Hill et al. 2003; Almer et al. 2004; Smithson 2005; McDonald et al. 2007, 2008; Johnson et al. 2008; Brown 2010; Leslie et al. 2012; Maruyama and Tietze 2012; Michielsens et al. 2014). On the other hand, few studies focus on the exploration of agency of flexibility users (for exceptions see: Jackson and Scharman 2002; Cabrera 2009). However, there is a dearth of studies that attempt to illuminate how both structure and agency play out in the context of FWA (see notable exception Crowley and Kolenikov 2014).

This vital examination of structures needs to be balanced with identifying women's active agency and practices deployed in response to these structures (Betz 1984; Cabrera 2007; Dikkers et al. 2010; August 2011a; Buse et al. 2013). Therefore, although it has been shown that women experience reduced status and inequality in work (Glass 2004; Walsh 2012), research needs to illuminate how they creatively draw on their agency on a daily basis in reaction to these structures (Orser et al. 2012). By addressing this question, we can begin to understand how structures may be further stabilised and/or changed by the agents themselves (Giddens 1986; Stones 2005). Drawing on ST, in particular on QNS, this study addresses this shortcoming in the literature and hopes to illuminate if and how flexible women knowledge workers participate in the process of structuration. The theoretical framework of this study draws on the architecture of the QNS theory and its concomitant four elements of structuration: external and internal structures, active agency and outcomes. The foci of the study are, thus, the structures and active agency of women knowledge workers, and illuminating how they draw on existing structural rules and resources in order to negotiate and obtain, utilise and manage FWA. Their perceived consequences of FWA will also be explored.



## 1.6. Aims, Objectives and Research Questions

The main aim of this study is *to critically examine the perceptions of women knowledge workers who use FWA in order to better understand how they obtain, manage and experience FWA.*

To achieve this overall aim, the following research questions (RQ) have been developed:

**RQ (1) How do women knowledge workers negotiate and obtain FWA through both structure and agency?**

**RQ (2) How do women knowledge workers experience, and manage FWA on a daily basis through both structure and agency?**

**RQ (3) What do they perceive as the consequences of utilising FWA in relation to these women's lives and careers?**

Within the context of the overarching aim, the study addresses four specific objectives, which seek:

**Objective (1):** to better understand how women knowledge workers negotiate and obtain FWA given their unique social positioning afforded by the agentic knowledge worker status and occupational expertise.

**Objective (2):** to illuminate how these women perceive, experience and manage FWA on a daily basis.

**Objective (3):** to provide insights into the consequences of utilising FWA on women knowledge workers' daily lives and careers.

**Objective (4):** and lastly, to explore how women knowledge workers engage in the reproduction and /or transformation of social structures, with structuration as a guiding theory.

## 1.7. Potential Contributions

The above aim, objectives and developed research questions will potentially contribute to the current scholarship in a number of ways by:

- (1) Addressing the gender-neutrality of **knowledge work literature** which tends to emphasise organisational-interests and reifies knowledge workers to a mere “resource”.
- (2) Enhancing our understanding of how FWA are experienced by women knowledge workers, since **flexible working** may be particularly conducive and enabling in the knowledge work context.
- (3) Conceptualising **knowledge work** in a more democratic and inclusive way, thus exploring the experiences of the “missing middle”, rather than replicating the focus of the previous studies on highly privileged, high-status knowledge work occupations.
- (4) Contributing to the stock of knowledge in the context of the recent **right to request flexible working** legislation in the U.K., which is characterised by some potentially problematic legislative mechanisms and thus advantaging the employer over the employee.
- (5) Illustrating how **structuration theory** may help us better understand how women knowledge workers draw on *structures* and *agency* in an organisational context. Moreover, by using ST this study explores how these women’s practices may be contributing to changing and reproducing organisational normativities. The findings from this study may help us gauge how gendering processes might be occurring in work organisations.
- (6) By informing **practitioners** involved in policymaking, charities and women’s rights advocates about the findings of this research and suggesting how to promote gender equality through alternative ways of organising and conceptualising work.

## 1.8. Organisation of the Thesis

The thesis commences with an introductory **Chapter (1)** which provides an overview of key issues grounded in the study. It briefly introduces the current socio-economical background and examines the position of women in work organisations. It provides the context of the study, namely knowledge work and FWA. It presents a theoretical framework underpinning this study. Lastly, it proposes the aims, objectives, the research questions and potential contributions.

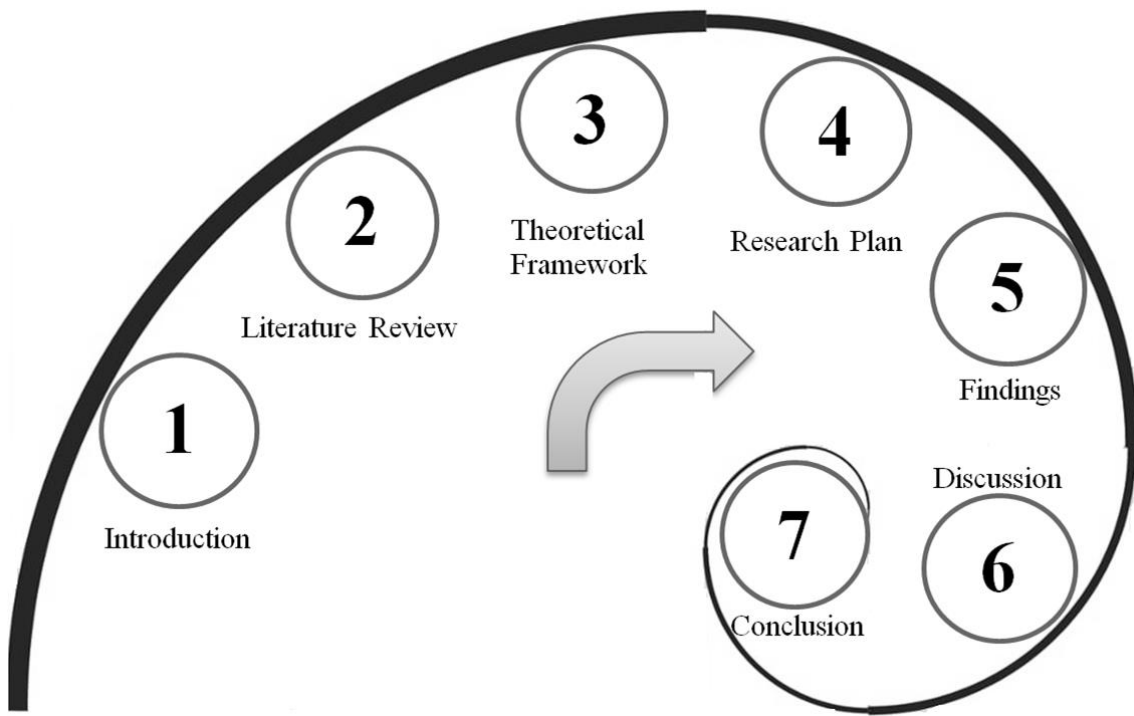
**Chapter 2** focuses on reviewing the literature, firstly, in relation to knowledge work, how knowledge workers are conceptualised, and then how this study understands this concept. It also discusses the relationship between knowledge work and gender. Secondly, this chapter presents the definitions and research streams in relation to flexible working, and also it considers how the current U.K. legislation of the right to request flexible working may be especially problematic. The chapter also provides insights onto FWA seen as a gendered issue and its critiques.

**Chapter 3** expands on the theoretical framework underpinning the study, and proposes the research questions. It discusses why ST is an especially apposite lens through which to make sense of the experiences of women knowledge workers, as it considers both agency and structure and the interplay between the two. This chapter also presents ST and QNS in detail and lastly, it provides a visual figure depicting the overarching theoretical framework. It is followed by **Chapter 4**, which provides an extensive examination of the employed methodology (ontology and epistemology), the study's identification with Critical Theory, feminist methodologies, and the compatibility of ST with the study's philosophy. The chapter also proposes the method, the process of sampling and data collection, the characteristics of the participants, and data analysis using template analysis and NVivo. It also reflects on the importance of ethical considerations.

**Chapter 5** focuses on the presentation of the findings supported by appropriate citations. It presents the new concepts of *Becoming Flexible*, the Metaphor or War, being an Ideal Worker, *(Un)becoming Flexible*, and the consequences of flexible working.

**Chapter 6** discusses the findings of the study in the light of previous literature, and through the lens of ST it explores the socio-structural outcomes of flexible working. This chapter also demonstrates the study's contribution to knowledge.

**Chapter 7** presents a summary of the findings and the conclusion, implications for future research and practitioners, goodness and quality of the inquiry and the researcher's reflexivity.



**Figure 1. Visual illustration of the thesis structure.**

## **Chapter 2. Knowledge Workers and Flexible Work Arrangements**

### **2.1. Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to present the research context of this study. First, the chapter focuses on the concept of *knowledge work*. I then discuss why knowledge workers are considered unique and what skills make them distinctive in comparison to non-knowledge workers. I also discuss different ways the concept of knowledge worker is defined which reflects the intensity of its scholastic debate and disagreement on the topic. I then propose a suitable definition of knowledge worker guiding this study. Since this project explores the experiences of women knowledge workers, I also review the available literature on knowledge workers with gender as the analytical lens. Secondly, the chapter focuses on the available literature on flexible work. It starts with the definitions, examples and research streams concerning flexible working, which are often underpinned by a business-case agenda. Next, I present the intricacies of the U.K. legislation of the right to request flexible working in order to critically evaluate its problematic request mechanism and then discuss its gendered uptake repercussions in relation to career outcomes.

### **2.2. Knowledge Workers**

It is now conventional wisdom in management and organisational studies that western economies have become knowledge-based (May et al. 2002). This change to the economy together with the rise of the ICT has facilitated the expansion of knowledge work and knowledge workers (Castells 2000; Baumont and Hunter 2002). The U.K.'s economy heavily relies on these new workers and this is evidenced through the changes to the make-up of the labour market. Although, such overreliance on the knowledge economy and the atrophy of manufacturing has been considered problematic for the U.K. economy (Chang 2016), the number of knowledge workers has undoubtedly proliferated (CIPD 2013; ONS 2017a). For instance, since 1978, the number of IT workers has doubled, and the number of people working in the KIS sector (such as

professionals, science, technology, administration, support service activities) has trebled (ONS 2017a).

The concept of knowledge worker first emerged in Drucker's writings in the 1950s and much scholarly literature concerned with this area cite his now famous quote about the importance of knowledge workers:

“[t]he most valuable asset of a 21st-century institution [...] will be its knowledge workers and their productivity” (1999, p. 79).

The notions of both knowledge work and knowledge worker have now been widely accepted as post-industrial phenomena and continue to be explored and researched (Alvesson 1993; Blackler 1995; Davenport et al. 1996; Kleinman and Vallas 2001; Lewis et al. 2003; Timonen and Paloheimo 2008; Nicolopoulou et al. 2011; Bhatnagar 2014; Harney et al. 2014; Vanthournout et al. 2014). Legge has argued that knowledge worker is now assumed to be:

“the wealth generator of the networked information society, and [...] the lynchpin of the learning organisation” (2005, p. 13).

Knowledge workers' distinctiveness lies in their tacit, rather than explicit knowledge, which is often uncoded and difficult to extract. Thus, knowledge workers are able to leverage this unique attribute to their advantage which gives them a degree of power over the employer (Peppard and Rylander 2005). This strong position of knowledge workers is evocative of the concept of expert power explored by French and Raven (1959) and the social influence such power can bring. As Donnelly sums up:

“[W]orker ownership of tacit knowledge empowers knowledge workers and results in heightened levels of employer dependence, as the codification of tacit knowledge is problematic, if not impossible, and knowledge workers are often able to take their knowledge with them when they leave” (2009a, p. 320).

Employers rely on their knowledge workforce to generate, produce and apply knowledge and these activities contribute to the organisational competitive advantage (Harrigan and Dalmia 1991). Therefore, knowledge-intensive firms depend on knowledge workers and it is in the employers' interest to retain such workers within organisations. Some scholars have even focused on identifying specific ways in which this dependency is managed. For example, Alvesson (2004) recognises a number of strategies to manage this dependency by ideological controls, creating a “strong” culture, creating a sense of community, motivation strategies such as performance

related rewards, nurturing a positively flexible outlook, and influencing the employee's evaluation of self and the organisation through a systematic intervention.

Moreover, a large amount of studies on knowledge workers focuses on the nature of organisational knowledge and its creation, and knowledge management in knowledge-intensive firms to encourage a free flow of knowledge (Scarborough 1999; Henard and McFadyen 2008; Monks et al. 2016). These managerial tasks are, however, compounded by a new complex relationship between an employer and a knowledge worker.

It is argued that this relationship no longer fits the traditional industrial-bureaucratic personnel management built on control and power of the manager, but on issues surrounding autonomy, organisational structure and employee-driven demands. Knowledge workers are the new "free agents", able to eschew organisational dependence through crafting independent career paths and operating outside of bureaucratic constraints (Pink 2001 cited in Donnelly 2009b). These idiosyncrasies of knowledge workers depart from the characteristics of traditional workers and white-collar workers (such as clerks and administrative assistants), who rely on organisational membership to exist as well as flourish, and who at the same time prop up the bureaucratic order.

The relatively privileged position of knowledge workers in the employer-employee relationship may afford these workers the power to extract significant concessions from their employers. For instance, it has been argued by Reed (1996) that knowledge workers do not have to depend on the organisational membership to thrive, and enjoy much autonomy and empowerment in decision making, thus they are in control of their skills in the labour market competition. They can freely engage in shaping their boundaryless career conducive to cognitive work (Arthur and Rousseau 1996) and requiring an individual worker to build their human capital, thus it assumes:

"an assured, skilled, probably well-qualified agent, with the human and social capital to leverage their skills, while traversing a terrain that holds no barriers for the adaptable and the well networked" (Pringle and Mallon 2003, p. 847).

One of the features that knowledge workers are also believed to control is where and when they work. As Knell posited knowledge workers are:

"[e]quipped with sought-after knowledge and networks, they are expert pollen of the new economy... They distrust structures but depend on networks ...

They demand sovereignty over their time... And they know that companies need them more than they need companies” (Knell 2000 cited in Donnelly 2009b, p. 325).

Moreover, in order to meet the knowledge-work employment relationship challenges, Beaumont and Hunter (2002) have also called for the HR function to develop new approaches to people management. They argue that the combination of the rise of knowledge workers and knowledge as the source of competitive advantage presents a strategic opportunity for organisations to harness this knowledge, but also to achieve gains in the employee-advocate role. For example, the new management needs to recognise the importance of knowledge workers’ motivation and psychological contract, and respond to these workers’ renewed WLB expectations. This, for example, could be addressed by allowing the knowledge workers to enjoy alternative work schedules, such as FWA.

Therefore, much research has been dedicated to understanding how the key agents in this new system, *knowledge workers*, are best managed (Beaumont and Hunter 2002; Benson and Brown 2007), best motivated (Vanthournout et al. 2014), and how their commitment can be earned (May et al. 2002; Benson and Brown 2007). Moreover, it asks what the new psychological contract is (Thompson and Heron 2005; O’Donohue et al. 2007), how to manage knowledge workers’ contract status and employment opportunities (Harney et al. 2014; Hu 2014), what attracts these workers to organisations (Miguélez and Moreno 2014), and also how to best leverage their tacit knowledge, which is believed to be much needed for organisational learning and sharing (Gibbs et al. 2013). The general trend in this research stream seems to concern the best ways of harnessing and leveraging these workers in the interest of the organisation, however very little is known about these workers own perceptions. The knowledge workers’ agency is perceived as a problem to be carefully managed, which results in these workers being objectified in existing research, despite their attributed autonomy. Moreover, this reification of knowledge workers goes even further as scholarship to date has been largely considered gender-neutral, with only a few studies directly exploring women knowledge workers (Walby 2007; Caprile and Pascual 2011; Walby 2011; Donnelly et al. 2012; Natti et al. 2012; Truss et al. 2012; Donnelly 2015; Olsen 2016; Peterson 2017).



### **2.2.1. Knowledge Worker Definition - the Debate**

The definition of *knowledge worker* available in the literature is as elusive as the definition of *knowledge* itself. Much conceptual literature on knowledge economy, its organisations and workers is fraught with scholastic debates about what knowledge is, and how to best define these knowledge-related terms, which generates more questions than answers (Castells 2000; Alvesson 2004; Powell and Snellman 2004; Timonen and Paloheimo 2008).

The way in which the concept of knowledge worker has developed can be divided into three central streams. Traditionally, knowledge work was understood as professional work and it was classified through specific knowledge work occupations, such as accountants, academics, legal professionals, scientific workers, engineers, consultants, software developers, research and development workers, IT and telecom workers, or public relations and corporate social responsibility workers (Benson and Brown 2007; Timonen and Paloheimo 2008; Nicolopoulou et al. 2011). This approach to conceptualising knowledge work has been criticised, however, for its broad-brush approach, glossing over a “degradation of the nature of some knowledge work”, and disregarding the fact that many employees are increasingly required to draw on their cognitive faculties in many traditional occupations (Sewell 2000 cited in Benson and Brown 2007, p. 124). Moreover, there has been continuous emergence of new occupations within the last decade, such as app developer, market research data miner, generational experts, social media managers, cloud computing professionals, and sustainability experts, to name a few (Casserly 2012). Therefore, the fast growth of the knowledge economy and the number of knowledge work roles make it impractical to define this concept through specific professions as they continue to appear.

The second approach to categorising knowledge work focuses on distinguishing different industries or sectors. For example, high-technology industries such as aerospace, computer and office equipment, communications equipment and pharmaceuticals are included. Secondly, it comprises knowledge-based services, such as telecoms, ICT services, finance and insurance, and education and healthcare. This method of conceptualising knowledge work, however, has serious limitations, since not all employees in these industries and sectors are knowledge workers; and vice versa:

there are knowledge workers in industries not included in this categorisation (Beaumont and Hunter 2002).

Similarly, there is also a third framework used by statisticians in the United Nations and the European Union that focuses on drawing boundaries around three industries that are contained within knowledge work: high-technology manufacturing, information or ICT, and KIS. High technology manufacturing includes office machinery, computers and other information-processing equipment, electronic communication equipment, scientific instruments. The information sector comprises publishing, printing and reproduction of recorded media, post and telecommunications, computer and software publishing, data processing and database activities, and television, video, news and library. KIS include water transport, air transport, post and telecommunications, financial intermediation, insurance and pensions, auxiliary financial intermediation, real estate, renting equipment, computing, research and development, other business, education, health and social work and recreation, culture and sport (Walby 2011, p. 12-13).

The fourth stream of conceptualisation of knowledge work promises a more systematic approach. It focuses on the descriptive characteristics of such work, and departs from relying on specific occupations to define this concept, for example (1) processing large amounts of information, (2) use of ICT, (3) problem solving, (4) routine-free work, (5) increased autonomy, or (6) collaboration. Such approach to defining knowledge work appears to be a more pragmatic proposition, as not all knowledge work can be defined through occupational identity alone (Timonen and Paloheimo 2008).

However, there is a further complication to the concept of knowledge worker since many occupations exhibit some of the descriptive characteristics, but not all, and so their occupational categorisation is more problematic. Newell et al. (2002) have offered a definition that attempts to circumvent this problem: they propose that knowledge workers use knowledge as input, medium and output of their work simultaneously. Yet, the problem here lies in the definition lacking a wider structural context in which these jobs may take place.

Legge (2005) has suggested that the attempts to sharpen the concept have instead complicated the existing discussion, because it is still unclear as to what sort of

knowledge is being debated, how many different categories of knowledge workers there are, and in which organisations they exist. She points out that the main problem with defining knowledge worker is the key concept of *knowledge* which is pervasive, broad and difficult to categorise, and thus problematic to define. For instance, Reed postulates that knowledge workers only operate with:

“a sophisticated combination of theoretical knowledge, analytical tools and tacit or judgmental skills that are very difficult, but not impossible, to standardize, replicate and incorporate within formalized organizational routines” (1996, p. 585).

However, this view has also been criticised for largely ignoring the importance of contextual knowledge. Such background knowledge is located within organisations in the form of non-generalisable company policies or procedures and task-objects. It is formalized or tacit, and can include lower-order forms such as company policies and individual clients’ needs and higher-order forms, such as industry trends (May et al. 2002, p. 780).

To offer more clarity, Legge (2005) has differentiated between two types of knowledge workers, firstly, those who use explicit knowledge that has already been codified and is “ready to use”, and secondly, those who use tacit knowledge that is uncodified and requires education, specific qualifications, skills and experience, to be generated. She has argued that *knowledgeable* workers (e.g. call centre operatives, data inputters) are the receivers and users of explicit knowledge; in contrast to *knowledge* workers (e.g. consultants, analysts, researchers) who operate with tacit knowledge. Her attempt at sharpening the concept reveals some weaknesses exposed by Donnelly (2009b) in his study into management consultants. Namely, knowledge workers rely both on tacit and explicit knowledge at the same time as they “often require access to the intellectual capital embedded in organizational systems” (Donnelly 2009b, p. 235). Therefore, even if the lynch-pins of knowledge work – management consultants - engage both in tacit and explicit knowledge, then we could reasonably expect that most knowledge workers are also likely to follow suit.

Alternatively, some scholars have proposed definitions that rely on less descriptive, and more abstract characteristics. For instance, Barley and Orr have suggested that knowledge work is:

“comparatively complex, analytic, and even abstract, because it makes use of tools that generate symbolic representations of physical phenomena” (1997, p. 5).

Similarly, Reed has argued that knowledge work is “esoteric, non-substitutable, global and analytical” (1996, p. 586), and the professions that fall into this category are financial and business consultants, project and R&D engineers, and computer and IT analysts. The use of the word “esoteric”, however, rather than facilitating clear compartmentalisation, exacerbates the lack of clarity the concept of knowledge worker already attracts. It also suggests rather lofty and highly privileged occupations that cannot be readily filled, which would point to a degree of exclusivity of such workers. Another weakness of this conceptualisation is Reed’s assumption that knowledge workers are autonomous actors, who tend to be self-employed, or employed in small specialist firms outside of large corporations. However, many knowledge workers rely on large public and private organisations for employment, thus they are not liberated from potential issues linked to hierarchical bureaucracies (May et al. 2002). Therefore, these definitions may also prove problematic when attempting to ascertain which occupations and professions should and should not be included, and this can create sampling challenges for research purposes. On the other hand, Davenport et al. (1996) concluded that knowledge worker is someone who has high degrees of expertise, education, or experience, and the primary purpose of their job involves the creation, distribution or application of knowledge. Their definition is arguably more inclusive, but used alone may encourage endless occupations to be incorporated under this conceptualisation.

Some scholars argue that it is the non-routine element to work tasks that characterises knowledge work. However, critical management literature has challenged also this premise on which the conceptualisation is attempted (Benson and Brown 2007). Alvesson (2004) and Thompson and Warhurst (1998) have argued that many knowledge-intensive organisations do rely on routine work. Additionally, Thompson and Warhurst (1998) have suggested that knowledge workers should be demystified as they are just more knowledgeable than other workers.

Brown and Benson (2007) have proposed that in order to define knowledge workers in light of the general disagreements among scholars, it is best to focus on the areas of agreement, instead. They suggest that the following characteristics should guide

which occupations can be defined as knowledge work: (1) information processing, (2) problem solving, (3) production of knowledge, (4) knowledge, as the main tool and the output, and (5) thinking as the core task. This conceptualisation gives rise to a three-dimensional framework of knowledge work: variety of work, interdependence of tasks, and autonomy.

Having considered the ongoing debate, the conceptualisation of knowledge worker for the purposes of this study will be proposed next.

### **2.2.2. This Study's Definition of Knowledge Worker**

The key element of the theoretical framework in this study is the concept of knowledge worker and the following broad definition of knowledge worker adopted in other work-family research (for example, Wolfram and Gratton 2014) has been used as the starting point:

“[K]nowledge workers produce and exchange information, instead of physical goods [and] the value of their work depends on the degree of innovation and quality of the (...) immaterial goods produced, rather than on the time spent in making them” (Pravettoni et al. 2007, p.1932).

As this definition is too broad and could not stand alone for research sampling purposes, further narrowing down of the concept was required. Thus, this study also draws on the existing conceptualisations of knowledge worker, framed in the descriptive definitions put forth by Timonen and Paloheimo (2008) and Benson and Brown (2007). Namely, Timonen and Paloheimo (2008) have suggested that knowledge workers engage in: (1) processing large amounts of information, (2) use of ICT, (3) problem solving, (4) routine-free work, (5) increased autonomy (but not total), or (6) collaboration. Benson and Brown (2007) further sharpened the conceptualisation to include: knowledge both as (7) the main tool and (8) output of work; and (9) thinking as the core task. In relation to routine-free work, however, Benson and Brown do allow (10) routine, as well as non-routine work, following the criticism that knowledge workers' tasks are not exclusively non-routine.

Drawing on the above two definitions cumulatively will help to ensure that a more encompassing and inclusive definition is utilised, which is likely to reflect more recent twenty-first century occupations. However, in order to further enhance the clarity of the

conceptualisation of knowledge worker used in this research project the following characteristics will be used:

1. Having both tacit and explicit (codified) knowledge derived from: being well-educated (degrees, masters, PhDs); possessing a specific skill set (for instance, CIPD, IT qualifications); or having experience in a given knowledge intensive industry or organisation. This reflects DiFillippi and Lindsay's (2006) argument that knowledge work arises from accumulated experience and skill mastery, rather than necessarily higher levels of education.

2. Having increased autonomy (but not complete) and trust in completing work.

3. Engaging in both routine and non-routine tasks.

4. Using knowledge as a tool and ICT as the primary means of task completion, which facilitate: knowledge workers' ability to work outside the confines of the traditional office time and space structures (e.g. homeworking, flexi-time, flexi-space) – the role is conducive to working flexibly. Limited contact with client, customer, or end user facilitates flexible working.

5. Women knowledge workers functioning as members (both employees and workers) of organisations, rather than freelance in networks. This ensures that the sample is sensitive to the right to request flexible working legislation.

6. Women knowledge workers mainly occupying the KIS industry, which is believed to be more egalitarian than high-technology manufacturing, information technology, and the economy as a whole, and it centers on human and social capital that women tend to possess. The KIS sector includes water transport, air transport, post and telecommunications, financial intermediation, insurance and pensions, auxiliary financial intermediation, real estate, renting equipment, computing, research and development, other business, education, health and social work and recreation, culture and sport. This “female-friendly” knowledge work may thus provide women with an opportunity to combine work with home responsibilities without penalties (Walby 2011).

Such delimitation of the knowledge worker conceptualisation allows a less exclusive focus, which has often characterised previous research emphasising elite samples of white-collar workers and high-status professions, such as lawyers (Epstein et al. 1999), accountants (Fenwick 2012), and consultants (Donnelly 2006). Most work

institutions comprise many knowledge workers, characterised by more ordinary and everyday roles, hidden in various organisational functions, far from being “esoteric and non-substitutable”, prestigious, and extraordinary (Reed 1996). Such workers are more prevalent in traditional employing organisations and are thus still subject to hierarchical bureaucracies (May et al. 2002; Donnelly 2009b). Therefore, the right to request flexibility is pertinent to knowledge workers, because they lack the total autonomy associated with freelance work and they are important especially to women who are more likely to seek these provisions for care responsibilities (Crompton 2002).

Limited or no direct client contact allows even more flexibility of time and space, as this type of knowledge worker is freed from the structural constraints of business hours and office premises, as well as the hegemony of client, often characterising knowledge work such as management consultancy, accountancy, and law (Donnelly 2009b). Although, some degree of client contact is permissible, it does not constitute the core of the knowledge work activity. Therefore, a strong association and interdependence of knowledge work and flexible working is what characterises the conceptualisation of knowledge worker in this study. It is understood that the flexibility flowing from the expansion and use of the ICT in work organisations go hand in hand with knowledge work and are strongly intertwined.

Thus, the above criteria for knowledge workers would permit inclusion of the following occupations: academics (who engage in research); researchers; project managers; managers within specialised units (requiring both soft & hard skills); HR officers (working with policy development, administration and HR systems); analysts; technicians; IT workers; and marketing (creative) officers.

On the other hand, administrative workers and call centre operatives would not be included, as they operate with only explicit, codified knowledge, follow employee manuals, and engage in routine tasks. Teachers would also be omitted as their contact hours are of key importance, and the ICT role is decreased with a limited flexibility. Front-line office workers would also be excluded as they are primarily dealing with customers face-to-face, rather than working with information, knowledge and data. Financial (bank) roles would also not classify due to a lack of autonomy in these highly monitored environments, where homeworking is limited due to sensitive data protection and fraud prevention.

### **2.2.3. Knowledge Work and Gender**

Castells (1997, 1998 cited in Walby 2011) suggested that the knowledge economy offers a unique opportunity for gender relations with an end to patriarchy and a transformation of family life. He recognised however, that only those people with appropriate skills and connections would be able to leverage this opportunity. Nevertheless, the knowledge economy has provided some hope for gender egalitarian goals, especially for women. Sylvia Walby (2011) demonstrated that high-tech manufacturing and ICT industries that are often associated with high-status, privilege and high levels of pay lag in terms of gender parity, since women are a minority of workers (32 and 36 per cent respectively). However, the KIS sector is more gender equal with a slight majority of women workers (61 per cent) and it is the most equitable sector within the knowledge economy. This may represent a promising environment for women to thrive (Walby 2011).

Secondly, knowledge work could offer women the balance needed for the reconciliation of the private and public spheres helping them to address both productive and reproductive tasks. With the aid of the ICT which facilitates blurring of the temporal and spatial boundaries commonly associated with office work, women knowledge workers may be able to take advantage of non-standard work arrangements (Stanworth 1998).

Thirdly, women's education and qualification levels have been rising steadily, and girls' performance at school has been better than that of boys in most subjects. Girls perform significantly better than boys at GCSE level (DoE 2016) and are around 30 per cent more likely to gain higher education qualifications (UCAS 2016). This educational gender gap has prompted the conclusion that gender may soon overtake the gap between the rich and the poor in educational attainment (HEPI 2016). Therefore, women may be particularly well placed in the ascension of the knowledge economy that needs their talents. It has been argued that women benefit from the different skillset needed in post-industrialism and the knowledge economy in particular (Eikhof 2016). Traditional physical advantage benefitting men in industrial and agricultural societies is no longer relevant in knowledge work. As knowledge work harnesses individual intellectual talent and educational credentials, gender inequalities in the workplace could be ameliorated,



since cognitive talent is not dependent on gender (Eikhof 2016). Women may thus enjoy the trappings of expert power (French and Raven 1959) allowing them to modify structural constraints to their advantage.

Fourthly, Walby (2011) argues that women also tend to possess the social skills needed for successful networking which underpins knowledge work. This could be particularly helpful since knowledge work does not rely on bureaucracies and hierarchies as much as traditional economy does, and instead thrives on network building. As women tend to network for social reasons, and knowledge creation is enhanced by social interaction, at least in theory, women should flourish particularly in knowledge work occupations (Durbin 2011).

However, despite these hopes, it has been suggested that women may be experiencing disadvantages in this arena. Some scholars have challenged this new optimistic view of knowledge work and the potential benefits this type of work may afford (May et al. 2002; Perrons 2003; Donnelly 2006; Truss et al. 2012; Donnelly 2015). This relates to identifying the same gender inequality issues existent in the wider economy, ingrained in job roles, career opportunities and the pay gap, which have simply shifted into the knowledge economy (Truss et al. 2012). This is corroborated by comparative research conducted on men and women knowledge workers in the U.K. and Ireland by Truss and her associates (2012). Quantitatively, it has been shown that women significantly over-represent lower and middle categories of earnings and are less representative at top and senior management levels. In terms of women's experiences and perceptions, the authors showed that female knowledge workers had poorer perceptions of career prospects, despite better opportunities for workplace training than men. They also did not feel that they had significant levels of autonomy and variety, and were less likely to engage in innovative work behaviours. Truss et al. argued that these shortcomings are effectively depleting women's career capital and "fostering a cycle of disadvantage for women in the knowledge economy" (2012, p. 748-9).

Women's struggles in the knowledge economy could be linked to several problems. Firstly, Donnelly (2006, 2009b) has proposed that since knowledge workers tend to be employees, rather than freelance agents, the employment relationship between the employer and the employee is not as egalitarian as some suggest. This leads to the vulnerability of women to gendered organisations and inequality regimes,

discriminatory practices, and norms and expectations which are difficult for women to fulfil due to outside commitments (Acker 1990, 2006). Secondly, possessing high educational credentials does not necessarily guarantee success, as it has been argued human and career capital are gendered (Mosesdottir 2011; Walby 2011). Thirdly, networks associated with the growth of human, social and career capital needed for developing a career in knowledge work are not as egalitarian as previously believed (Durbin 2011). Each issue will be discussed in turn.

Donnelly (2009b) has argued that knowledge workers who work as employees are characterised by a hybridised employment relationship, where they lose some of the privileged knowledge worker attributes, while the employers retain the traditional power advantage. This is for example extant in the retention of the employee versus employer interdependency (in the level and form of knowledge, client relationships seniority, position in the network); in the continuity of a dyadic employment relationship; and in hierarchical structures shaping network relationships. This hybridised relationship could neutralise the knowledge workers' bargaining power and agency and render them susceptible to organisational-level structures. In the context of gender, this leads to the applicability of Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organisations in knowledge-intensive firms and women's continued vulnerability to intra-organisational issues, such as inequality regimes (2006).

Organisational structures have long been understood problematic for women, as organisational norms and cultures can foster inequality regimes, and institutions are the locations of inequality. The idea that organisations can be gendered was first proposed by Joan Acker (1990) in her seminal work, which challenged the assumption that work organisations, their structures and bureaucratic institutions are gender-neutral. She argued that gender is more than just a socially constructed binary and that it has become an analytic category in itself. Acker argued that gender does not "stand" outside of organisational structures, but that gender defines them, as they undergo the gendering process through five different ways: division, construction, interaction, identity, and conceptualisation.

Firstly, divisions are existent in labour, namely which jobs are carried out by men and which jobs by women. They also concern how different sexes are or are not allowed to behave, where they are expected, or not expected to be seen, and who holds power.

Divisions are substantiated in the horizontal and vertical segregation, in how we understand gender roles within the family, and also how the state reproduces gender hierarchies through welfare policies and legislation (e.g. the marriage bar, pension age).

Secondly, organizations are subject to gendering through social construction of symbols and images that can have sources in language, ideology, culture, the media, and fashion. This is for example existent in the “think manager, think male” (Schein 1978) phenomenon, or in the ideal worker norm (Williams 2000), or the perception that technical skills and masculinity are in tandem (Orser et al. 2012).

Thirdly, Acker (1990) argues that interactions between women and men, women and women, and men and men involve the patterns of dominance and submission which create gender inequality. Thus, the fourth element of gendered identities is created through the above three processes; men and women may automatically choose particular occupations, speak and dress in a particular way, and present themselves in a way that distinguishes their particular gender.

Finally, and perhaps, most importantly, “gender is implicated in the fundamental, ongoing processes of creating and conceptualising social structures” (1990, p. 147), as it constitutes organisational logic and how work organisations are ordered through assumptions and practices that can be traced in explicit rules, contracts, and job evaluations.

These gendering processes result in inequality in organisations, which Acker (2006) defines as:

“systematic disparities between participants in power and control over goals, resources, and outcomes; workplace decisions such as how to organise work; opportunities for promotion and interesting work; security in employment and benefits; pay and other monetary rewards; respect; and pleasures in work and work relations” (p. 443).

The visibility of gender inequalities (but also class, and race inequalities) varies, and as such it may be especially challenging to identify them in organisations. In certain circumstances, inequality can be hidden, for instance, intentionally concealed by organisational agents to sustain the status quo, unintentionally reproduced through a lack of awareness, or simply through the inability to see one’s privilege or one’s detriment. Furthermore, inequalities can be legitimatised, especially in organisations that are founded on rigid bureaucracies, or where inequality is naturalised. For instance,

inequality can be legitimised through entrenched essentialist belief in differences between men and women, and seeing women as more suited to child rearing, and men to work and career (Acker 2006). This for instance could occur through granting women easier access to flexible work schedules than men, or perceiving part-time work more conducive to women's needs, and treating men who seek flexible schedules with suspicion (Gatrell et al. 2014).

The legitimisation of inequality can also occur when there is a widespread belief in natural superiority of those individuals who succeed in the market competition (Acker 2006). This can be especially pertinent in the knowledge work context, and particularly persistent in political and economic market-oriented cultures built on neoliberal attitudes, such as in the U.K.. The neoliberal discourse endorses the primacy of choice over constraints, and it promotes the importance of individual career choice and taking responsibility for it, which is supported by flexible, deregulated markets that allow women free exercise of choice (Lyonette et al. 2011). Such belief in the freedom of choice that is supposedly granted to women obscures deeper structural constraints governing these "free choices". Previous research has shown that career choices are not genuine or unconstrained, but they are the result of extraneous variables, both at an individual and organisational level (Broadbridge 2010; Kumra 2010).

One example of how normative and structural influences shape women's experience of work in the knowledge economy relates to knowledge work-related notions such as "skill" and "technology" and how gender is understood within those concepts. It has been found that these notions are defined separately within "men's" and "women's" roles as part of organisational structuring. For example, men's knowledge-intensive roles tend to be mainstream, while women's roles more peripheral. This consequently results in men having better access to career advancement, training and development opportunities and intensive involvement in networking which leads to career gains (Alvesson 1998; Jha and Welch 2010).

Hence, women knowledge workers cannot truly benefit from the utopian conceptualisation of knowledge work based on boundarylessness, flexibility, autonomy and freedom, as they are still subject to gendered organisational bureaucracies and regimes. Indeed, Donnelly's (2015) comparative qualitative work on management consultants in the U.K. and the U.S. has shown that the role of policies influencing

gender regimes at an intra-organisational level is ineffective and the impact on gender outcomes only nominal at best. His findings suggest that despite extolled organisational and national-level support for gender equality at both vertical and horizontal levels, women in each country and firm setting were disadvantaged by policies, occupational norms, discriminatory cultures and unfriendly working hours (Donnelly 2015). Thus, women still suffer at a micro-level from problems arising from meso- and macro-level and occupational norms which perpetuate the dominance of male interests and power (Acker 1990).

Organisations also foster various norms and expectations which have been shown challenging for women to adhere to. The ideal worker norm is another example. Acker (1990) exposes a fallacy of the abstract, bodiless worker who is devoid of sexuality, emotions and who exists beyond and above the reproductive processes. This, she argues, both masks and reproduces the underlying gender relations (p.151). She explains this phenomenon as the fundamental outcome of both bureaucratic and capitalist production regimes that aim to manage sexuality and procreation out of organisations and institutions. This has to be accomplished in order to differentiate the home which is meant to be the legitimate location of sexual activity from the location of capitalist production. Acker argues that this separation of productive and reproductive processes is symbolised through the concept of the disembodied job (1990). At the same time, other “bodied” activities, such as emotions, procreation, and sexuality intrude “upon and disrupt the ideal functioning of the organisation” which risk the organisation spiralling out of control (p.152).

Not surprisingly then, this abstract ideal worker is actually a man who embodies the ideal worker norm (IWN), which is concomitant with organisational cultures that reward full-time commitment and availability (Bailyn 1993; Williams 2000; Rapoport et al. 2002; Blair-Loy 2003), and with the expectations that employees will internalise organisational interests (Moen et al. 2013). The perceptions of the employees’ commitment and performance often go hand-in-hand with their temporal conduct and obligations (Kunda 1992). The IWN is based on the characteristics and behaviours that men are more likely to meet, as it requires an individual who is unburdened by private distractions, such as childcare, elderly care, or housework typically carried out by women. Whilst women have often found this behavioural mould difficult to fit into,

White middle-class men have been more likely to achieve this ideal, as they have traditionally benefitted from a stay-at-home partner able to provide backstage support (Davies and Frink 2014).

More recently, single childfree women have also been heralded (alongside fathers) as the new ideal workers, but what is striking here is that the childfree requirement is not applicable to men in the same way. Men might actually be perceived more favourably if they are married, have a family, and a mortgage to pay, all of which point to the predictability of their work commitment (Kmec 2011). Motherhood and childcare have been identified particularly detrimental to women in relation to their careers. Research focusing on the experiences of women has shown that motherhood is seen as incompatible with a normative (what should be) career, a normative worker, and that mothers are marginalised through “mommy-tracks” and suffer motherhood penalties (Whitmarsh et al. 2007; Cahusac and Kanji 2014; Gatrell et al. 2014).

Harking back to Weber’s ideal-type of career bureaucrat, office-holding should also be “a ‘vocation’, demanding the ‘entire capacity for work for a long period of time’” (Weber cited in Crompton 2002, p. 546). Likewise, such ideal requires work devotion and extreme personal sacrifice, because one’s career should be seen as a true calling. Therefore, the IWN and the devotion it necessitates, originates largely from professional, white-collar occupations and stretches into today’s knowledge work careers (Blair-Loy 2003). This links back to the traditional middle-class values and beliefs about gender relations built on the presumption that women are best focused on home commitments, whilst their husbands concentrate on careers, embodying the full-time male breadwinner model (Crompton 2002). Women’s inability to embrace long working-hour cultures, organisational expectations, constant availability and visibility can result in various predicaments, such as home and work conflict, or being clustered into non-managerial and part-time jobs that offer no advancement (Truss et al. 2012). More importantly, this should not be conceptualised as the women’s “inability to conform”, but rather the organisation’s gendering processes that reproduce gender inequality and skewed power relations which advantage men (Acker 1990).

Another issue relates to whether female-held talent is actually valued. Despite the inroads that women have made in education, outperforming boys at school and men at universities, and gaining human capital pivotal in the knowledge economy, women are

not succeeding in as it would be expected. Even though the knowledge economy heavily relies on human and social capital and privileges those in their possession, women do not appear to be doing well (Walby 2011). Mosesdottir in her appraisal on gender inequality in the knowledge society has suggested explanations such as women having the “wrong” skills as they are underrepresented in subjects “considered to be the driving force behind the move to the knowledge society” (2011, p. 35), but also motherhood, and career interruptions, occupational segregation, and devaluing of women’s human capital.

Walby (2011) has argued that the devaluation of women’s human capital is a result of the uneven distribution of gendered power which in turn promotes masculinist discourse to become dominant, and this occurs “despite multiple competing discourses on gender and human capital” (p. 7). In the context of the knowledge economy, higher value is placed on technical and scientific skills, which are socially constructed to be masculine, and lower value is placed on general human and social skills often attributed to women and deemed feminine. This argument is strengthened by the gendered composition of the knowledge economy, which shows that women are clustered into KIS, but represent small numbers in high-tech manufacturing and IT. Studies that have focussed on exploring the experiences of women provide illuminating insights about how women make sense of their subordinate position in knowledge-intensive organisations. For instance, in the IT sector, women tend to view their roles through an essentialist gender lens, and believe that the roles undertaken by women are *soft* compared to their male counterparts who are employed in positions that require *hard* technical skills (Crump et al. 2007). Here, Acker’s (1990) theory of gendered organisations also could help us to better understand this phenomenon as the outcome of at least two of the five gendering processes: the construction of divisions along lines of gender, and creating and conceptualising social structures through organisational logic extant in job evaluation as a management tool.

Firstly, a fact that has been largely obscured from the history was women’s precursory participation in early knowledge work, namely computer programming and skilled computing work in the 1950s and 60s on the wave of technical innovation after the wars (Abbate 2012). Women with maths degrees were recruited specifically to fill these positions in the light of male talent shortages during and shortly after WWII.

Although, computer hardware manufacturing was considered men's work, computer operator and programmer were new jobs that had not been stereotyped (gendered) as masculine at that point. Women had already been associated with carrying out manual calculations and those women who possessed appropriate education were recruited to work on computer projects. However, when the profession became more and more relevant and significant to the economy moving towards being knowledge-based, women's participation slipped to the margins, and currently men greatly outnumber women in IT jobs. This was also illustrated earlier by Acker (1990) in Cynthia Cockburn's (1983) work on the introduction of new technology within industries that prompted a structural reorganisation, which created a polarity of men's skilled and women's unskilled work.

Secondly, job evaluation is a form of organisational logic in which gender is a constitutive element. This management tool helps to rationalise the organisational hierarchy through the description and content of jobs compared on criteria such as knowledge and skill. Job evaluation does not evaluate job incumbents, but jobs, which are the basic units in organisational hierarchies. Such reification of jobs exposes the organisational logic of affording the priority to the mould which humans need to fill. This mould is constituted through particular gendered components, such as knowledge, skills, complexity and responsibility. These components are usually defined in terms of "hard skills" and managerial and professional tasks to the detriment of the more "soft" and "feminine" skills. The latter are devalued in order to create and reproduce a congruence between the conceptualisation and evaluation of these components and the apparent hierarchical position. This, Acker argues, is needed to legitimise and preserve the existing gendered structures (1990) camouflaged as gender-neutral.

The belief that networks allow more egalitarian forms of working within the knowledge economy has also been contested. It has been argued that networks have the propensity to obscure informal and unofficial distribution of power and resources, extant in their gender, class, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation compositions. This lack of transparency can create informal gendered social closures, for example "old boys' networks" (Ibarra 1993; Oakley 2000; Rutherford 2001). This may also prevent women from doing well in the knowledge economy. For instance, Rutherford (2001) in her study into financial and airline industry has shown that long working hours and



being present are some of the rules of preferment within closed networks, which women struggle to “obey” due to their caregiving responsibilities. Durbin (2011) has argued that strategic informal networks that are important in knowledge work tend to be men-only, and women are excluded or denied access to these networks. This could also be explained by Acker’s (1990) gendering processes of the construction of divisions through allowed behaviours, locations of physical space; but also the construction of symbols and images that express gender divisions. Informal closure regimes and “old boys’ networks” can be characterised by divisions in where and when these networking social interactions occurs (e.g. in a pub on a Friday evening, or at a golf course), and what subjects are discussed (football, DIY, objectification of women). On the other hand, symbols extant in language, popular culture, dress and presentation of self also explain, express and reproduce these divisions. Again, Acker (1990) warns that we should not look for the discrepancies in women’s behaviour and their inability to conform, but rather see the inherently gendered nature of these social structures that are constructed in order to exclude women.

Duberley and Cohen (2010, p. 195) sum up these multi-factorial normative and structural influences that may impede women’s advancement within knowledge-intensive organisations as a cumulative disadvantage. The utopian idea that information technology in the knowledge economy can somehow equalise the differences between men’s and women’s opportunities and career prospects is also challenged (Truss et al. 2012). Some scholars have argued that these cumulative disadvantages are not incidental and that apart from cognitive capitalism needing women’s talent pool, it is women’s “cultural attitude that becomes absolutely functional to the needs of contemporary organisations” (Morini 2007, p. 47).

Morini has argued that the exploitation of this *cultural attitude* relates to women’s historic propensity to adopt multiple roles, and the knowledge economy relies on the consolidation of the family, the city and human relations into one economic space. Concomitant with the contraction of material production, the expansion of knowledge work has facilitated the disappearance of sharp lines between life and work and the emergence of work as a comprehensive action. Morini has likened a knowledge work organisation within cognitive capitalism to a living body

“that constantly needs every care, word and action. If life itself enters the economic arena [...] women are encouraged to divert all their time, care, words and attention towards the *company-living body*” (2007, p. 47).

There exists, therefore, a heightened potential for women knowledge workers to experience an acute tension from a misalignment between the work and life spheres. This, for instance, could occur from macro-level mandated structures, expected roles and responsibilities relating to both social and organisational norms (Afiouni and Karam 2014). This tension is often addressed by micro-level actions, such as utilising flexible work arrangements, which is especially pertinent in the context of knowledge work, as such work allows both temporal and spatial elasticity. Flexible working, however, can create further problems (Durbin and Tomlinson 2010) in the quest to dissipate the tension. The problems relating to utilising non-standard work arrangements will be discussed in the following chapter on flexible working.

Therefore, regardless of the utopian literature offering hope for gender egalitarian goals, the women’s struggles in the context of knowledge work may only be “old wine in new bottles”. Yet, despite these recent developments in the economy and the concomitant gender debates, not much research has focused on women employed in this sector of the economy in particular. Indeed, it has been argued that the caveat in the knowledge work scholarship lies in the assumption that knowledge work and the knowledge economy are gender-neutral, or even gender-blind (see notable exceptions Walby 2007, 2011, Caprile and Pascual 2011, Donnelly et al. 2012, Natti et al. 2012, Truss et al. 2012, Donnelly 2015, Olsen 2016) and that we are yet to better appreciate women’s experiences of work and employment in this context. Thus, an important feature of this research, which needs to be explicitly laid out here is that the notion of gendered organisations is acknowledged in order to understand the relationship between gender and organisational processes that may curtail women’s opportunities. In other words, it is recognised that the concept of knowledge work may not be necessarily gender-neutral, even if it is presented as such by organisational logic (Nkomo and Rodriguez 2018).

Therefore, this study aims to address the call to broaden our understanding of the individual experiences of women knowledge workers through research that transcends macro-level statistics and company-level case studies (Truss et al. 2012). Moreover, the acquisition of an insight into the experiences of knowledge workers “is of increasing

importance given that the number engaged in this form of work has been growing” (Donnelly 2015, p. 85). The tensions extant in the combination of cognitive capitalism, infinite adaptability and flexibility are thus worth exploring, as they are well known to individual women, but not necessarily well known to scholarship (Morini 2007).

The next section will define and give examples of flexible working and present the most recurring research interests concerning these alternative work options.

### **2.3. Flexible Work Arrangements**

Some scholars suggest that bureaucracies are able deliver improved gender equality in the form of state interventions (Britton 2000). For example, national-level or EU policies aimed at increasing transparency of employment issues and the introduction of WLB policies and practices may help women to advance in work organisations. Flexible working is one example of such state intervention and it falls within the umbrella of WLB policies and practices which form part of the progressive human resource management (HRM) agenda.

The predominant aim of this flexibility programme is to help to reconcile the two often incompatible spheres of life and work. This in turn promises business-case gains through employee motivation (Hill et al. 2003), job performance and productivity (Baltes et al. 1999), reducing stress (Atkinson and Hall 2011), engaging employees, increasing morale and securing their loyalty (Taylor 2010). However, flexible working has also been heralded as one way in which employers can secure and retain female talent, as women are more sensitive to the so-called dual burden of work and family commitments (Hochschild and Machung 2003) and seek alternative work arrangements to enable them to stay in work. Moreover, some feminists argue that as FWA can allow women to engage in their care responsibilities this addresses both the inadequate childcare provision and the ageing population care needs in the U.K. (McRobbie 2013; Grabham 2014). Whichever rationale is driving the flexibility rhetoric, i.e. talent retention, WLB or care needs, this practice has gained a significant momentum through its legislative framework in the U.K. (ACAS 2016) and has been promoted by non-government organisations such as charities (e.g. Working Families).

It is important to distinguish between the employee- and employer-driven flexibility as these arrangements are significantly dissimilar and carry different

employment relationship implications. For example, employer-driven flexibility tends to benefit the organisation in the management of fluctuating business demands, such as zero-hour contracts, or succession and contingency planning, where core and peripheral staff structures facilitate efficient redundancies and downscaling. At the same time, this type of flexibility penalises the employees with its precarious system of work provision (Standing 2014a). The employee-driven flexibility aims, at least in theory, to benefit or serve an employee, who can choose when and where to work. Thus, it affords employees a degree of control in hitherto constraining work specialities and temporalities (Taylor 2010).

The focal point of this research project is the employee-driven flexible working which is utilised to facilitate WLB and reconcile work with family commitments. The reason for this choice of focus is to explore and challenge the general assumption that flexible working policies designed with employees in mind automatically lead to an enhancement of their experience of employment. As Huff (2009) suggests, scholarship that is relevant, that matters and is most interesting should be rooted in social phenomena which at first appear good and normative. Research should aim to illuminate whether such phenomena fulfil their expectations, and how they are experienced and perceived by the subjects in question (Huff 2009). This study explores the type of flexible working employees request for their own benefit, rather than the arrangements (such as zero-hour contracts, or skills flexibility) an organisation may seek for operational reasons. Thus, although these FWA are meant to be employee-enabling, this study explores if women knowledge workers do experience them in such a liberating way.

The next section will provide the guiding definition of flexible working used in this study.

### **2.3.1. FWA - Definitions and Research Streams**

This research focuses on the workplace flexibility that is mainly adopted for the benefit of employees, rather than driven by employers satisfying the organisation's operational demands. The reason for this choice of the conceptualisation of FWA is that the overarching premise for these provisions comes from allowing employees a degree

of autonomy and control, which in turn aims to facilitate the individual's grapple with work and home demands (Hall and Atkinson 2006). FWA in this study are defined as:

“alternative work options that *allow* organizational members to customize the spatial and temporal boundaries of their workday” (Greenberg and Landry 2011, p. 1165, my emphasis).

The above definition is underpinned by the idea of granting employees control over their work schedules in order to meet care responsibilities, leisure pursuits, WLB and well-being needs and to promote life satisfaction and happiness (Hall and Atkinson 2006). Such flexibility is particularly conducive to knowledge workers who are able to leverage the possibilities of FWA thanks to the “virtual” nature of knowledge work which cuts through both temporal and spatial boundaries (Stanworth 1998; Falstead et al. 2005; Eikhof 2016). Consequently, this employee-driven flexible working carries a promise of freedom in deciding how work is conducted and it is regarded as a positive HRM trend both by practitioners (such as the Working Families charity and the CIPD) and academics who recommend work organisations to adopt it in order to appeal to female talent in particular (Hewlett and Luce 2005; Kossek and Lee 2008; Sullivan and Mainiero 2008).

These workplace provisions can be divided into two categories dependent on the characteristics of the arrangement: temporal and/or spatial (Kossek and Friede 2006). It is generally agreed that temporal flexibility is an opportunity for employees to have more control over the number of hours they work or when they work. It usually comprises flexi-time, annual hours and periods, compressed hours, term-time working, part-time, job sharing, career breaks, and sabbaticals (Torrington et al. 2005; Kossek and Friede 2006; Taylor 2010). Spatial flexibility (flexi-space), on the other hand, allows employees to work from a location that is external to the official workplace. Employees are able to divide their work between working from home and/or another location, such as teleporting, telecommuting, teleworking, or homeworking. The main advantage of this arrangement is the ability to minimise the amount of time spent commuting and the distractions present in the workplace. Both temporal and spatial flexibility definitions and types are presented in Table 1. However, these work arrangements can create managerial concerns around self-management, motivation and

productivity while away from the workplace, as it is not possible to directly monitor employees' behaviours and performance (Greenberg and Landry 2011).

	<b>Temporal Flexibility</b>	<b>Spatial Flexibility</b>
<b>Definition</b>	To allow employees more control over the amount of hours worked or when the hours are worked.	To allow employees a choice to work outside of the office or worksite all or some of the time.
<b>Types of FWA</b>	<p><b>Reduced-Hours or Part-Time Work:</b> Working less than full-time with a commensurate decrease in salary.</p> <p><b>Flexi-time:</b> Varying the beginning and ending times within a given flexible range and established core hours.</p> <p><b>Compressed Work Week:</b> Working extra hours on some days of the week in order to have part of the day or whole day off another time.</p> <p><b>Compensatory Time:</b> Working long hours and then getting time off in order to recoup.</p> <p><b>Job Sharing:</b> Two employees sharing one full-time job.</p> <p><b>Leaves of Absence:</b> Maternity, paternity, military service, education, training, elder and child care.</p>	<p><b>Teleworking/Teleporting/Mobile:</b> Working part or all of the time at an off-site location and use technology (e.g. e-mail, fax, mobile phone) to communicate. Also known as <b>Flexi-space</b>.</p> <p><b>Homeworking:</b> Working part or all the time from home. Also known as <b>Flexi-space</b>.</p>

**Table 1. Definitions and types of FWA. Adapted from Kossek and Friede (2006).**

Although, eight different types of flexible arrangements are presented above for the sake of completeness, according to the CIPD report, only three types are most commonly made available and used, namely, part-time, flexi-time and homeworking (flexi-space) (CIPD 2012). Hence, this study adopts this categorisation.

Research on flexibility in work organisations can be broadly divided into two streams. The first stream concerns organisational interests or a business case which requires “firm flexibility” (Atkinson 1984 cited in Taylor 2010) in light of fluctuating customer demands, the rise of a “24-hour society” and globalisation (Patrickson and Hartmann 2001; Ernst et al. 2004; Raess and Burgoon 2015). Such flexibility aims to facilitate profit maximisation (Lee and Devoe 2012), and quick downscaling in

turbulent periods (Dhyne and Mahy 2012). Thus, it mainly serves organisations seeking multi-skilled employees who can promptly adapt to different roles and the function they fulfil. Moreover, it allows organisations to pay for labour strictly in accordance with the fluctuating supply and demand in order to cut costs (Taylor 2010). It could be said that this stream of research on flexibility is characterised by a focus on addressing managerial interests and a “desire to solve organisations’ problems in terms of efficiency and effectiveness” (Roper et al. 2010, p. 667).

The second stream is concerned with the employee-driven flexibility, which arises in response to WLB needs and other employee-centered issues (Higgins et al. 2000; Hall and Atkinson 2006; McDonald et al. 2008; Beham et al. 2012; Hofäcker and König 2013; Galea et al. 2014; Sok et al. 2014). This literature is mainly focused on individual interests and achieving a satisfying and fulfilled work and life. Some studies on flexible working emphasise structural constraints that hinder employees’ career progression and deteriorate their experiences of status within work organisation (Cohen and Single 2001; Brown et al. 2003; Hill et al. 2003; Almer et al. 2004; Smithson 2005; McDonald et al. 2007, 2008; Johnson et al. 2008; Brown 2010; Leslie et al. 2012; Maruyama and Tietze 2012; Michielsens et al. 2014). For example, Almer et al. (2004) suggest that it is the combination of parenthood and a flexible schedule that creates problems in advancing one’s career, rather than solely flexible working. Leslie et al. 2012 explore the managers’ negative perceptions of FWA users; and Michielsens et al. (2014) suggest it is the long-hours culture that eventually marginalises flexible workers.

In contrast, some studies focus on the agency of flexibility users. For instance, Jackson and Scharman (2002) explore women’s trade-offs in order to increase their chances for promotion and their efforts to create family-friendly work situations. Crowley and Kolenikov (2014) suggest that the female employees’ control over FWA and time-off options afford them a satisfactory employment experience and fewer career impediments.

### **2.3.2. Business-Rationale for FWA**

Offering flexible working to female employees is an often recommended tool to broadening, attracting and keeping the available pool of talent (for example Epstein et al. 1999). It is implicitly based on the conventional belief that women assume the main



caregiving tasks in the household. As women constitute half of the working population, it is claimed irrational and illogical not to utilise this resource. This is especially pertinent as women outperform men educationally, thus they demonstrate their cognitive capability, career motivation, and aspirations. However, even if women prove themselves in organisations at first, there is always the risk that they will eventually leave to become mothers, and struggle on re-entry, as their human capital becomes devalued by the degrading impact of a career break (Hewlett and Luce 2005). This is generally blamed for the lack of female representation at senior levels in organisations, since they simply do not make it as far, rendering the organisational talent pipeline “leaky” (Cabrera 2009a).

Flexible work arrangements are thus recommended firstly, to allow women to join organisations, secondly, to allow them to stay in work and raise family at the same time, and thirdly, and more importantly, to re-enter and return to their jobs after maternity leave without incurring career penalties. For instance, Servon and Visser’s (2011) study on the experiences of women in science, engineering and technology (SET) sectors suggests that, among other factors, the extremeness of SET jobs requiring extensive travel, long hours and round-the-clock demands hinder women’s careers and contribute to women’s decision to leave organisations. The authors recommend that employers adopt family-friendly policies in order to retain women’s talent.

Shifting the focus from face-time to an emphasis on outputs and allowing women to decide when and where to work have also been recommended by Cabrera (2009b) in her study into women graduates of a top ranked international business school. The majority of the women in her study who had taken a voluntary career break did so in order to seek WLB. Thus, it is argued the organisations that do not recognise the need for flexible working to reconcile family commitments risk losing valuable female talent (Cabrera 2009b).

Furthermore, a vast amount of literature has attempted to link FWA with financial performance and increased individual productivity, however with mixed results. A meta-analysis by de Menzes and Kelliher (2011) carried out to ascertain a business case for the use of FWA has shown that positive link with individual productivity was only demonstrated in 31 per cent, and with financial performance in 44 per cent of the reviewed studies. This is owing to various methodological issues, nevertheless, a

number of studies did show a direct positive link with organisational and individual performance (de Menezes and Kelliher 2011). For instance, Eaton (2003) demonstrated that the usability and the perceived availability of FWA, among other work-family policies, were positively associated with productivity. Moreover, flexible working was also associated with enhanced work or service quality when measures such as number of errors or customer complaints were used (Kauffeld et al. 2004).

In terms of organisational outcomes, Perry-Smith and Blum (2000) and Whitehouse (2007) demonstrated that perceived financial performance was positively associated with the availability of FWA. Furthermore, among organisations employing mostly female professionals, Konrad and Mangel (2000) found a strong relationship between the provision of FWA and productivity. With regards to the types of FWA, homeworking and remote working have been shown to have a positive association with profits and return on assets and equities (Sands and Harper 2007). Moreover, an earlier meta-analysis by Baltes et al. (1999) also showed an increased productivity and retention.

Outcomes such as reduced turnover, improved retention and reduced absenteeism have also been associated with flexible working policies, albeit the studies are not conclusive. De Menezes and Kelliher's (2011) meta-analysis has shown that only 46 per cent of studies on FWA demonstrated an association with turnover and retention. The results were stronger in relation to absenteeism, as 61 per cent of studies showed the link. Lower turnover intentions were associated with women teleworking (MacDermid et al. 2001), and new mothers allowed to return to work on reduced schedules increased their loyalty to the organisation (Schwartz 1989 cited in Greenberg and Landry 2011).

The overall findings provided by the authors, however, produce a rather disappointing reading to those who are keen to undergird FWA exclusively in the business-case rationale. The evidence analysed in the paper failed to demonstrate a positive link between FWA and performance-related outcomes. Consequently, these findings show that anchoring work-life policies in the business rather than employee-centred logic may be short-lived and precarious, as the evidence supporting its use is continually debated. For instance, a much criticised move by Yahoo!'s CEO Marissa Mayers to completely cease mobile working was motivated by its emerging disadvantages, such as creativity, innovation and collaboration impacting the

corporation's performance (Strategic Direction 2013). This is an extreme example of how even the ostensibly progressive role-model employers may withdraw flexibility as soon as it is not directly beneficial to organisational interests.

### **2.3.3. Flexible Working Legislation**

The U.K. government introduced a legislative framework promoting flexible working under the Employment Rights Act 1996 which has been in effect since 2003. The legislation affords an employee the right to request a change of schedule in relation to the spatial and temporal arrangement of work and to have this request seriously considered by the organisation.

The regulation has evolved from the right to request flexible schedules for parents of children under 6 years of age in 2003, to the right for both carers of adults and parents of all children under the age of 17 from 2009. Since 2014, the right to request captures all employees that have been employed for at least 26 weeks, and it disposes of any specific reason for securing a flexible schedule. This proposition was originally criticised by the Institute of Directors and the British Chambers of Commerce as being burdensome for businesses (CIPD 2012), nevertheless, it was eventually introduced. The explanatory memorandum to amend the legislation justified the change on the grounds of abolishing cultural stereotypes:

“[T]he current restrictions on this statutory right create the cultural belief that flexible working is only of benefit to parents and carers and, consequently, primarily for women as they deliver the majority of the caring role. This has led to people with other commitments unable to make a statutory request to work flexibly. This culture means businesses are not recognising the benefits of flexible working” (Business, Innovation & Skills [BIS] 2014, p. 2).

This alteration to the legislation reflects a wider discourse shift from “work-family” and “family-friendly”, to “work-life” and “work-life balance” in order to remove the implicit emphasis on women, which has excluded men and people with commitments unrelated to childcare from the debate (Lewis et al. 2007). However, the effectiveness of this shift and the “ungendering” of FWA are contentious since women are still more likely to both request and obtain flexible working more successfully than men, especially when it comes to part-time or reduced schedules (CIPD 2012). Thus, it

is argued that “changing the discourse does not, in itself, change the reality of gendered spheres” (Lewis et al. 2007, p. 363).

Furthermore, the explanatory memorandum to flexible working regulations in 2014 reads that the impact on employing organisations is “higher productivity, lower labour turnover, reduced absenteeism [...], totalling £55.8m” (BIS 2014, p. 4). This signals a strong business case that the policymakers wished to communicate, rather than a WLB or employee well-being agenda. Indeed, a European comparative study has shown that the U.K. prioritises a business case for FWA, only with the rhetoric of meeting the needs of employees (Den Dulk et al. 2011). This is further corroborated by Smith (2016) in his study into 103 U.K. employing organisations during the onset of the financial crisis. The author has found that in organisations where work schedules were beyond the standard hours (9am and 5pm), the employees experienced increasing competitive pressures, efficiency drives, work intensification and business needs being prioritised over caring duties. Some studies carried out in the U.S. have also shown that there is “a disjuncture between the broader organisational culture and the promises of FWA policies” (Kelly and Kalev 2006, p. 383). Thus, for instance, Smith (2016, p. 219) has argued that the claim that WLB policies, such as FWA, are part of a progressive HRM agenda aimed at reconciling work with family needs to be challenged, as such accounts may be utopian and overly functionalist.

Consequently, despite the discourse of flexible work being crucial to the employees’ wellbeing, life and family dimensions, the main reasons for introducing flexibility appear to be predominantly to serve the organisation. Although, the ACAS advisory booklet on flexible work attempts to frame the FWA rationale as a gender-neutral work-life reconciliation solution, it also reinforces a business case rationale:

“A poor balance between an employee’s work commitments and their other responsibilities can lead to stress, high absence and low productivity. Employees who have a better work-life balance often have a greater sense of responsibility, ownership and control of their working life. If an employer helps an employee to balance their work and home life this can be rewarded by increased loyalty and commitment. They may also feel more able to focus on their work and to develop their career” (ACAS 2016).

The above excerpt demonstrates that the drive behind improving WLB is still premised on business-oriented returns, such as decreasing absence, increasing productivity, a sense of responsibility, ownership and control of work. Employers

granting FWA can “be rewarded”, thus the implicit meaning is that allowing the employees flexibility is rather transactional and reciprocal in nature.

Whether this way of framing the right to request FWA has been intentional by the policymakers remains unclear. The policymakers’ assessment on the impact of flexible working stipulates that it “benefit[s] employers and employees as well as wider society” (Death and Honey 2011) which would suggest the government’s appreciation of value to all. Nonetheless, it could be argued that such business-centered formulation of the legislation is aimed to encourage high acceptance of requests and to prevent the initiative from being marginalised if framed as a purely gender, social justice or work-family issue (Kelly et al. 2010).

The next section will elaborate on and illuminate the problems in relation to the mechanisms of the flexible working legislation.

#### **2.3.3.1. The Right to Request Flexible Working**

Employees who have worked for at least 26 weeks are eligible to request flexible working. They are entitled to submit only one flexible working request in a twelve-month period, which means that if the original request is refused, the employee has to wait one year before submitting another application. Refusals of requests must be based on at least one of the eight possible business reasons: (1) the burden of additional costs; (2) an inability to reorganise work amongst existing staff; (3) an inability to recruit additional staff; (4) a detrimental impact on quality; (5) a detrimental impact on performance; (6) a detrimental effect on ability to meet customer demand; (7) insufficient work for the periods the employee proposes to work; and lastly, (8) planned structural changes to the business (ACAS 2016).

This formulation of the right to request flexible working creates a legislative loophole, which affords more power to the employer, who is entitled to reject a flexible working request if it does not suit the organisation. The underlying principle for this framework is arguably rooted in a business case, rather than in promoting egalitarian relationships, gender equality, and a WLB agenda. However, some studies have shown that this power imbalance can be levelled if the requesting employees perceive they have enough occupational power. For instance, Greenberg and Landry (2011) demonstrated that the perceived occupational power of female employees (defined as

critical job, high performer, and hierarchical power) could be leveraged when requesting flexibility in order to achieve positive negotiation outcomes. The study was conducted in the U.S. on a non-knowledge work sample, where no formal legislation comparable to the U.K. existed on the national level. They showed that occupational power was more important in obtaining FWA than the cultural support for it. However, it is unclear whether women knowledge workers would also leverage their occupational advantage whilst seeking flexible schedules.

Greenberg and Landry (2011) further demonstrated that when structural (as opposed to cultural) work-life support was present, then women of both high and low levels of perceived power were able to gain more positive negotiation outcomes. Thus, the authors concluded that the organisational context plays a crucial role in negotiating flexible working, and that a formal FWA policy minimises the risk that only the powerful will have access to such schedules. The U.K. context is advantageous to employees insofar as the structural work-life support is provided through the right to request legislation, which renders all U.K. organisations “FWA-ready”.

If we were to accept the conclusions of Greenberg and Landry (2011) that the structural support matters most in the negotiation of flexible working, then the U.K.-based employees should not in theory experience any problems in obtaining FWA. However, the question whether flexible working can become a cultural tenet if there is enough structural support as the authors suggest remains unanswered. Few studies have illuminated the experiences of women who have successfully negotiated flexible work schedules in the context of the right to request in the U.K..

One qualitative study into female workers in small firms, exploring the negotiation of part-time hours on return to work after maternity leave has shown an overwhelmingly positive experience perceived by the women (Atkinson 2016). The flexible requests were largely accepted due to the employers valuing and wishing to retain the women, however a minority who lacked managerial support experienced more negative outcomes. The author suggested that the right to request policy has become successfully embedded in organisational policies, despite the weakness of the regime that the employees are heavily dependent on the strength of their own bargaining position. Therefore, it may be possible to effectively claw back the bargaining power from the employer in certain circumstances. The shift of power to an employee may

occur if they are able to demonstrate value, experience or a skill that their employer wishes to retain in the organisation. The ability of the employer to grant FWA only to certain employees may thus become a tool used to retain talent, and consequently be used as an incentive, administered on a case-by-case basis only to the employees “worthy” of an alternative arrangement. Thus, occupational power may help female employees to obtain flexible working (Atkinson 2016).

The right to request rather than to obtain FWA facilitates such casual arrangements, as it de-standardises employment conditions. This is evocative of the so-called idiosyncratic deals (i-deals), which are “individualised arrangements between valued workers and their employers [as] the product of negotiation” (Rousseau 2001, p. 260). They include broadly understood terms and conditions of employment, such as pay and perks, and they are not just exclusive to work schedules. These i-deals result from three trends: workers’ greater occupational power, which is particularly relevant in the case of knowledge workers; non-standardised employment conditions; and also the employees’ expectations for contract customisation. This is influenced by the pervading ubiquity of the marketplace, where even employees are used to expanded choices and diversification of their employment contract. Although, this theory has its roots in a deregulated labour market in the U.S., it has also become pertinent in the U.K., because FWA are standardised only to a degree: they do not have to be granted.

Rousseau’s appraisal of these i-deals would suggest strengthening of employee power through a neoliberal discourse of the labour market winner who is embodied by a powerful, indispensable knowledge worker able to leverage unstandardised employment conditions to their advantage. However, reaching an exclusive flexible arrangement may not necessarily be possible for the less valued workers:

“[I]f the worker who occasionally stayed later came to be more trusted and relied upon by her boss, and was given greater latitude and flexibility when she requested, an idiosyncratic deal is in the making” (Rousseau 2001, p. 261).

The author argues that the human capital of knowledge workers is “difficult for employers to control” (2001, p. 265), which ultimately leads to a power shift benefitting the employee. Rousseau recognises, nevertheless, that attainment of such i-deals is laborious and requires considerable legwork, such as information gathering, and relationship building. It also occurs through requests, demands, tactics, strategies and

problem solving to reach an agreement. Lastly, evaluation, feedback, renegotiation, redesign and maintenance of the terms may be needed to obtain FWA. To theorise these praxes Rousseau proposed a three-phased framework of reaching i-deals: prework, i-deal creation, and managing the aftermath (Rousseau 2005). So, although employees may enjoy relative power in negotiating FWA, the process still requires a vast amount of effort to both finalise and maintain the deal.

Moreover, Morini argues that such individual contracting risks “fostering the denial of any social corporeality” (2007, p. 44). This in turn may weaken the bargaining power of the collective, as each employment deal is highly individualised. Furthermore, as women continue to outnumber men in the uptake of flexible working, there is a risk that gender inequality in organisations may be further exacerbated as power and control over how work is organised is perpetuated in favour of the bureaucracy (Acker 2006).

In the context of women knowledge workers and the flexible working legislation in the U.K., this theory has some significant limitations. This is because i-deals are defined as:

“[D]ifferent from standard employment conditions [...] intended to *benefit both the employee and the firm* by giving a *valued worker* something *not otherwise obtainable* through the firms standard practices” (Hornung et al. 2008, p. 655, my emphasis added).

The first divergence relates to the intended benefit of i-deals and FWA. Although the U.K. government attempts to endorse FWA as benefitting both the individual and the organisation, the ACAS (2016) guidelines demonstrate that the bottom line advice to the employer is “help if it doesn’t harm”. I-deals, on the other hand, are framed as mutually beneficial arrangements. Secondly, i-deals can be characterised by their exclusivity, special status, and availability only to the special few. In contrast, FWA are intended (at least in theory) to be reasonably obtainable by most employees regardless of their status in the organisation.

It cannot be assumed *a priori* that all knowledge workers are valued for their tacit knowledge or experience, or automatically possess a special or esoteric status in the organisation, even if some scholars characterise them in this manner (Reed 1996). Therefore, although the theory of i-deals may have some relevance to FWA in highly individualised employer-employee relationships, it cannot be readily applied to the



context of female knowledge workers in the U.K.. The way in which women knowledge workers experience flexible working post-negotiation on a daily basis will arguably much depend on the reason why they were granted them in the first place. If the rationale for allowing women employees to work flexibly centres on the employer's benevolence and embracing the flexibility ethos, then the organisational culture is more likely to match such attitudes. However, if the reason for granting FWA schedule is located in the business case for flexibility with a view to retaining women's talent, because the perceived value of an employee is high, then it could be argued that the organisational culture plays a relatively minor role. It may be that the consequences of the latter scenario become rather grim for flexible women workers. As previous studies have shown, organisational cultures which are unsupportive of work-life policies marginalise and stigmatise flexible workers, and perceive them as an aberration from the norm (Epstein et al. 1999; Williams et al. 2013).

Moreover, when organisational culture does not support WLB policies, employees are unlikely to take up FWA (Greenberg and Landry 2011). However, it is reasonable to assume that the right to request facilitates the take-up of flexible working to a degree, regardless of the organisational culture, for the simple reason of avoiding the employment tribunal by the employers. As a consequence, the individuals who do secure flexible working are not automatically guaranteed to enjoy supportive contextual factors as a given, such as managerial support or wider organisational support (Kelly and Kalev 2006).

#### **2.3.4. FWA – A Gendered Issue**

Although FWA are heralded as the solution to retaining female talent and solving WLB matters (Bardoel et al. 2007; Cabrera 2009a), there is an ongoing debate in relation to how gender is implicated in the utilisation of FWA, and to various short-term and long-term outcomes of working flexibly (Cohen and Single 2001; Brown 2010). Some scholars suggest that as long as women predominate among FWA users, gender equality will be severely difficult to achieve (Crompton 2002) and that targeting these policies at women may be reinforcing their inferior status in organisations.

In light of the above, the U.K. legislation allows employees the right to request flexible working for *any* reason, as the government hopes that FWA will cease to be the

preserve of the female labour force mainly utilised for childcare needs. It is hoped that flexible working becomes a gender-neutral cultural tenet characterising private, knowledge-intensive and public sector organisations.

It is doubtful, however, that such de-gendering of the policy is going to also de-gender the assumptions about the traditional divisions of labour and who is the main caregiver in the family unit. This is because these deeply rooted assumptions at the societal level are going to be reflected in WLB policies. For example, research in 34 countries has shown that women carry out two thirds of all domestic work (Knudsen and Wærness 2008). Therefore, as flexible working provisions deliver the structure for incorporating household and childcare duties, FWA are likely to remain gendered and seen as a “women’s issue” (Christensen and Schneider 2010). Take-up of flexible schedules is strongly linked to gender, class, race, childcare commitments, type of sector, size of organisation, and even type of FWA.

The majority of employees on flexible schedules are women. For instance, between 2009 and 2011, 17 per cent of employees had made a change to their work schedules; 57 per cent of them were female. Also, women were more successful than men in having their requests fully agreed to (66 per cent versus 53 per cent) (Death and Honey 2011). The Fourth Work-Life Balance Employer Survey (BIS 2013) reported that the organisations with higher proportion of women were more likely to have part-time employees. For instance, 87 per cent of organisations comprising at least half of female workforce had part-time employees. This was significantly higher than organisations where female employees made up 25-49 per cent of the workforce (74 per cent of organisations had part-time employees) and workplaces where less than a quarter of the workforce was female (54 per cent of organisations had part-time employees). These statistics show that part-time work is strongly feminised.

McRobbie has suggested that the government has a vested interest in encouraging women to work, since women with careers are less likely to need state-sponsored benefits. Moreover, female labour power is

“far too important to the post-industrial economy for anyone to be an advocate of long-term stay-at-home wives and mothers” (2013, p. 121).

Consequently, WLB policies are introduced nationally to capture women’s pervading family needs, and at the same time these provisions aid the new corporate

feminism to “support and extend the dominance of contemporary neoliberalism” (2013, p. 121).

Thus, it has been argued that reduced schedules are cementing the stereotype that mainly women are responsible for caregiving and they are not as committed and dedicated to employers. Even if the employer provides strong structural support for WLB practices that superficially appear gender-neutral and inclusive, these may “not mute non-institutional discourses” signalling that flexible working “violates organisational norms and values” (Turner and Norwood 2014, p. 854). Thus, reduced hours and homeworking arrangements may reinforce the subordinate position of women in the private sector, while still allowing women to remain in work during their childrearing years (Glass 2004).

This phenomenon is further exacerbated by the reluctance or apprehension of fathers to request flexible working, which consequently reinforces the notion that FWA are more acceptable for women. For instance, despite men wishing to work flexibly, they do not normally choose to utilise such arrangements (Greenberg and Landry 2011). Research has shown that men are discouraged from working flexibly to look after their family, and women are criticised for prioritising their careers (Gatrell and Cooper 2008). The 2017 Modern Families Index suggests that fathers are also concerned about the message they may be sending to their employers if they express a desire to work flexibly. Thus, they are more likely to lie about family life conflicting with work (Bright Horizons 2017).

Flexible working by women tends to be primarily in response to childcare commitments, and also caring for parents or grandparents. According to a government report, 43 per cent of employees working flexibly had children under the age of 18 (Death and Honey 2011). Additionally, women are more likely to use FWA in order to look after other dependants. Men appear to utilise FWA for different reasons, such as reducing commuting time and costs, maximising productivity, staying on top of their financial affairs, coping with pressure and stress, and pursue hobbies. Women are also more likely than men to report that the ability to work flexibly is a factor in staying with the current employer, which would suggest that women place a greater value in these arrangements.

The survey has also demonstrated that public sector employers (49 per cent) were more likely than private sector employers (33 per cent) to offer FWA that at the time of the survey went beyond the statutory minimum (CIPD 2012). The statutory minimum in 2012 only allowed parents of a child under 17, a disabled child under 18, or carers the right to request flexible working. Some organisations, such as Women's Pioneer Housing went beyond this minimum and extended their flexible working schedules to all employees, regardless of the reason for the request, which predated the latest extension of the legislation by the government in 2014 (CIPD 2012).

This could be explained by the statistics showing that public and third sector organisations are more likely to employ women. For example, 57 per cent of public sector organisations had at least three quarters of female employees compared to only 26 per cent in the private sector (BIS 2013). Thus, public sector organisations are also feminised and are more likely to offer FWA to their female-dominated workforce.

Whilst part-time is most ubiquitous among lower ranks in organisations, flexi-time and homeworking tends to be utilised among those at senior levels and with managerial responsibilities (CIPD 2012). However, data available in the CIPD report also suggest that different types of FWA are gendered. Women are much more likely to use part-time schedules (49 per cent) than men (13 per cent); and men are more likely to use flexi-time (30 per cent) than women (21 per cent); and have access to homeworking and mobile working (25 per cent and 22 per cent) than women do (15 per cent and 8 per cent) (CIPD 2012). This has been attributed to class differences in FWA utilisation, since more men than women occupy high-status jobs. These privileged employees are often perceived as "trusted workers who are felt not to need close supervision" (Williams et al. 2013, p. 212), thus they are more likely to be afforded more schedule control.

Walby (2011), on the other hand, has explored the take-up of FWA within the knowledge economy and identified different gendering patterns in comparison to the economy in general, as above. With regard to spatialities of knowledge work, women and men are on par when it comes to working from home within high-tech manufacturing and KIS, but not within IT, where men outnumber women (21 per cent versus 15 per cent). Furthermore, mobile working (different places with home as a base) is much more prevalent among men than women (e.g. 11 per cent versus 4 per cent in

KIS). With regard to temporalities of knowledge work, there has been a shift from standard to non-standard working hours. In high-tech manufacturing more men use FWA (24 per cent versus 22 per cent), but women are more likely to use flexible schedules (flexi-time) in IT (21 per cent versus 17 per cent) and KIS (31 per cent versus 20 per cent). They are also much more likely to work part-time than men in all three knowledge economy sectors (high-tech, IT and KIS) with men averaging 7.6 per cent and women 30.6 per cent.

These figures suggest that there is gender patterning in relation to temporalities and spatialities in the knowledge economy. Temporalities are more female-dominated and spatialities are more men-dominated. Walby (2011) has suggested there it is a common misconception that gender patterns of care have disproportionately increased the number of women working from home. On the contrary, it is men who are more likely to work away from the employer. Thus, knowledge work spatialities are gendered in non-traditional ways.

Other research carried out in the U.S. showed that access to FWA was diminished for female, non-white, less-educated and less-skilled workers (Golden 2001b). It may be the case that these groups of people tended to be employed in non-knowledge work organisations that did not facilitate FWA due to the criticality of round-the-clock operations, such as customer service, hospitality or retail organisations. However, some studies have shown that there also exists intra-organisational and intra-occupational bias within knowledge work organisations in the context of granting flexible working as a perk for the privileged few (Kelly and Kalev 2006).

On the whole, FWA utilisation depends on various factors, but the key issue underpinning these factors appears to be gender. Women are more likely to use FWA; childcare is the main reason for flexible schedules among women; the feminised public sector is more likely to offer FWA; and the most feminised FWA (part-time) seems to be devalued and prevalent in lower status jobs. Thus, it seems that flexible spatialities are more prestigious and reserved for the upper ranks and men, and temporalities are of a lesser status and largely occupied by women.

Weber and Williams (2008b) have tried to explain this phenomenon. They posit that the popularity of FWA among women can be attributed to the competing demands of work and motherhood. Women are caught in the double bind. On the one hand, they

feel obliged to conform to full-time commitment required by their employers, as they are cognisant they will be rewarded for loyalty, prioritising work and behaving like ideal workers (Acker 1990; Williams 2000). But, conforming to this ideal is untenable if they also have to meet the requirements of “hegemonic cultural expectations to practice intensive mothering” (Webber and Williams 2008b, p. 16). Thus, women make the decision to utilise FWA as one of the strategies to manage these contradicting expectations, which colours the way flexible working is perceived and is far from gender neutrality. Women do not generally use FWA in order to advance their careers, or boost employability through training and development like men do, but mainly to raise their families. Consequently, their decision to work flexibly could be perceived by the employer as a clash of devotions.

The next section will explore some of the most prevalent negative consequences and repercussions of FWA in relation to the work sphere.

### **2.3.5. Critiques of FWA**

Although, the rationale for using FWA is rooted in positive gains in either WLB of employees, business-case agenda or social justice, research to date has shown a dark side of flexible working. These consequences tend to fall on an employee who through the use of FWA unwittingly becomes a non-standard case, different from the normative typical ideal worker who does not require or seek work-life reconciliation concessions (Rapoport et al. 2002). The predicaments that FWA can bring on an individual range from rendering their commitment to the organisation suspect, career derailment or even social stigma attracted by a failure to adhere to organisational norms (Whittock et al. 2002; Rogier and Padgett 2004; Connolly and Gregory 2010; Durbin and Tomlinson 2010; Moen et al. 2013; Williams et al. 2013). These consequences will be discussed in turn.

#### **2.3.5.1. Perceived Lower Commitment**

Flexible work arrangements become particularly salient for parents, as they seek balance in order to reconcile family demands with work (Sullivan and Mainiero 2007). As women still tend to assume primary caregiving role to their children, they are also more likely to request FWA. Unfortunately, perceptions of what it means to be

committed to organisation are likely to be rooted in gender role stereotypes that assume women take childcare responsibility as the number one priority. This has led to the view that women, especially those who work flexibly, are uncommitted or not as committed compared to men, as they have alternative tasks and obligations more important than work (Rogier and Padgett 2004). Moreover, employees themselves are concerned that utilising FWA signals a lack of commitment to career and the organization (Whittock et al. 2002).

In the context of professionals and managers, Moen et al. have argued that the way in which workers do time work is often “intertwined with perceptions of their commitment and their performance as employees” (2013, p. 105). Thus, if employees choose to utilise FWA they are risking being seen as contrary and uncommitted. This happens when their employer implicitly expects that the interest of the company is internalised and prioritised through, for instance, long hours.

However, research by King (2008) on assistant and associate-level professors demonstrated that there was no difference between the mothers’ and fathers’ level of affective (linked to attachment) and normative (linked to obligation) commitment, and that mothers had actually higher levels of continuance commitment (related to remaining in the organisation) and work involvement (importance of work) than fathers. The author has suggested that the mother-professors’ attitudes related to work and family defied the stereotypes and that mothers may recognise that more effort and attention is necessary for their progression.

Furthermore, a study conducted in the Netherlands demonstrated that ambitious working parents utilised work-home arrangements (flexible hours, core, compressed schedule, telecommuting, and working from home) more often than the less-ambitious parents and that this link was stronger for the mothers than the fathers (Dijkers et al. 2010). The authors have argued that this result was expected as flexible working allows mothers to fulfil their communal gender role while at the same time allows to fulfil their professional ambitions. The ambition levels of the mothers were on par with those of the fathers despite the mothers working fewer hours. This again defies the stereotypes that mothers who work reduced schedules are less ambitious.

Moreover, flexible working is suggested as one of the ways in which employers can actually gain commitment from employees. This happens as the organisations that

allow FWA or embrace a WLB culture may appear benevolent, and become attractive employers to work for. This is substantiated by different studies suggesting that organisations that provide flexible working options can expect greater employee commitment (Dex and Scheibl 2001; Shapiro et al. 2009). Enhanced commitment is even demonstrated among the employees who do not necessarily utilise these options themselves. For instance, Scandura and Lankau (1997) have found that women reported higher levels of organisational commitment when they perceived that their employers merely offered FWA regardless of whether they actually used these policies or not.

So, why is flexible working both promoted as commitment creating, and seen as a sign of a lack of commitment at the same time? The dissonance between the negative perceptions of commitment of flexible women employees, and the endorsed organisational gains stems from the way in which commitment is conceptualised. As argued in the previous chapter, issues related to what it means to be an ideal worker, gender and flexible working are interrelated, and as Rapoport et al. contend:

“[t]he definition of commitment remains rooted in a traditional concept of the ideal worker as someone for whom work is primary . . . and the demands of family, community and personal life are secondary” (2002, p. 29).

Thus, as long as the above applies, a clash will continue to exist between flexible policies and organisations that demand full-time availability and total commitment. Such *greedy organisations* (Coser 1974 cited in Glover and Kirton 2007) view employees seeking FWA as time deviants unable to deliver on the open-ended nature of organisational commitment (Smithson et al. 2004). In many workplaces FWA create a problem with perceived commitment and loyalty largely due to the persistent culture of presenteeism and long hours, and the traditional notions of career success (Sheridan 2004; McDonald et al. 2008). Sheridan (2004) has introduced the concept of the cult of presenteeism experienced by professionals and managers in many organisations which connotes the pressure to be present and work longer hours. She has pointed out that the binary of full-time and part-time commitment to work is exacerbated by men’s incapacity to take up part-time work due to:

“a lifelong system of social control which begins with gender socialization and is continually reinforced and recreated by other institutions — the organization and the family — and ideologies” (Sheridan 2004, p. 222).



McDonald and colleagues (2008, p. 2210) have also found that a reduced schedule was “furthest from notions of the normative, full-time and fully-committed job incumbent” and that telecommuting was perceived as a “relatively subversive activity” kept secret from clients, closely supervised and only allowed occasionally for single specified tasks.

Therefore, in order to encourage employees to take up flexible working, it is not sufficient to rely solely on the introduction of such policies (Thompson et al. 1999). Eaton (2003) suggests that it is the perceived usability of FWA that increases commitment, that is, the perception the users will not be penalised should they decide to work flexibly and that they will not be perceived as organisational deviants.

Similar situation occurs in relation to the perceived motivation of flexible working users as reported by co-workers and managers. Research conducted among medical doctors has shown that part-time colleagues were perceived as:

“slightly lacking in motivation and/or ability [or] not quite fully formed, not really a full member of the team” (Evans et al. 2000, p. 359).

Rogier and Pagett (2004) also demonstrated in their hypothetical-scenario experiment that women employees on flexible schedules were perceived by others as having less advancement motivation and less job-career dedication, as compared to women employees on standard schedules. These ingrained inaccuracies and perceptions may ultimately lead to further consequences, which are more tangible, such as an impact on career prospects.

#### **2.3.5.2. Negative Impact on Career**

Studies to date have shown a rather complicated picture in relation to consequences of using FWA on career. Negative career penalties arising from utilising FWA have been well documented in the literature through both quantitative and qualitative studies. They have revealed that women either report perceived career stagnation or slowdown (Durbin and Tomlinson 2010), or experience the glass ceiling effect which prevents them from reaching higher levels in organisations (Connolly and Gregory 2010). Some studies, albeit in the minority, have shown a positive impact on career, as women are able to remain in work and continue their employment

participation, which is more conducive to career building, than opting-out of the workforce altogether (Connolly and Gregory 2010; Dikkers et al. 2010).

For instance, Connolly and Gregory (2010) have suggested that part-time work should be conceptualised as *dual tracks*. Using part-time schedules as an interlude and only temporarily until full-time employment is resumed can be career supporting for women. However, if they are used as work spells in non-employment, then FWA may become a trap to successful careers. Moreover, Purcell et al. (1999) have proposed that manual, semi- and unskilled workers experience flexibility as insecure and unpredictable, predominantly in these roles and organisations where working patterns change according to demand. Thus, it is recommended that policymakers should distinguish part-time utilisation among women from poorer or single families, and dual-working couple families on more protected contracts.

Indeed, some researchers suggest that it is only managerial, professional and office workers and employees with occupational expertise or skills who are able to experience a benefit from flexible working (Purcell et al. 1999). This is supported by Tomlinson (2006b) who in her study on service-sector female employees differentiated between optimal and restrictive part-time schedules. For instance, *optimal* (i.e. flexible scheduling the users were most satisfied with) was exclusive among high-skill, high-grade women employees; as opposed to more prevalent *restrictive* flexibility, which was found among lower-skill, lower-grade women who did not have well-developed human capital prior to maternity leave.

This suggests that flexible working may only be benefitting those with greater individual occupational power (Crompton 2002), or expert power (French and Raven 1959), as their perceived organisational value allows the privileged women to both negotiate flexibility successfully, and then utilise it with no career penalties. On the other hand, Carney (2009) has shown that the norms of the ideal worker behaviour were stronger in high-status occupations and consequently, mothers were “at a greater risk of becoming excluded from employment within these occupations” (2009, p. 113).

Thus, attempting to explain who enjoys the benefits of flexible working through the dichotomy of high-status and low-status occupations may be oversimplified. For instance, in their meta-analysis, Baltes et al. (1999) have argued that those who have a significant degree of autonomy in their work, for example professionals and managers,

are unlikely to benefit from flexi-time work schedules as much as general employees do. This is due to these types of employees already enjoying high levels of freedom in customising their work schedules to their needs. Thus, the official implementation of flexible working in these groups is unlikely to be perceived as beneficial.

Moreover, Crompton and Lyonette (2011) demonstrated in their study that working reduced schedules can have different consequences depending on the actual high-status profession. For instance, both male and female G.P.'s and medical consultants enjoyed having relative control over their working hours. Female G.P.'s were able to return to the same position after maternity leave; and the consultants' high status was not jeopardised. However, part-time schedule users in accountancy were heavily penalised, despite the profession's high-status and high-skills attributes (Crompton and Lyonette 2011). This has also been demonstrated in professions such as law, notorious for all-encompassing time commitment demands (Epstein et al. 1999; Campbell et al. 2012).

Crompton and Lyonette (2011) have also suggested that the variances in how reduced schedules are experienced across the labour market may be due to the differences between public and private sectors, and the power of professional bodies (such as British Medical Association) in negotiating desirable terms and conditions of work. But Epstein et al. point to the organisational cultures regardless of the sector that are founded on the ideal worker norm and what it means to be a "true professional" (1999, p. 133). Also, Johnson and colleagues have suggested that utilising FWA:

"may lead to negative workplace and career consequences because the pursuit of work-life balance conflicts with the traditional culture of the organization" (2008, p.50).

It is understood that such traditional cultures of organisations value less "life balance" and more "work", so that the employees' time, space and cognitive capacities can be maximised to benefit the ultimate goal of most organisations – productivity and efficiency. This may prove a major challenge to women and career penalties and concerns about reduced visibility can differ across sexes. For instance, in Maruyama and Tietze's (2012) study, female teleworkers and mothers who teleworked were more likely to report the disadvantage of reduced visibility and stalled career advancement as a result of FWA, than male teleworkers and teleworking fathers. Moreover,

reconfiguration, deskilling and side-lining is likely to occur after changing working patterns to FWA, as evidenced in a qualitative study of 54 female professionals and executives (Stone and Hernandez 2013). Also, other studies have suggested that flexible working women felt they were marginalised or downgraded (Blair-Loy 2003; Gatrell 2005).

These issues are so deeply ingrained that Carney (2009) has suggested that the inability of mothers to conform to the ideal worker behaviour through part-time work schedules should be reinterpreted as “systemic discrimination”. Although mothers are able to conform to continuous labour market attachment, they can only maintain it if they utilise reduced schedules, which at the same time render them non-ideal workers. The author argues that equality for women can only be gained if we first understand how the ideal worker norm is operationalised in the labour market.

Hill et al. (2004) attempted to challenge how part-time work is continually seen inferior and explored *new concept part-time work* in IBM, well known for family-friendly approach to their employees and WLB policies. The premise of this proposition was to create quality part-time jobs that would not attract career penalties. However, they also found that women who worked part-time reported much less career optimism in comparison to their full-time counterparts. Interestingly, another study conducted by the same authors in the same organisation, but on IT teleworkers, has shown that this mode of working had a neutral effect on career opportunities. The authors argued that as teleworking had been normalised, it was not perceived as a deviation from the standard office work arrangements, and it did not attract negative career consequences. This suggests that even in the face of family-friendly rhetoric much depends on the norms within organisations, and that deeper cultural issues around the normalcy of work hours may create barriers to women’s career progression.

One of the more dangerous consequences of such norms of work schedules is that they are internalised by women employees themselves, who having experienced career stagnation come to accept this as an inevitable trade-off (Dick 2010; Durbin and Tomlinson 2010). For instance, a study conducted among police employees has shown that 95 per cent of the interviewed participants recognised their part-time status had halted their careers, but at the same time they viewed the ability to work part-time as a privilege. The participants believed that being “allowed” to return to their pre-

pregnancy roles was a “signifier of their worth and value” (Dick 2010, p. 521). Furthermore, Dick and Hyde (2006) in another study on the same group of participants showed that part-time work in itself was not blamed for career penalties, but an inability of the employees to fit the mould of the established organisational practices. As the bureaucratic structures were “let off the hook”, the participants attributed blame to family, home life, and babies instead. This shows that the organisational norms may be so strong that they become hidden not only within the structures, but also within the agents themselves (Acker 2006). This may ultimately prevent a realisation of this situation and may limit opportunities for a meaningful change.

Penalties related to using flexible or reduced schedules also extend to career pay gap. For instance, there is much agreement that utilising FWA can have a detrimental effect on wages, and creates a gender wage gap since women are more likely to work flexibly. Flexible arrangements which reduced employee face-time in the workplace and freed the employees to perform caregiving tasks had resulted in a potentially severe wage decrease in the context of lucrative managerial and professional roles (Glass 2004).

### **2.3.5.3. Flexibility Stigma**

Inability to conform to social norms, whether it is at a broader macro- or at organisational-level can result in a stigma (Goffman 1963). Stigma is “undesired differentness from what we had anticipated” (p. 5), and when applied to the organisational context it could occur to anyone who utilises flexible schedules in organisations where norms are based on the ideal worker norm, and full-time availability. Crocker et al. posit that:

“stigmatized individuals possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute or characteristic that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context” (1998, p. 505).

As flexible working still is a relatively new phenomenon, there is a risk that people who take advantage of these schedules conceptually depart from what is considered ordinary. In short, those on full-time, rigid schedules may be considered “normals”, or conforming to the norms, and those who fail to follow such scripts are less dedicated and less professional – “time deviants” (Epstein et al. 1999, p. 29).

Indeed, Williams et al. suggest that the flexibility stigma for professionals is driven by the work devotion schema, reflecting ingrained cultural assumptions that work “demands and deserves undivided and intensive allegiance” (2013, p. 211). The major negative impact of stigmatisation has its consequences in psychological or social spheres (Biernat and Dovidio 2000, p. 88). Such consequences can be evident in the stigmatised employee’s well-being, their affective outcomes (job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and transient mood states), and behavioural outcomes (task performance, organisational citizen behaviours, counterproductive behaviours, and withdrawal) (Boyce et al. 2007).

Flexibility stigma may conceal a double perspective, as in the original work of Goffman: the flexibility attribute can be either *discredited*, or *discreditable* (Goffman 1963). The difference is based on the visibility or the awareness of others’ of one’s stigma, which could be flexible working. On the one hand, co-workers and managers may be fully aware of the flexibility status, in which case the attribute is discredited. On the other hand, it may not be obvious to some co-workers and non-direct line managers, in which case it is a discreditable attribute. Thus, it is possible that the individual, who is aware of flexibility stigma in the organisation may wish to “make a direct [or indirect] attempt to correct” (Goffman 1963, p. 9) the discrediting attribute to prevent her from being stigmatised. Accordingly, in order to experience stigmatisation, or its threat, an individual “must be aware of the negative stereotypes others hold” in relation to the particular attribute (Boyce et al. 2007, p. 15). Research has shown that employees who are stigmatised due to FWA are cognisant of the co-workers’ and managers’ perceptions (Epstein et al. 1999; Donovan et al. 2005; Stone 2007; Cech and Blair-Loy 2014).

Cech and Blair-Loy (2014) observed that although people who take advantage of WLB policies, such as FWA, are not always stigmatised or negatively perceived per se, the key reason for stigmatisation is the individual’s decision to use these policies for *childcare* purposes. This move may be negatively interpreted by co-workers and managers as a “cultural expression of lower career commitment” (2014, p. 87) which results in flexibility stigma. The authors have also found that women were more likely than men to be cognisant of flexibility stigma, and so were the parents of children under three years of age compared to nonparents. However, they did not find differences

between the mothers' and fathers' reporting the stigma, which would suggest that there is a wider organisational belief that parents, not just mothers are uncommitted (Cech and Blair-Loy 2014).

The difference between how men and women experience flexibility stigma has been further nuanced. It is argued that the stigma for men is founded on the *gender nonconforming* behaviours. For example, men utilising FWA for family commitments may be perceived as incongruous. Whilst women experience the stigma because they are *gender conforming*. They are doing what they are expected to do: compromise career for the sake of their families (Williams et al. 2013). It has even been suggested that women who make the decision to leave an organisation to focus solely on family are applauded (Stone and Hernandez 2013). High-status men, on the other hand, enjoy flexible working to advance their careers (Brescoll et al. 2013).

Focusing on lawyers, Epstein et al. (1999) explored how the employees experienced their part-time status and they demonstrated that stigmatisation ensued directly and indirectly. For instance, it occurred through removing them from career tracks or subjecting them to jokes about their reduced schedules. Stigmatisation also ensued through a symbolic treatment highlighting differential status, whereby the part-timers were denied allocated offices, business cards, or door nameplates. Moreover, the reluctance of clients to work with part-time lawyers to represent their cases suggests that the stigma can stretch beyond the confines of the organisation and can affect an outside reputation.

## **2.4. Identifying Research Gaps**

Drawing on the above discussions on knowledge work and FWA, the following gaps in the literature have been identified:

**Research Gap (1)** Scholarship on knowledge workers tends to be gender neutral (Scarborough 1999; Flood et al. 2001; Hunter et al. 2002; Thompson and Heron 2005; Benson and Brown 2007; O'Donohue et al. 2007; Christensen 2011; Nicolopoulou et al. 2011; Reinhardt et al. 2011; Cushen and Thompson 2012; Kinnie and Swart 2012; Erhardt and Gibbs 2014; Harney et al. 2014; Wolfram and Gratton 2014), with some notable exceptions (see: Walby 2007, 2011; Donnelly et al. 2012; Natti et al. 2012; Truss et al. 2012; Donnelly 2015; Olsen 2016; Peterson 2017; Tammelin et al. 2017).

This study fills this shortcoming in the existing research by focusing on the experiences of women knowledge workers.

**Research Gap (2)** Knowledge work has been linked to an improved ability to work flexibly, however there is little evidence about how flexible women knowledge workers experience these new provisions (for exceptions see: Perrons 2003; Donnelly 2009b). Women knowledge workers are believed to enjoy agency through a relatively strong human capital and occupational advantages, however it is unclear whether they benefit from these attributes when obtaining and managing FWA. Specifically, scholarship on FWA has so far tended to focus on idiosyncratic contexts (e.g. medical academia - Brown et al. 2003; Open University staff - Donovan et al. 2005; police force - Dick and Hyde 2006; Dick 2010) or idiosyncratic professions (accounting - Cohen and Single 2001; Almer et al. 2004; Johnson et al. 2008; solicitors – Campbell et al. 2012; medical and accounting – Crompton and Lyonette 2011; managerial – Brown 2010; Durbin and Tomlinson 2010, 2014; radiologists - Chertoff et al. 2001), with no explicit focus on knowledge work, with some notable exceptions in the context of SET (Herman and Lewis 2012), IT (Hill et al. 2003; Hill et al. 2004) and KIS, such as civil (Lewis 1998) and public service (McDonald et al. 2007; McDonald et al. 2008). This study addresses this knowledge gap and explores the experiences of women knowledge workers employed within the KIS sector. Can this most egalitarian sector be described as a “safe space” for women to openly engage in family responsibilities, take-up flexible work options without penalties or stigma and thrive in their careers? Moreover, this study departs from the tendency of previous research to examine specific business-case aspects of FWA, such as performance, productivity and profitability (Konrad and Mangel 2000; Eaton 2003; Stavrou 2005), or those aspects only related to the WLB of its users (Higgins et al. 2000; Beham et al. 2012; Hofäcker and König 2013). It critically explores the perceptions, experiences and ways of negotiating and managing FWA by women knowledge workers on a daily basis.

**Research Gap (3)** Moreover, studies on knowledge workers in the context of flexible working have mainly focused on high-status and highly privileged groups of employees, such as management consultants, lawyers and accountants (Epstein et al. 1999; Donnelly 2006; Donnelly 2009a, 2015). Choosing a democratic and inclusive sample of knowledge workers in this study strives to reflect the rising prevalence of



knowledge workers as key organisational members across diverse public and private KIS organisations, such as higher education, charities, local government, financial services, etc. As per Williams' et al. (2013) call, research is needed to illuminate the experiences of flexible working among the “missing middle”, rather than the experiences of the privileged few in highly prestigious and exclusive professions that have too often characterised knowledge work-oriented studies. Thus, this study explores the experiences of a diverse group of women knowledge workers normally employed by and present in most organisations. Moreover, flexible working researched in the context of high-status knowledge work, such as management consultancy or law (Epstein et al. 1999; Donnelly 2015), has been shown to be constrained because of the dominating needs of clients and customers over and above the needs of individual employees (Donnelly 2006). Therefore, the study focuses on those women knowledge workers who do not experience extremely high levels of client hegemony to illuminate whether such environments are more conducive to FWA.

**Research Gap (4)** Furthermore, despite the relatively recent legislation of the right to request FWA (updated in 2014), there is a dearth of research concentrating on how such flexible working is experienced, with a few notable exceptions in the context of Australia (Skinner and Pocock 2011; van den Broek and Keating 2011; Skinner et al. 2016), New Zealand (Donnelly et al. 2012) and the U.K. (Lewis and Campbell 2007; Atkinson 2016; Phillipson et al. 2016). Considering that the right to request flexible working has been a well-recognised and an oft-recommended option for mothers seeking to reconcile their home and work responsibilities (Atkinson 2016), and that the legislation has been significantly expanded to allow all reasons for flexibility (ACAS 2016), it is apposite to examine how this flexibility is experienced on a daily basis by women knowledge workers. Moreover, the right to request flexible working legislation provides an important backdrop to address Greenberg and Landry's (2011) call to investigate how FWA are negotiated and obtained. These scholars have argued that more research transcending statistical or case study approaches is needed, and that researchers should aim to explore the experiences of individual women who utilise FWA.

**Research Gap (5)** Furthermore, this study offers a unique approach to conceptualising women knowledge workers as both enabled and constrained by the

structures of social systems (Giddens 1986; Stones 2005). This departs from the tendency in existing women-centered research to pursue an exploration of structures which are framed as career/work/success barriers, obstacles and constraints (Donovan et al. 2005; Broadbridge 2008a, 2008b; Campbell et al. 2011; Cullen and Christopher 2012; Michielsens et al. 2014; Spoor and Hoye 2014). These studies are extremely valuable, however it is also important to better understand women's agency and their ability to draw on enabling structural resources to achieve their goals (for an exception see Tomlinson 2006a, 2006b) or to engage in strategies in response to career challenges (see Orser et al. 2012 as an exception). Despite substantial amount of scholarship on gender in work organisations, relatively few research studies that *directly* draw on structuration as a theoretical lens can be found, with some notable exceptions (Boggs 1999; Nielsen et al. 2003, 2004; Mercado et al. 2011; Auer and Welte 2013; Haddad 2013; Karam et al. 2013; Afiouni and Karam 2014; Turner and Norwood 2014; Wheeler et al. 2014). This study fills this shortcoming and it adopts a theoretical framework that attends to the duality of structure and agency characterising women knowledge workers' lives and careers.

## **2.5. Summary**

This chapter has presented the context of this study. The concept of knowledge work has been explored to help understand why knowledge workers are considered unique and that their tacit knowledge makes them distinctive in comparison to non-knowledge workers. I also discussed different ways in which *knowledge worker* is defined, however I proposed a suitable definition guiding this study. As this project explores the experiences of women knowledge workers, I also reviewed the available literature on *women* knowledge workers, but showed that knowledge work scholarship tends to be gender neutral. Secondly, the chapter has focused on the existing research in relation to FWA. I provided the definitions and research streams concerning flexible working and presented the dominant business-case agenda. I also briefly introduced the mechanisms of the U.K. legislation that grants the right to request flexible working. I demonstrated that the way in which this legislation is constructed might make the employer-employee relationship problematic in relation to the reproduction of power imbalance. I also discussed the gendered flexible working uptake and its negative

repercussions in relation and women's career consequences, such as a perceived lack of commitment, negative career outcomes, pay gap and flexibility stigma.

## **Chapter 3. Theoretical Framework**

### **3.1. Introduction**

This chapter proposes the theoretical framework for this study. I discuss why structuration theory (ST), and specifically quadripartite nature of structuration (QNS) is a particularly fitting lens for studying the experiences of women in the context of knowledge work. Firstly, the chapter presents Giddens' ST (1986), and then Stones' QNS (2005), and demonstrates how these theories strive to reconcile the structure and agency polarity. Secondly, I sketch the difference between the concepts of structure and agency in women's studies. Thirdly, I show how this study's key concepts, *woman knowledge worker* and *flexible working* are incorporated into the theoretical framework, and why it is apposite to see these two elements as both affording agency and constraining women at the same time.

I now introduce and define the main structuration concepts proposed by Anthony Giddens. I also show how Giddens' theory has been further developed by Rob Stones, whose QNS theory is appropriated here as a helpful lens through which the data analysis is conducted.

### **3.2. Giddens' Structuration Theory**

The division between structure and action in social science has a rich trajectory. Structuralists are concerned with the overall structure of the society and the ways in which it limits and constraints humans through a combination of impenetrably powerful social institutions. These institutions, such as the family, the education system, the economy, the societal norms, rules and regulations mould and determine the formation of people's identities, behaviours, practices and cognitions (Jones et al. 2011). On the other hand, social action and interpretivist theorists have viewed structuralists as too deterministic and instead focused on the behaviours, the free will and choices of individual humans that cumulatively create and shape social structures. This suggests that people are not simply passive puppets constrained and animated by social systems, but they are actively partaking in creating and negotiating meanings and sense making through interactions with other members of the society (Jones et al. 2011).

This dualism is one of the key theoretical dilemmas in social sciences: how far are we creative human actors, actively controlling the conditions of our own lives? Is most of what we do the result of general social forces outside our control (Giddens 1986)? The tension between structure and agency has been explored by British sociologist Anthony Giddens who proposed the best approach to viewing the society is the middle way by recognising the importance of both concepts. Structuration theory is an important attempt by Giddens to address “two pernicious misconceptions prevalent in social thought [...]: objectivism and subjectivism” (Stones 2005, p. 13-14). The caveat of treating these two elements in isolation lies in the fact that the former emphasises forces and structures over puppet-like agents, while the latter lays emphasis on actions, interactions, choices, desires, interpretations and practices over broader social life. As Stones sums up:

“[S]ubjectivism uproots agents from their socio-structural context, treating them as deracinated, free-floating, individuals, whereas objectivism treats them so derisively that they sink without trace, conceptualised as if they lack the autonomy to cause even the slightest ripple of disturbance on a social surface determined wholly by powerful and impersonal systemic tides” (2005, p. 14).

To address the problem of voluntarism in subjectivism and reification in objectivism, Giddens set out to propose a new theory that would combine both elements. He achieves this through giving prominence to the *duality of structure and agency* (rather than dualism) and emphasises that structure is both the medium and outcome of action. Both structure and action operate together to form the social context and practices, as opposed to performing independently of each other (Giddens 1986). Therefore, ST allows researchers to explore people’s practices and behaviours, and their environmental context which may both limit and enable them at the same time. As Giddens put it, ST:

“allows one to understand both how actors are, at the same time, the creators of social systems and yet created by them [...] It is an attempt to provide the conceptual means to analysing the often delicate and subtle the interlacings of reflexively organised action and institutional constrain” (1991, p. 204).

Through his development of this theory, Giddens postulated that the way to bridge the gap between structure and action is to accept that humans actively make and remake

structures, as structure and action relate to each other, and they are two sides of the same coin. Giddens claimed that social structures are:

“both enabling and constraining: they help us to make sense of the world, to achieve our purposes or goals, but they can also limit our room for manoeuvre in the social world” (Jones 1999, p. 166).

### 3.2.1. Structure

As explained, the traditional understanding of structure as a constriction to social action is eschewed by Giddens (1986). For him, structures have the capacity to *both* enable and constrain agents. For instance, social structures provide us with rules in order to make sense of the world, and resources to reach our goals. At the same time, structures can also act as obstacles or like walls of a box that can diminish our freedom in negotiating the social world, but they only exist in the moment in which they are produced or reproduced. Giddens argued that rules and resources can give us transformative capacity to enable us to change social structures (1986).

He also suggested that social structures are memory traces, or tacit (taken-for-granted) and discursive knowledge (understood and verbalised knowledge of conduct by the actor) existent in social actors, thus actors and societies cannot be separated, as they are dependent upon each other to exist. He illustrated this dependency with language as an example, and how it is produced through free speech acts, but which are founded upon strict formalised rules. Similarly, social structures are produced and reproduced through interactions and they do not exist independently of agency. For example, if language is not used, it may cease to exist (Giddens 1986).

Structures according to Giddens, however, only exist in a virtual form, which means that they only occur “in so far as they are held in the minds of actors who actually employ them or instantiate them” (Jones et al. 2011, p. 168). Therefore, structure is recognised by Giddens as a “virtual order” and it implies that agents possess knowledge about “how to go on” in social relations (e.g. memory); they have the necessary capabilities to “go on” (e.g. actual material objects or physical conditions); and that both knowledge and capabilities are employed in the production of social practices and organisation (e.g. waged labour) (Stones 2005). Giddens explained that:

“to say that structure is a virtual order of transformative relations means that social systems, as reproduced social practices, do not have ‘structures’ but rather exhibit ‘structural properties’ and that structure exists, as time-space presence, only in its instantiations in such practices and as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents” (1986, p. 17).

Some critics (Sewell 1992) questioned how the idea of a social structure only existing in the moment could explain the existence of systematic inequalities. However, Giddens addressed this challenge with the notion of social systems. He explained that social systems are clusters of social structures which are “regularised relations of interdependence between individuals and groups” (Giddens 1979 cited in Jones et al. 2011, p. 169). Gender inequalities, for example, are system inequalities with unequal power relations that are the result of specific clustering of social structures. Thus, whilst social actions result in social structures, social structures result in social systems which may be characterised by social inequality.

Another criticism in relation to virtual structures concerns Giddens’s lack of explanation of how material or physical conditions or levers are virtual. This compelling criticism has been addressed by Stones (2005) who argued that the term “virtual” caused more confusion than clarity, and the reason why these structures are thought to be virtual is that both knowledge and capabilities represent “latent capabilities” (not manifest). This means that they are drawn upon by agents, and they are transformed from latency to that of the manifest or the actual when they are needed. Thus, Stones in his updated version of ST proposed that structures should be divided into external and internal structures to better reflect conditions of action (such as material objects and physical conditions, and other agents) and knowledge (existent in human agents) (Stones 2005). Therefore, Stones’ structures can be virtual as well as physical.

Margaret Archer, well known for her important critique of Giddens’ ST, argued that Giddens conflates human agents with the system, which causes

“a coherence of the structural properties, such that actors’ inescapable use of them embroils everyone in the stable reproduction of social systems” (Archer 2010 cited in King 2010, p. 254)

Archer argued that instead there should be a clear distinction between agency and structure in order to explore their interaction, and that there is a dualism instead of duality of structure and agency in the social world (King 2010). She accused Giddens of

being an “elisionist” for conflating and collapsing structure with agency together in such a way that it is not possible to parse them out from one another.

Stones, who developed a more nuanced version of ST argued that Archer exaggerated Giddens’ “inseparability” claims. Giddens, as Stones argues, had given prominence to the duality of structure, albeit,

“with an emphasis on structure as both medium and outcome – where those outcomes then become the medium for subsequent actions” (Stones 2005, p. 54).

For this reason, ST implies that structures must either pre-exist or exist in the moment in which the human draws upon them.

### **3.2.2. Agency**

Agency is defined by Giddens as people’s capability, not just an intention to act, which is enabled by access to resources. These resources could be extant in material objects or physical conditions, but also power over other people. Such power is not necessarily understood in terms of domination, but rather one’s capacity to “intervene in the world”, or act otherwise, and one’s ability to “‘make a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events” (Giddens 1986, p. 14). In short, agency is the individual’s ability to make a change.

Structuration theory purports that all individuals have capabilities to make a change to their social, economic or religious structures, and these capabilities can vary contingent upon time and space. Giddens argued that even in situations in which individuals appear to “have no choice”, their power is only “confined by a range of specifiable circumstances”, and that their constraint should not always be seen as “the dissolution of action as such” (1986, p. 15). He also argues that human societies would not exist without human agency. Here, Giddens attracted some criticism in that ST affords too much voluntarism to human agents. Margaret Archer disagreed that conditions of action are no more than internalised rules that can be broken. She believed that Giddens overinflated the degrees of freedom for action (King 2010). However, Giddens had acknowledged the existence of social conditions that transcend individuals and argued that “society is not the creation of individual subjects” (1986, p. xl), but that



the individual agents reproduce social systems and their agency should not be seen as reduced (King 2010, p. 255).

He contested Archer's critique by asserting that actors do not create social systems, but they can only reproduce them or at best transform them, "remaking what is already made in the continuity of praxis" (King 2010, p. 171). Moreover, his definition of agency

"concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently" (King 2010, p. 9).

Furthermore, so that individuals are able to transform structures they need to be in possession of power associated with their knowledge and being knowledgeable of the social context they inhabit. Human agents also produce intended and unintended consequences through their actions, which can occur through unacknowledged (or taken-for-granted) conditions of action. These two elements:

"indicate how systemic features of a society may be maintained even though they escape the purposes of the actors engaged in their reproduction" (Jones et al. 2011, p. 170).

Knowledgeability, its quality, unacknowledged conditions of action and unintended consequences are all closely linked. The stronger is one's knowledgeability of context, the fewer unacknowledged conditions of action there are, and the less likely it is to experience unintended consequences of action (Stones 2005). For example, a man and a woman planning to get married will not necessarily be fully cognisant of their contribution to the reproduction of the heterosexual character of the family on the macro-societal level. On the other hand, for politicians or gamblers their knowledgeability and cognisance of context will be of utmost importance in order to avoid unintended consequences of action (Stones 2005).

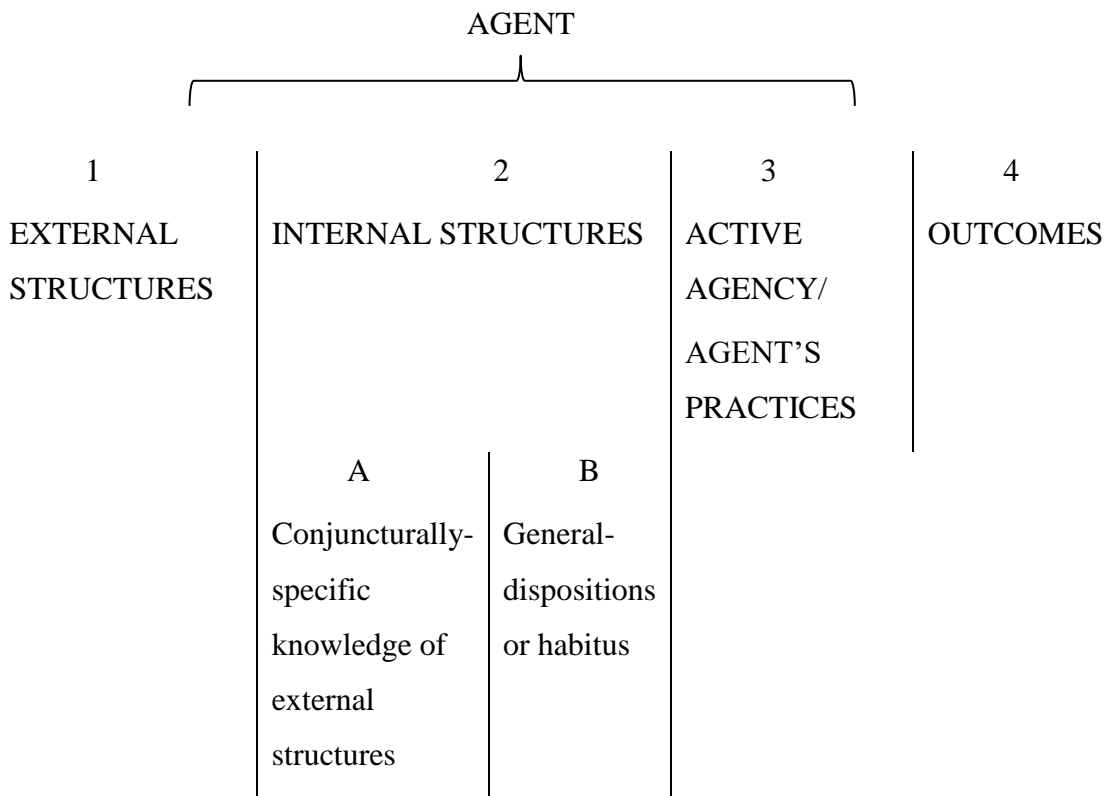
### **3.3. Stone's Quadripartite Nature of Structuration**

One of the major criticisms of Giddens' ST is that it suffers from being pitched at a largely philosophical level and is more restricted to the abstract level of ontology-in-general. Giddens himself admitted that his version of ST gives priority to ontological questions of *being* over epistemological questions of *knowing*. The implication of this

character of ST is that it becomes problematic when attempting to apply it to the substantive level to inform empirical analyses. This caveat neglects the needs required at the situated, empirical level that calls for these concepts to be spelt out in much finer detail in order to be applied successfully by researchers. To address this shortcoming, Stones has developed a considerable contribution to ST through sharpening its concepts, so that they are more conducive to a research investigation.

Secondly, Stones (2005) critiqued Giddens' assertion that humans have a significant ability "to choose to do otherwise" in his conception of agency. Stones argues that "real people are less free 'to do otherwise' than abstract agents" (Stones 2005, p. 112). This is because, Stones explains, people are not free from their wants, desires and principles that will ultimately guide their conduct. Therefore, Stones has developed two additional concepts concerning external structures: independent causal forces and irresistible causal forces. This addresses a debate to what extent humans are agentic or are they only agentic within limited options (Stones 2005).

Stone's QNS is a nuanced and amended view of structuration, which breaks down this theory into four separate but inter-related aspects of the duality of structure. Figure 2 illustrates his contribution.



**Figure 2. The quadripartite nature of structuration. Adapted from Stones (2005).**

Stones (2005) divided Giddens’ structures into two different types of structures: *external* and *internal*, and he added *active agency* and *outcomes* into the model. The next four sections will outline Stones’ theory of QNS adopted in this study as a theoretical lens.

### 3.3.1. External Structures

These structures pre-exist human agents that subsequently inhabit, reproduce or transform these position-practices (Stones 2005, p. 63). As in Giddens’s resources, external structures can be also at in-situ level and concern the action-horizon “as perceived by the agent and /or by the social researcher” (p. 84). External structures are the conditions of action and they often confront the agent-in-focus as a feature of an external reality. They exist independently from the agent-in-focus (e.g. women knowledge worker) and they can be material or ideational, human and non-human. These structures can constrain her, but on the other hand they can also provide her with possibilities and capabilities – they may enable or facilitate desired actions. External

structures can also be unacknowledged conditions of action, and they can also bring unintended consequences upon the agent-in-focus (Stones 2005).

### **3.3.1.1. Independent Causal Forces**

These forces describe the external structures that are completely autonomous from the agent-in-focus and her wants, desires and conduct. These external structures are constituted, reproduced and changed independently from the agent and pre-date them. The agent has no power to individually overthrow these structures or the physical capacity to control or resist even if they directly affect their lives (Stones 2005).

In the context of this study, these forces are expected to be existent for instance in the structures of organisation, the knowledge economy, legislation, and the labour market.

### **3.3.1.2. Irresistible Causal Forces**

These forces describe external structures that agents do have the power and physical capacity to resist, so as Giddens put it “to do otherwise”, but they *feel that* they are unable to do it in phenomenological terms (Stones 2005). The reason for this perceived powerlessness is the effect of the combined external structures and the agents’ “hermeneutic frame of meaning with all its wants, dispositions and ordering of concerns” (p. 112). As Thompson (1989 cited in Stones 2005) argues, this does not mean that the agents subjectively misrecognise their external conditions, but often, it is a realistic appraisal of the external conditions and the potential combination of sanctions, rewards and impacts these alternative choices could bring upon them. It means that people sacrifice their ideal sets of wants, desires and principles to protect themselves and others in order to achieve a more “realistic” state of affairs according to their internalised value system (Stones 2005). In other words, people have other options, but they are not prepared to sacrifice the desirable elements of the status quo.

In the context of organisational norms and expectations, women knowledge workers might recognise certain oppressive regimes or ideals to align with. However, because of their internalised value system or an apprehension of unwanted sanctions, they may be sacrificing their individual agenda.

In order for agents to *feel* able to resist the duress of these causal forces, they must possess three types of properties: *adequate power*, *adequate knowledge*, and *adequate critical distance*. Adequate power is required to be able to resist structures, however “without endangering the conditions of possibility for the realisation of core commitments” (Stones 2005, p. 115). Adequate knowledge concerns agents’ cognisance of possible courses of action and their possible consequences, and adequate critical distance is the ability to gain a requisite reflective and strategic distance from their conditions of action (2005).

For women knowledge workers in this study, their occupational power and capital might provide them with the perception that they are able to resist organisational constraints, and for instance, take up flexible working despite unsupportive organisational norms and expectations.

### **3.3.2. Internal Structures**

Internal structures concern the agents’ perception of the social situation and their knowledgeability of the structural characteristics of the social system that forms their action horizon (Auer and Welte 2013). These structures exist within agents and can be further divided into conjuncturally-specific and general-dispositional structures (similar to Bourdieu’s habitus).

#### **3.3.2.1. Conjuncturally-Specific Structures**

These structures refer to an agent’s knowledge of the specific context of action and the specific details and idiosyncratic exigencies of a particular context, for example, the knowledge of *this* particular work organisation, as opposed to the knowledge of *any* work organisation. This is in direct opposition to knowledge about any general external structures (e.g. any organisations, any routines, and all people). This knowledge is acquired over time and it may be enduring, built over a period of time and drawn on immediately, or much later. It directly relates to Giddens’ knowledge of interpretative schemes, power capacities and normative expectations and principles. Interpretative schemes refer to how agents interpret each other’s actions and utterances; power capacities concern agents’ knowledge about power resources and which agents-in-context to draw them from; and finally normative expectations (or norms) refer to

agents' alignment with the norm either voluntarily, or by pressure. Conjuncturally-specific structure is the agent's knowledge about the external structures and this knowledge can either enable or constrain the agent (Stones 2005).

In relation to women knowledge workers, these structures could signify these workers' knowledgeability about their place of work, specific organisational norms, co-workers' and managers' expectations, routines, organisation of practices and policies of FWA.

### **3.3.2.2. General-Dispositional Internal Structures**

In contrast to the conjuncturally-specific type, these structures are defined as a less contextualised type of knowledge of particular conditions of action. They are adaptable dispositions, orientations and social skills, and also what Bourdieu referred to as *habitus*. They serve as:

“methodologies for adapting generalised knowledge to a range of particular practices in particular locations in time and space” (Stones 2005, p. 88).

Different types of capital form part of the structuring process of the Bourdieusian *habitus* (social, cultural, economic and symbolic). An example of such structures could be the women knowledge workers' particular tacit knowledge of norms, rules, power, interpretative schemes, which they can draw on “naturally, without thinking”, or reflectively and reflexively.

### **3.3.3. Active Agency - Agent's Practices**

These concern actions that agents undertake by drawing on their internal structures, and they can be either routine or pre-reflective (taken-for-granted, not thought about), or strategic and critically thought through (Stones 2005). Agents are able to decide to carry out intentional actions, even against dominating rules and power structures, however the scope for this action much depends on their knowledgeability (Auer and Welte 2013). Moreover, agents' actions can be described as position practices and they can be characterised as processes of active positioning and passively becoming positioned at the same time. Thus, humans can “monitor, reflect on and react to practices; at the same time they may create new practices” (Auer and Welte 2013, p. 182).

Agency is everything that women knowledge workers in this study might be doing, ways of negotiating and managing FWA, and navigating organisational structures.

### **3.3.4. Outcomes**

Outcomes refer to the products of structuration in the form of external and internal structures and as events. These effects can result in change and elaboration, or reproduction and preservation of existing structures. These structures then act as conditions of action for the next cycle of structuration. These outcomes can have intended or unintended consequences (Stones 2005).

## **3.4. Structure and Agency in Women's Studies**

Women's studies (socialist-feminist theory studies) have been affected by broader social theory debates concerning the primacy of structure versus agency. The former approach de-emphasises women's capacity to enact their will, and the latter ignores the socio-historical context of women's struggles in the society and work organisations (Kahlert 2012). This creates a skewed focus on the constraining or enabling elements in women's lives. For example, discussions about *subjective* or *objective* careers and constraints or choices of women who navigate their work and life activities imply that these concepts are not necessarily compatible (Burke 1999; Carter and Silva 2010; Buse et al. 2013; Duberley and Carrigan 2013). As Karam et al. posit:

“the manner in which scholars choose to resolve the structure-agency tension has direct implications for the explanations they provide of how behaviours of individuals shape institutions” (2013a, p. 90).

The importance of this debate is constituted in the assumptions about the power of agency and structure in social life and how they influence our explanations of issues such as gender segregation and inequality. For instance, do we assign more explanatory power to the structural properties of capitalism and economic processes that ultimately result in gender segregation and inequality? Or do we instead shift the emphasis to the explanations rooted in patriarchy which often adopt an agency view? What results from these two viewpoints is either a reliance on gender and agency as prominent

explanations for inequalities, or an assumption of “gender-neutral” economic processes and structures that afford gender and agency a secondary role.

Structural approaches emphasise researching the social organisation of life rather than individuals, since it imposes irresistible constraints upon actors. This in turn results in the shift from preoccupation with the characteristics of male and female workers to the characteristics of social, economic or organisational structures (Wharton 1991). As individuals cannot be blamed for inequalities, such as gender segregation, consequently they have been neglected in empirical analyses and theorising. This abandonment of the agent as the unit of analysis was initially assumed conducive to feminist claims that gender segregation limits women’s choices, rather than being reflective of them. However, there are two main criticisms of structural approaches: firstly, they are unable to account for human actors and their capacity for agency, and secondly, they assume gender-neutrality of structures (Wharton 1991).

The first caveat refers to the failure of structural approaches to reveal which processes generate and sustain structures, and they neglect the exploration of the extent to which actors themselves contribute to the regenerative cycle of their own oppression. Moreover, it is not known how inequalities in the workplace and in the labour market may be disrupted and dismantled by the actors (Wharton 1991).

The second limitation refers to the assumed “gender-neutrality” of economic arrangements and the structural approaches inability to account for the role of gender in gender segregation. It is recognised that men and women experience different (unequal) consequences due to various social processes, but that these processes are not themselves gendered, which for instance contradicts Acker’s (1990) theory of gendered organisations. Moreover, subjectivity and the role of identity and resistance are neglected (Wharton 1991).

To circumvent these problems, socialist-feminist theorists have appropriated a dual-systems approach that aims to fuse capitalism and patriarchy into one “partnership” (Hartmann 1981). For example, Hartmann (1981) suggests that the synergy of capitalism and patriarchy results in men’s domination over women through the control of women’s labour. Wharton (1991) argues, however, that the problem with this formulation lies in treating these two social phenomena as two separate relations, that is, capitalism as existing outside of individuals, and patriarchy as instantiated in the



actions of men and women. As a result, gender domination is not recognised as a characteristic of the larger social structure (Acker 1990), but rather it is reductively treated as an action of men against women.

On the other hand, social actor-based approaches focus on men's exclusionary actions to retain male dominance, and their resistance to allowing women an equal footing. Thus, "gender interests" motivate men's and women's actions, and segregation is ultimately traced to patriarchy. However, these approaches have also been criticised.

It is argued that gender is historically dynamic and multidimensional, which means that male gender interests are unlikely to be universal and unchanging across space and time. Even if this was not the case, viewing men as omnipotent, that is, knowing what their gender interests are, is spurious (Wharton 1991). As a consequence, rather than exploring how historically-situated gender interests are constituted and reproduced, gender interests are afforded an ontological status, which is in turn reductive of men's (and women's) capacities for agency. Wharton argues that to overcome these problems we need to pay:

"attention to the conditions that make it possible for men and women to become social actors who form and implement decisions" (1991, p. 381).

Gendering does not happen in a vacuum, but is contingent upon historical conditions and Wharton (1991) suggests that a multitude of economic, social, and political processes shape gendered social relations. Therefore, she argues studies are needed to appreciate these conditions of action and explore how identities and the interests that emerge from these conditions become gendered (Wharton 1991). In relation to this study, these conditions are constituted in the external and internal structures that are at the same time historically and situationally contingent and reflective of gender interests extant in social, economic, organisational and legislative "action horizons" (see Chapter 3.5, Figure 3). More broadly, there are reflective of the current post-feminist discourse which assumes equilibrium between feminism and femininity through a synergy of the productive and reproductive processes in women's lives. At the same time, the agency of social actors is accounted for through the analysis of the strategic practices shaped by these conditions and idiosyncratic resources available to women knowledge workers.

This combined structure and agency perspective also addresses McNay's (2010) concerns with feminism, post-identity, and the problem of agency in empirical research. The exploration of agentic practices which are necessarily substantiated within a limited constituency of a subjective group of relatively privileged women knowledge workers enables us to better understand and theorise agency-in-situ, as opposed to an abstract agency. This subjectivist exploration may ultimately help to advance thought about the social conditions needed for effective political agency if we are to circumvent what McNay (2010) criticises as indeterminacy in post-identity theory. As she argues, if we eschew the exploration of self-identities because they are subjective, we will not be able to engage with

“individuals’ perceptions of themselves and their oppression in order to facilitate the type of active agency required to catalyse the shift to post-identity politics” (McNay 2010, p. 523).

At the same time, it is important to recognise that humans’ scope for innovative action and imagination is limited by the Bourdieusian habitus. Imagination of social actors bounds the possibilities for action, and this imagination is historically and situationally contingent. It is important to explore how certain courses of action (emancipatory or otherwise) are shaped by an individual’s understanding of their own identity and place in the world if we are to better understand potential barriers and facilitators to the mobilization of counter-hegemonic consciousness. This necessitates an interpretative perspective upon embodied experience, thus it is subjectivist, and it illuminates:

“the dispositional underpinnings of agency and leads to a potentially fuller understanding of oppression than is available in a purely objectivist account of power” (McNay 2010, p. 518).

Stones’ (2005) QNS can potentially throw light on the aspects of embodied agency in the context of the construction of social inequalities as it draws from Bourdieu’s habitus which McNay (2010) works with, in the form of his definition of structural conditions for action. This will allow us to conceive agency

“not in objectivist terms as an abstract category but as a form of practical and intentional engagement with the world” (p. 518).

McNay (2010) cites Laura Beth Nielson's research on legal regulation of speech as exemplar work which illuminates how self-identity and understanding affect agency in surprising ways. Nielson's study showed that the most likely victims of offensive speech (women and black people) were the ones opposed to the legal regulation of speech, and moreover, did not view such offence as a problem to be resolved through legal remedies. The author suggested that this reluctance could be explained by the convergent effects of overarching norms about appropriate feminine behaviour dictating the ideal of "good girls" that avoid harassment by behaving and dressing "correctly", and also norms about individualism and autonomy dictating to "stick up" for herself. McNay (2010, p. 519) argues that these norms are not experienced as external expectations, but are internalised as in habitus (and indeed Stones' (2005) QNS internal structures), which contribute to the "misrecognition or the partial complicity of the oppressed with their own oppression" (McNay 2010, p. 520). This exploration also sheds light onto the oft-neglected facet of agency in the subject-formation process which can be generative of oppression, rather than necessarily subversive and liberating (McNay 2003). McNay (2003) argues that agency is too often conceptualised as resistance, rather than both resistance and conformism, therefore, instead of exploring how women subvert subjectification, researchers need to focus on how actors also generate it.

As Wharton argues the challenge for social-feminist theorists is to:

"conceptualize capitalism and gender from a perspective that recognises these social relations as both motivator of action *and* a property of structural position" (1991, p. 375).

Thus similarly, if the aim of critical and feminist theorists (which is discussed in Chapter 4.2.) is to explore structural constraints that move beyond the social-feminists' usual suspects (capitalism and patriarchy) *and* the agentic processes which are both oppression generative and liberating, then an appropriate theoretical framework is needed. Some scholars (Felski 1989; Kahlert 2012) argue that ST offers an appropriate theoretical framework for gender and women's studies, as they view women as active agents within wider social systems of structures. Women should be recognised as creative and agentic human beings who can act, albeit within a limited structural scope. Rita Felski (1989, p. 224) suggests that ST and its duality (rather than dualism) of

structure and action would enable researchers to cease to conceptualise structures as exclusively coercive forces. She argues that women should not be reductively seen as “helpless victims of an all-pervasive patriarchal ideology” and that it is important to “account for the potential of women’s creativity and agency within limited options” (Felski 1989, p. 225).

Kahlert (2012) also argues that ST should strongly feature in gender and women's studies, because this theory makes it possible to attend to the multi-dimensional complexity of social practice:

“It enriches women’s and gender studies by reminding them that engendered structures are not just given, but are also actively made, and that they can be changed by different processes of social production and reproduction” (p. 65).

Therefore, the theoretical framework in this study seeks to address this tension of structure and agency, and it is underpinned by a duality of women’s position in work organisations. Namely, it recognises that the social systems women operate in can both enable and constrain their agency in the context of their organisational careers. Thus, ST appears to be an especially germane lens through which data analysis will be accomplished. This analytic framework appreciates structures which facilitate or hinder flexible working, and also the individual women knowledge workers’ agentic practices, and the consequences of these actions.

This study relies on a set of assumptions linked to the two main concepts discussed in the literature review: *woman knowledge worker* and *flexible working*, and as demonstrated these concepts can be problematic. Through a postfeminist discourse, women are conceptualised as knowing and capable *agents* who consciously *choose* to commit to home responsibilities by preference, or choose alternative career paths that can accommodate home, family, life and work domains (for a discussion see Lewis and Simpson 2017). It is also claimed that women have been enjoying increased status, autonomy and freedom in educational achievements, in labour market participation, through eschewing or delaying motherhood and climbing organisational hierarchies to reach top management levels (Glover and Kirton 2007; DoE 2016; HEPI 2016; UCAS 2016). The introduction of gender equality policies, WLB practices in organisations, and the recognition of alternative career models also carry a promise of women’s agency in enacting their life choices, rather than being solely constrained by structures

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(Hakim 2000; Mainiero and Sullivan 2005). For example, new career and career management theories emphasise the active role of the individual in shaping of their work-life decisions and career trajectories, such as the kaleidoscope career model (Mainiero and Sullivan 2005), boundaryless career (Arthur 1994), protean career (Hall 1996), and preference theory (Hakim 2000).

Specifically women knowledge workers have a significant scope for *action* afforded by their unique social positioning underpinned by the knowledge worker status (Stanworth 1998; Castells 2000). This unique status is founded on their human capital, occupational tacit knowledge (French and Raven 1959), relative freedom and autonomy, and privilege as compared to, for example, the more oppressed working-class women in precarious employment (Warren 2000; Pai 2004; Lautsch and Scully 2007). Work organisations are advised to attract and retain female talent to address talent shortages, develop a competitive advantage and motivate their staff through a promise of enhanced WLB. The social justice agenda and the legislative structures that promote inclusion, equality and women's ascension in employment also appear to be on the women's side (Equal Opportunities Commission [EOC] 2017; ACAS 2016). All these structural factors combined constitute a relatively enabling context for women knowledge workers to thrive.

However, women and their position within the society have been traditionally constrained by social structures, such as essentialist gender differences, gendered organisations, the masculinity versus femininity dichotomy, patriarchy, capitalism, paid work, the state, and gender role expectations (Oakley 1972; Kanter 1987; Acker 1990; Walby 1990; Acker 2006). There is also broader consensus as to the existence of social and organisational structures restricting women's status in organisations and in the wider society (Alvesson and Billing 1997; Williams 2000). Therefore, it is recognised that also women knowledge workers are constrained by social systems in a number of ways.

Firstly, they still have to align to gender role norms, which become more acute when they become mothers, as well as to postfeminist and neoliberal expectations of "having-it-all" and engaging in paid employment, preferably with a satisfying career (Ezzedeen and Ritchey 2009; Pomerantz et al. 2013). Moreover, in the context of knowledge work they are often employed as organisational members, rather than

freelance, boundaryless workers (Donnelly 2009b). This makes them vulnerable to organisational normative and structural constraints, such as inequality regimes and ideal worker norms (Acker 1990; Williams 2000; Acker 2006). Additionally, these workers are unable to easily signal productivity and competence as knowledge work and its performance are notoriously ambiguous, and as Alvesson (2001) suggested, knowledge workers rely on reproducing an expected occupational norm to demonstrate their value to the organisation.

Secondly, the flexible working legislation can be perceived as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, this state intervention attempts to remove barriers for women to paid employment and WLB by strongly endorsing flexible working framed within a business-case agenda. It encourages and enables both employees and employers to incorporate flexibility in organisations. However, at the same time, its legislative “right to request” element that legitimises flexible working returns the bargaining power back to the employer, as rejections of these requests are equally strongly legitimised in the business-case logic. Moreover, this right to request does not automatically entitle to flexible working, and only one request can be submitted per year, which arguably serves to protect the employer (Den Dulk et al. 2011; BIS 2014; ACAS 2016).

Some studies focusing on women and gender issues within work organisations have argued for ST to be used as a meta-theoretical lens (Kirby and Krone 2002; Nielsen et al. 2004; Auer and Welte 2013; Karam et al. 2013; Schimpf et al. 2013; Afiouni and Karam 2014; Turner and Norwood 2014). For example, ST has been used in a study exploring how a discourse of work-family benefits may be reinforcing and undermining work-family policy implementation and utilisation (Kirby and Krone 2002). The authors leveraged ST to demonstrate that the discourse reproduced organisational and social expectations of gender and work roles and that this process inhabited ordinary, day-to-day routines and interactions between people. Similarly, Turner and Norwood (2014) drew upon ST to illuminate the meanings of breastfeeding and organisational breastfeeding support of women who returned to work after maternity leave. They explored how these meanings challenged or reproduced social systems that asserted the incompatibility of breastfeeding and working. They found that the women’s discourse of breastfeeding support as a “privatised privilege” reproduced broader cultural discourses that contributed to the marginalisation of women’s bodies in

the context of work organisations. The authors argued that the constructed meanings of breastfeeding of the women were the outcomes of the material and discursive structures.

In another study by Karam et al. (2013) focusing on the concept and discourse of WLB, ST allowed the researchers to move beyond the bi-polar structure (work vs. life) and process arguments (balancing), and facilitated the exploration of WLB as a capability to navigate between structure and agency and the interaction between them (agentic process). The authors were able to illuminate that in order to achieve WLB women actively sought to conform to, as well as change, a multitude of institutionally assigned structures, through a number of day-to-day cognitions, behaviours and actions (Karam et al. 2013).

Stones' QNS was used to analyse the capabilities of work councillors as equal-opportunities agents, and the barriers and facilitators to equal-opportunities programmes (Auer and Welte 2013). The authors were able to recognise the importance of the social positioning and the status of knowledgeable and reflexive agents, and that their scope for agency also depended on the objective context within which they found themselves in.

In another study conducted in the context of female academics and parental leave policies, Schimpf et al. (2013) adopted ST to understand how these women were constrained and enabled by the policy, informal structures, outside agencies, and actors. By using ST the authors were able to illuminate that community and support between the academics created "mini" structures that reproduced or challenged the more formal "macro" structures.

The use of ST in the above studies enabled the researchers to account for the possibility that humans are constrained by social structures, but at the same time they are recognised to have "the capability to 'make a difference' to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events" (Giddens 1986, p. 14). As Auer and Welte put it:

"The adequacy and virtuosity of using organisational structures depend on the agents' individual biographies and abilities as well as on specific contexts. The knowledge or awareness of agents is always allocated unequally between agents and limited by unacknowledged conditions" (2013, p. 181).

Since this study analyses the experiences of flexible working of the relatively agentic and *knowledgeable* women knowledge workers, drawing upon ST as a

theoretical lens allows for an exploration of these actors' intricacies of negotiating, experiencing and managing FWA; and their dependence on structures, such as human capital and flexible working legislation. ST enables to illuminate how in and through these activities women reproduce the conditions that constitute their organisational and social environment (Giddens 1986).

At this stage, I feel that it is important to add that this research does not intend to test the applicability of ST or QNS in the study's context. Instead, this research is inductive to enable the participating women knowledge workers to *voice* their perceptions and experiences of utilising FWA. At the same time, it is expected that the findings from this examination will provide the basis for a new and unique theory which will fill knowledge gaps in relation to the experiences of flexible women knowledge workers. Therefore, the use of ST in this study is partly inspired from the works of Pozzebon and colleagues who argued that ST can be meta-theoretical and used:

“as a broad theoretical framework within which other social theories *can* be located and to which other perspectives *can* be related” (Shanks et al. 1999 cited in Pozzebon et al. 2014, p. 234, my emphasis).

Moreover, the choice of ST has also been carefully considered in terms of its compatibility with this study's philosophical underpinning, i.e. Critical Theory (CT). This methodology is concerned with exploring processes of social regulation, unequal distribution of power, and unmasking domination (Morrow and Brown 1994) and ST provides a means to achieving this goal by investigating such processes and structures (Veliquette 2013). ST offers an opportunity to examine “the role of power and domination in structuring processes that underlie organisations” (Poole and McPhee 2005, p. 180).

### **3.5. Theoretical Structure and Research Questions**

A unique theoretical framework guiding this study is proposed which captures both external and internal structures that may be constraining, or that the agents can leverage in order to engage in agentic processes to negotiate FWA. It also allows for an exploration of women knowledge workers' negotiation of FWA, experiences, perceptions and ways of managing FWA through day-to-day, routinized actions. Furthermore, it facilitates our understanding of how these practices reproduce or change



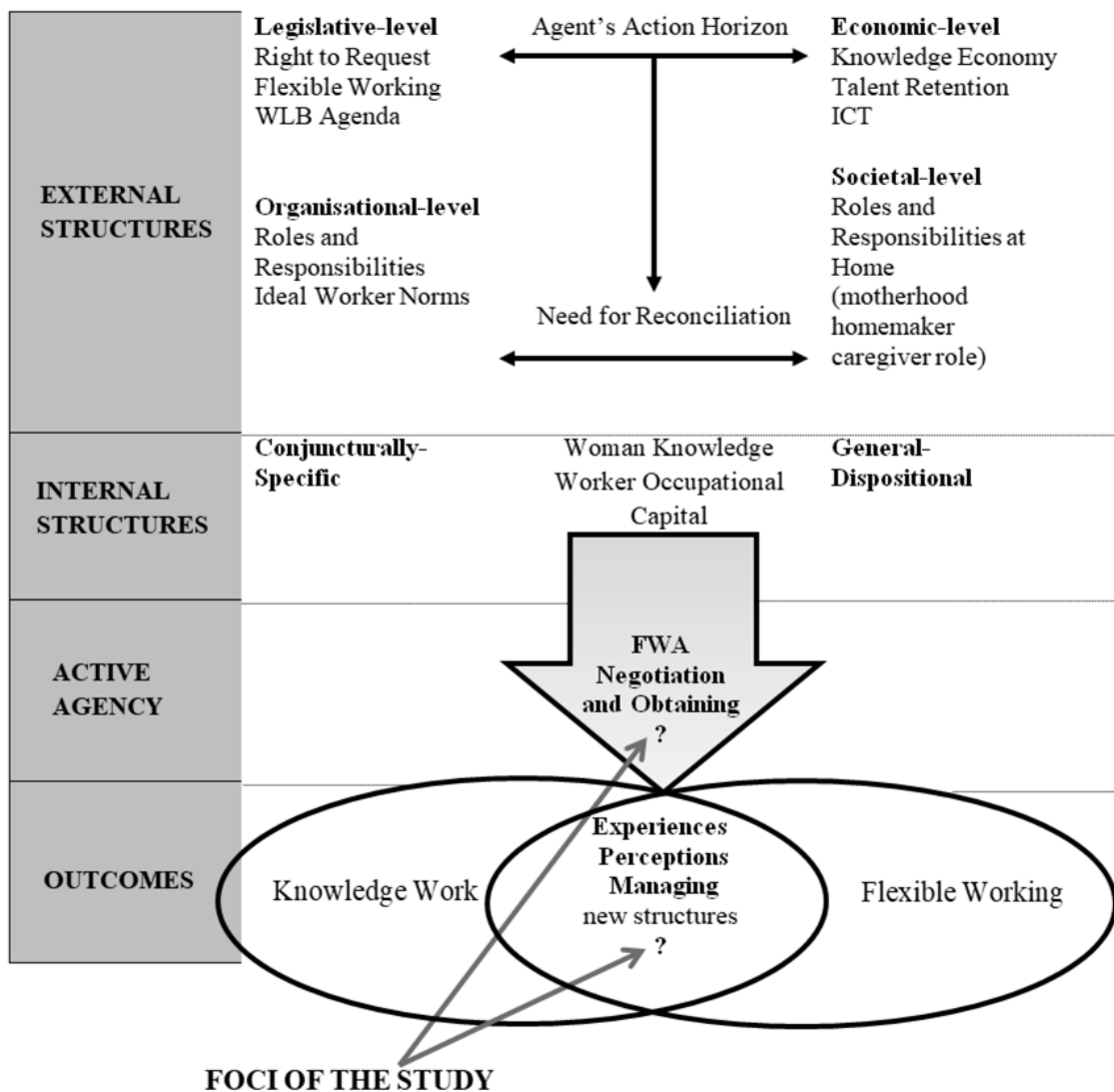
the existing structures. The question worth addressing is whether flexible working and women's occupational advantage gained through their expertise (provided by knowledge work) enable them to circumvent organisational structures when negotiating and utilising FWA? Or are women knowledge workers actively remaking these structures? Therefore, the following research questions have been developed to address the issue of negotiating, obtaining, perceiving, experiencing and managing FWA:

**RQ (1): How do women knowledge workers negotiate and obtain FWA through both structure and agency?**

**RQ (2): How do women knowledge workers experience, and manage FWA on a daily basis through both structure and agency?**

**RQ (3): What do they perceive as the consequences of utilising FWA in relation to these women's lives and careers?**

As suggested by Nielsen et al. (2004) the interpretation of findings is based not only on the examination of interview data, but also on the researcher's reference to the wider context. In this particular study, this context relates to the idiosyncratic characteristics of knowledge work, the legislative landscape of FWA policies, and its underlying business case agenda (talent retention and business-related outcomes). On the other hand, the study also appreciates the scholarship which has recognised the dichotomy of work (public) and life/family (private) spheres, how organisations are gendered, which is reified in ideal worker norms (Acker 1990; Williams 2000; Blair-Loy 2003). These structural elements are integrated into the theoretical framework which adopts ST (specifically Stones' QNS) as a guiding architecture, which distinguishes external and internal structures, active agency and outcomes (Figure 3).



**Figure 3. Theoretical framework developed for this study.**

ST remains an infrequently used theoretical lens in gender and women studies (for exceptions see: Kirby and Krone 2002; Nielsen et al. 2004; Auer and Welte 2013; Karam et al. 2013; Schimpf et al. 2013; Afiouni and Karam 2014; Turner and Norwood 2014), despite its ability to attend to the multidimensional complexity of social practice (Kahlert 2012). ST facilitates analysis of structures and illuminates how they are actively made and remade by active agency. Thus, it enables researchers to conceptualise structures as both coercive and enabling forces, but also, it attends to recognising humans' creativity and agency within them (Felski 1989).

In the context of this study, *external structures* (*action horizon* or *independent causal forces*) pre-date agents. These are structures such as laws (i.e. the right to request legislation), economic structure (i.e. the knowledge economy facilitating knowledge

work, WLB/talent retention agenda, the significance and dependence on the ICT), historical situatedness (i.e. women's ascension in education and employment). External structures are also *irresistible causal forces* that agents face on a daily basis, such as societal-level gender roles (i.e. women's motherhood, care work), and organisational normativities and structures (i.e. gendered organisations, the ideal worker norm).

*Internal structures* encompass women knowledge workers' human and social capital, tacit knowledge, skills, experience, autonomy, and trust. These characteristics are framed as the *woman knowledge worker's occupational capital* and they are constituted through *conjuncturally-specific* and *general-dispositional internal structures*.

Women knowledge workers experience a need for reconciliation of productive (work) and reproductive (family) responsibilities and seek to work flexibly as a solution for this dual need. Through *active agency* they *negotiate* and *obtain FWA*. This results in their day-to-day behaviours, practices and cognitions drawn from stocks of their internal structures and influenced by their external structures. As such, agency acts as the medium and the outcome of structure. As actors engage in practices that are enabled by structures, there is a continuous interplay between agency and social systems that are made up by a multitude of structures. Rather than solely focusing on structure or agency, this study attempts to understand how women knowledge workers engage in this structuration process and what these practices are, where both structure and agency are given equal importance (Giddens 1986).

*Outcomes* signify the intended and unintended consequences of structuration in the form of further structures and as events. These effects flow from the unique combination of *knowledge work* and *flexibility*, and the key focal point of this research is the exploration of how this combination is experienced, perceived and managed by women.

### **3.6. Summary**

This chapter has proposed this study's theoretical framework. Firstly, the chapter presented ST as originally defined by Giddens (1986), and then Stones' (2005) updated version of ST - QNS. I have suggested why ST is a helpful lens for studying the experiences of women in the context of work organisations. I outlined that dualism of

structure and agency either conceptualises social systems primarily as constraining and limiting women, their choices and agency, or it overemphasises women's agency and freedom to the detriment of recognising structural hindrances. This study moves beyond this dualism and explores the duality of structure and agency in women knowledge workers' experiences of FWA, and recognises that women may have available options for agency, albeit within structural limits of social systems. Secondly, I demonstrated how my study's key concepts of women knowledge workers and FWA are incorporated into the theoretical framework, and why it is apposite to see these two elements as both agentic and constraining. I proposed three research questions guiding this study and a visual representation of the theoretical framework consisting of structures, agency, and outcomes. The next chapter presents the research plan, the methodology employed in this study, the method, and the data collection and analysis strategies. I also introduce the participants, their descriptive characteristics and backgrounds. Lastly, I consider some ethical concerns and describe how I deal with them throughout the research process.

## Chapter 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Introduction

This chapter guides the reader through the research plan of this study and is divided into five main sections: methodology, method, data collection with its concomitant ethical considerations, and data analysis. Firstly, I focus on the ontological and epistemological issues relating to social science research and outline my own philosophical stance given my previous experience, and most importantly the study's research aims. The outlined key assumptions behind the research will explain why I have chosen an epistemological approach which emphasises the importance of the perspectives of women knowledge workers themselves. Then, I introduce the methodological stance which I have taken in this research study, i.e. Critical Theory that seeks to uncover and critique existing social relations, interactions, and structures. Moreover, I discuss why I also associate myself with feminism in this study and show why ST is particularly well-matched with Critical Theory. The second part of this chapter elaborates further on interview as a means to knowledge production, and evaluates semi-structured interviews to address the study's aims and research questions stated in the previous chapter. The rationale for the semi-structured interview method will be explained along with its advantages and limitations. I also outline details of my approach to data collection and introduce my research participants. Then my ethical considerations and ways of dealing with these issues are presented. Lastly, I outline my approach to data analysis through which I have developed codes and concepts.

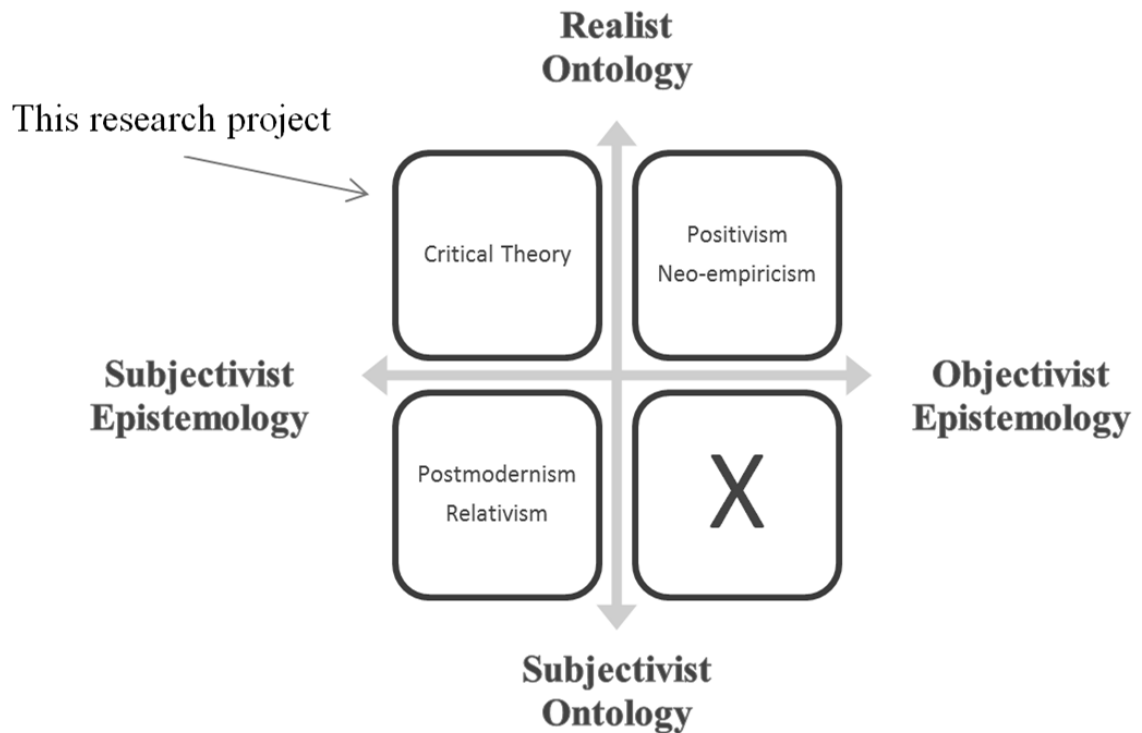
### 4.2. Methodology

In order to determine the methodological stance underpinning this study, it is important to understand what the research intends to develop, as the choice of research strategies, designs and methods ought to be considered together with the aims of the research in question (Bryman and Bell 2007). As discussed in the previous chapter, the research **critically examines the perceptions of women knowledge workers who work flexibly in order to better understand how they obtain, manage and experience FWA.**

### **4.2.1. Ontology and Epistemology**

Questions of ontology are concentrated around the nature of reality, and accordingly, social ontology is concerned with the nature of social units and social phenomena. The major question here is whether such units and phenomena are objective and have a reality that is external to us, humans, or whether they are merely constructed by the social agents through their perceptions and actions. Objectivists posit that there exists one independent reality that is separate from the conscious minds of social actors. In contrast, subjectivists (or constructivists) argue that there is no one reality that can be ascertained, and the researcher can produce only a tentative version of social reality that is not definitive (Morrow and Brown 1994; Bryman and Bell 2007). It is important to highlight, however, that this polarization of the two contrasting ontological positions has to be understood in conjunction with different epistemological commitments that explain how knowledge is obtained.

Epistemological questions are concerned with what we regard as acceptable knowledge, and whether we believe that the social world should be studied in the same way as the natural world, or whether the two are fundamentally different (Bryman and Bell 2007). The reason why ontologies and epistemologies are so tightly linked is that it is impossible to propose how to study social entities without our prior understanding of their nature. Epistemology can be broadly divided into two commitments: objectivist and subjectivist, however they do not necessarily have to follow the commitments of ontological realism and constructivism respectively (Bryman and Bell 2007). For instance, Critical Theory is characterised by a realist status of social reality, and a subjectivist epistemology. Therefore, a subjectivist epistemology can be wedded to either subjectivist or realist ontological assumptions. Incompatible, however, is an objectivist epistemology and a subjectivist ontological assumption, that is we cannot assume we can produce one objectively observable knowledge about multiple social realities that exist subjectively within a social actor (Johnson et al. 2006). Both subjectivist ontological and epistemological assumptions characterise postmodern or relativist methodological positions, whereas objectivist (realist) ontology combined with an objectivist epistemology exemplify positivist and neo-empiricist approaches (Figure 3).



**Figure 3. The study's methodological position. Adapted from Johnson et al. (2006).**

Traditional realism is most commonly associated with positivist (objective) epistemologies that pursue the discovery of invariant laws concerned with observable empirical facts and objective structures (Johnson et al. 2006). Subjectivist epistemologies, on the other hand, largely assume that social scientific knowledge flows from the interpretations of the meanings and consciousness of humans, which are generally excluded from positivist epistemologies (Morrow and Brown 1994, p. 54). Proponents of subjectivist epistemologies fundamentally disagree with the positivist stance, and argue that viewing humans as unthinking machines and slaves to external forces is deterministic, and it does not recognise that humans are reflexive social actors capable of thinking, making choices and decisions (Johnson et al. 2006).

Objectivist epistemologies, moreover, assume that it is possible to achieve a “god’s eye view” of the society, a “view from nowhere”, and that the only source of social scientific knowledge should be our sensory experience of the objects of an external social reality. Their proponents argue that it is possible to reach the ultimate truth of the reality that is constituted through facts, and that facts can be neutrally observed. Subjectivist epistemologies, on the other hand, renounce it is possible to reach a neutral observational language, or that objective knowledge can be reached by direct

sensory experience. Consequently, any knowledge produced by social scientists can only be defined as a product of social construction (Johnson et al. 2006).

The uniqueness of the position of Critical Theory in the above grid (Figure 3) is characterised by a realist ontological assumption, but a subjective epistemological commitment. This is linked to Kantian philosophy postulating that *there exists* a reality independent of human subjective perception. It is *not possible*, however, for humans to be certain of its existence (Kant and Meiklejohn 2009). In other words, there is an external social reality that science can never know save through human phenomenal worlds (Johnson et al. 2006). In relation to this research, I agree that there is an external reality, but the researcher and the researched can only see it through their human minds, therefore knowledge is only possible through their subjective understanding of it. This stance is characterised by the view that “reality as-it-is” can never be known by science, because humans are influenced by intersubjective *a priori* knowledge of “realities-for-us” (Johnson et al. 2006, p.147). All interpretations that social scientist offer are value-laden, as it is impossible to claim value freedom, or to be able to escape values that we bring into a research project. Therefore, even though we are unable to reach one objective reflection of reality, collectively through research we can come closer to understanding how this reality is experienced, as themes emerge in the data across a number of participants' stories (Silverman 2013).

My ontological commitment, not only throughout this research, but also my view of the world, is that social actors and their organisations, which are the subject matter of the social sciences, differ profoundly from the matter of the natural sciences, and as such they should be studied mindful of human idiosyncrasy, as opposed to following the logic of the natural order (Bryman and Bell 2007). Unlike the matter of the natural sciences, humans are conscious, and they experience and interpret the world through meanings that they construct. Therefore:

“there is a fundamental gulf between our concepts and empirical reality (...) [and] we cannot really know or represent ‘reality’ directly, because our understanding of it is mediated by the constructs of our consciousness (...); all we can really know is subjectivity and consciousness, because they are immediately accessible to us, whereas nature is outside of us, hence only indirectly knowable” (Morrow and Brown 1994).



I agree with the stance that the basis of social scientific knowledge ought to be the meanings and consciousness of social actors, which are largely excluded from positivist epistemology (Morrow and Brown 1994). Therefore, in terms of the methodological stance, I associate myself with a realist ontological and a subjectivist epistemological status (Johnson et al. 2006). As Guba put it “reality can never be apprehended, only approximated” (Guba 1990, p. 22). In other words, in relation to this research, we (social scientists) are unable to establish what is “real”, because all humans are subjective, however, we are able to give *voice* to the participating social actors (e.g. women knowledge workers), and let them speak about how they experience and perceive different phenomena (e.g. FWA, careers). Through our understanding of the consequences of these phenomena, we will be able to approximate the reality. I believe that the most powerful social groups:

“are most likely to be heard and that their interpretation of reality is more likely to be accepted (...), therefore [ordinarily] the powerful have *voice*: they are more likely to speak, to be heard and to be acknowledged” (Mackenzie Davey and Liefoghe 2004, p. 181).

Therefore, **by interviewing the less powerful** [women workers vs. employers], the researcher might be able to uncover power relations and how work practices (such as FWA) may cumulatively maintain or reproduce imbalances of power or gender inequalities (Mackenzie Davey and Liefoghe 2004). It is imperative to understand, however, that the individual’s view of themselves and the world is influenced by social and historical forces and that this view may be ideological (Kincheloe and McLaren 2008). Ideological in this context means influenced by

“shared ideas or beliefs which serve to justify the interests of dominant groups (...), since [they] serve to legitimise the differential power held by groups” (Giddens 2001, p. 691).

As the method of data collection in this study is interview, it is also important to acknowledge that “language is central to the formation of subjectivity (conscious and unconscious awareness)” (Kincheloe and McLaren 2008, p. 436). Therefore, the epistemological position of this study is subjective, and objectivity is neither sought, nor possible.

Moreover, it is important to stress that the study seeks to **give voice to women** in light of the above methodological stance, and although potentially valuable, it is not the

study's aim to draw differences between men's and women's experiences. I will discuss in the following sections why I believe viewing women as the less powerful is appropriate in this project, even though I recognise that the women I interview are in some ways more privileged than others.

#### **4.2.2. Critical Theory and the Qualitative Approach**

Why have I decided to methodologically underpin my research project in Critical Theory (CT)? As I present in this chapter, CT is concerned with critically appraising social realities through the medium of interpretative approaches to research (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2009). The mainstream approach to research in business schools tends to originate from managerialist modernist approaches to organisation theory. Modernist notions of the “ordered world” and the ability to manage chaos out of organisations with rational, scientific, objective research, bureaucracy, and technology all promise efficiency, effectiveness and human motivation micro-managed to meet the corporate agenda. However, critics argue that this approach to research benefits only those in power (shareholders, leaders, managers, men) and the concerns and issues of the less powerful (here: women workers) remain obscured and unvoiced. This neglect results from the modernist epistemology, which seeks to study reality in objective and structured ways, but at the same time, the issues of human action and human experiences become lost. Emotions are irrelevant aspects in organisations as they are irrational and should be left behind (McAuley et al. 2013).

My experience working in KIS organisations both as a subordinate and a manager for over a decade before commencing this study, has certainly influenced my methodological stance. I have experienced many aspects of how modernist organisations operate. I do appreciate the importance of understanding corporations in new ways to be able to adapt to contemporary business issues, such as fluctuating labour markets, and the need to minimise costs and risks. However, perhaps I have also witnessed a more brutalist face of business organisations which through their seemingly rational, logical, and reason-driven practices fail to attend to the needs, desires and emotions of its workers who are reified and become anonymous “things” or “resources” (McAuley et al. 2013). Therefore, with a clear conscience, I would not be able to pursue with integrity a purely managerialist approach to my research, precisely because I have

experienced being a small cog in a much larger and intimidating wheel of the corporate body. Thus, adopting the CT stance seems to me the most organic and intuitive decision, but it also enables me to be transparent. This does not mean that I should allow my personal values to distort the conduct of the research, but this critical reflection allows me to be vigilant against such issues through self-consciousness about my own values (Morrow and Brown 1994).

Following this choice of methodology, this study is *critical* due to three characterising purposes. Firstly, it is concerned with unveiling ideological mystifications in social relations, which is an immediate common sense meaning of the term *critical* that implies a negative evaluation. CT, however, is also *critical* in two other fundamental ways. It is characterised by the critique of the presupposed ontologies and epistemologies (the nature of reality, knowledge, and explanation), but also:

“the critique of self-reflexivity of the investigator and the linguistic basis of representation” (Morrow and Brown 1994, p. 7).

In other words, CT’s aim is to uncover and critique existing social relations, interactions, and structures, but also to realise that there might be certain taken-for-granted methodological approaches (such as positivism) to social science that need to be challenged, and that the role of the researcher and the values they bring cannot be underestimated. Language, moreover, is a medium of knowledge representation, and as such knowledge is also socially constructed.

Whilst in the domain of natural sciences it is reasonable to aim to establish regularities and causal connections, it should not be the case in the context of social sciences, a stance characterising CT. This is because there may be the danger that such knowledge could “lock people into fixed and objectified categories” rather than engendering progressive development (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2009, p. 156). The intention of my research project is not to confirm how many women knowledge workers utilise FWA, or whether they are able to reply “strongly agree” or “undecided” to questions regarding their satisfaction with WLB or career. Instead, my study aims to illuminate how women negotiate and experience FWA; how they manage flexibility on a daily basis, and what perceptions of these arrangements they have. This provides a significant scope for allowing the participants to elaborate on their subjective insights,

and it also creates conditions that foster illuminating potential power imbalances that women experience in work organisations.

CT views certain methods of data collection as implying some forms of social relation that may not be judged equitable, therefore CT *tends to* use qualitative methods in order to weaken, or in some cases even abolish, the division between the researcher and the subjects (Hammersley 2012). This study uses a **qualitative approach** to not only give women an opportunity to openly speak about their experiences of FWA, but also allow them to discuss related issues that might have otherwise escaped my attention if this study was designed as a survey (Morrow and Brown 1994). This study's approach emphasises words over and above quantification and data analysis. While it is expected that the produced findings may prove to be context-specific to knowledge work and relevant to a limited constituency, there is an increased opportunity to explore "original and fresh perspectives" that may have otherwise remained hidden with a more standardised approach (King and Horrocks 2010, p. 21).

Critical Theorists are interested in the knowledge that has an emancipatory power, and in the knowledge that promotes autonomy, clarification, a sense of responsibility, and a democratic process which is achieved through social science research. Even though CT perceives modern humans to be conformist and passive objects in the face of the machinery of society and rationality in its dominant forms, it simultaneously recognises that humans are capable of self-reflection and critical questioning which may lead to their autonomy (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2009, p. 159). This is captured in this study by the adoption of ST which enables an analysis of both structures and agency available to be deployed by the women knowledge workers (Giddens 1986).

CT is, therefore, not necessarily based on negative views of the society. It is optimistic in that our critical consciousness enables us to question structures, ideas, systems and procedures, which can lead to a positive change of "absurd" phenomena of the contemporary times. Such phenomena are frequently assumed to be good, neutral or right, but only through meticulous questioning may we be able to reveal their nature (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2009, p. 160). Overall, it is the emancipatory cognitive interest that according to Critical Theorists, should guide social science, which should strive to avoid an uncritical reproduction of dominant paradigms (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2009).

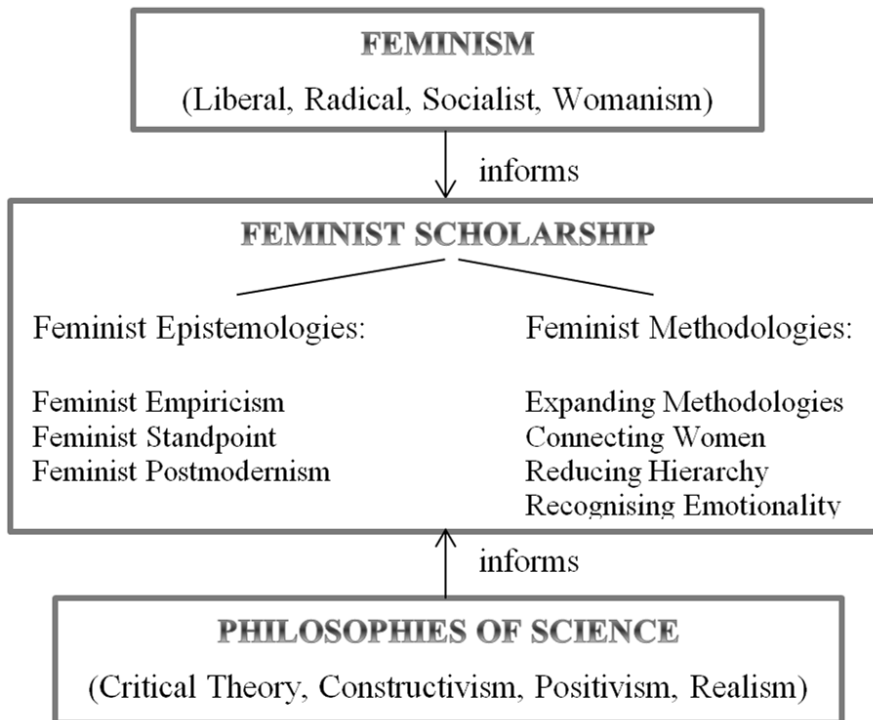
The current study is guided by the above principles of CT in that it is committed to scrutinising and questioning how seemingly good organisational practices, such as FWA, may be contributing to the reinforcing or perpetuating of gender inequality. If the researched social order is found to be unjust, the way that CT achieves change is through the liberation of the subjects from this social order, and this happens through the “enlightenment of the subjects of [CT]” (Fay 1993, p. 34). This is possible through providing the women an opportunity to see themselves differently to the way in which they see themselves currently in order to enable change. This can occur for instance through facilitating self-reflection during the research interview process about careers and the use of flexibility in organisations; or through sharing the findings of this research with the researched and with the wider academic and non-academic audience.

### **4.2.3. Feminist Methodologies**

This research project has also important associations with feminist methodology that ought to be discussed here. Studying women in the context of possibly gendered organisational structures and practices, such as FWA, carries some characteristics of feminist methodologies. Firstly, however, I attempt to summarise what feminist methodologies are, before I discuss their links with the current project and with CT.

Feminist methodologies are described in the plural here, since there is no single all-encompassing feminist methodology, but many possible approaches. There are, however, some important features that feminist methodologies have in common. The recurrent issue in feminist methodologies lies in the “particular theoretical, political and ethical concerns that make these varied approaches to social research distinctive” (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002, p. 2-3). Specifically, feminist knowledge can be said to be grounded in the following four key areas: (1) experiences of gendered social life; (2) judgements about the justice of social relationships; (3) theories of power; and lastly, (4) the morality of social investigation. Identifying these characteristics does not imply that all feminist researchers agree what the four areas actually mean and/or what the consequences of each aspect are. However, it is possible for feminist researchers to “potentially negotiate common moral and political positions” (2002, p. 3). The above features of feminist methodologies are built upon the movement of feminism more generally, but it is also important to understand feminism and its different underpinning

ideologies, and also the different philosophies of science that have influenced or informed feminist scholarship (Figure 4).



**Figure 4. Feminist scholarship. Adapted from Campbell and Wasco (2000).**

The founding value of feminism in the English speaking world by the end of the nineteenth century was the advocacy of women’s rights. By the end of the twentieth century, feminism was concerned with recognising that the relationship between men and women was political and that power was gendered. Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) argue that recently feminism has been trying to unite women as having some common political interests, and therefore aiming to act together in order to change potentially unfair social relations. Liberation, emancipation and social transformation may be today’s feminism’s major intentions. However, it is unclear what these notions mean and how we achieve them, because of the diversity of women, their social class, status, race, religion, and what it means to be dominated or oppressed for each individual group. These intentions may have extremely different meanings across different social divisions, and one universal aim or strategy is difficult to achieve. It is therefore impossible to arrive at one general definition of feminism, and consequently, one feminist methodology does not exist.

Feminist scholarship, such as feminist empiricism, standpoint theory and postmodernism do unite, nevertheless, in their overarching aim to eradicate sexist bias in social research, and to listen to women's voices, because it recognises that women's experiences are a legitimate source of knowledge. Historically, it has been highlighted by feminist researchers that scientific methods championed by patriarchal agencies limited the exploration of truth by rigid and prescriptive frameworks and structured surveys that did not allow sense-making of women's lives and experiences. The process of feminist scholarship, therefore, can be characterised by four factors (Campbell and Wasco 2000). Firstly, there is an emphasis on including qualitative research methods (expanding methodologies), in order to "challenge the positivist exclusion of emotions and values from the research process" (Hesse-Biber 2007, p. 8). Secondly, embracing group-level approach to data collection (connecting women), such as focus groups, and allowing women to co-engage in discussing existing issues that affect their lives, is another characterising feature. Thirdly, feminist scholarship aims to abolish (reduce) the hierarchy between the researcher and the researched, in order to eradicate the positivist ideal that the researcher is in charge of his or her research objects. This would allow the researcher to promote trust and disclosure, and to achieve the fourth characterising aspect of feminist methodologies, that is the ability to "recognise and reflect upon the emotionality of women's lives" (Campbell and Wasco 2000, p. 783).

This research project is in line with three out of the above four characteristics of feminist methodologies. In particular, it aims to allow the participating women to *voice* their experiences about their lives, careers and workplaces through the medium of a qualitative interview. This is also:

"because qualitative data are organized and evaluated subjectively in terms of themes, categories, and new concepts, not statistical significance" (Campbell and Wasco 2000, p. 784),

and so they are considered to be more appropriate for capturing and women's stories as experiences which are legitimate sources of knowledge (Campbell and Wasco 2000). Secondly, as a researcher, I have also tried to minimise the potential distance between myself and the women that I interviewed, in order to establish a more trusting environment and rapport, but also to signal that the participants are more important, and their stories worth listening to. This helps to break away from the traditional view that

the researcher is the “all-knowing” expert, and the participant has no insight into any aspect of the study. I often discussed some of my findings and also the FWA trends in the literature with my participants after the interview, if they showed their interest in the project, or wanted to know what was emerging from the data so far.

I also recognise the interviewed women’s emotionality of their lives. Although, the research questions do not deal with any harrowing topics, such as domestic violence, which are some of the recurring feminist subjects (Pizzey and Forbes 1974; Dobash and Dobash 1979; Brownmiller 2005), this research asks questions that may ultimately lead to the participants emotionally recounting their relationships with partners, and everyday challenges at work and home. I have reflected on the ways in which these women talked about their family and work roles, and recognise that they often described their lives using words such as love, obsession, and sadness, which helped me to appreciate the intensity in which they reflected on their daily responsibilities.

#### **4.2.4. Feminist Theory and Critical Theory**

Feminist theory (FT) and CT have many commonalities, such as their focus on social and economic inequalities and their shared agenda of promoting system change (Martin 2003). As Fournier and Grey (2000) argue, critical management studies (CMS) are concerned with recognising shortcomings in the knowledge and practice of management, and that we should aim to address them through change. This aim is arguably evocative of the main driver also in FT, which is to reveal both explicit and implicit inequalities, but also to reduce or remove those inequalities (Martin 2003). The link between CT and FT is visible in relation to the recognition of “the role that power plays in hegemonic knowledge” (Hesse-Biber 2007, p. 11), and both CT and FT attempt to expose skewed power relationships in order to empower the oppressed groups and regain control of their lives “in solidarity with a justice-oriented community” (Kincheloe and McLaren 2008, p. 437).

Another commonality is that both FT and CT recognise that historically there has been a propensity to view certain concepts as dualistic and dichotomous, which are socially constructed and misleading (such as male vs. female, objective vs. subjective, competition vs. cooperation, rationality vs. emotion; see Figure 5). Feminists (especially postmodernist) have strived to deconstruct dichotomies through discourse analysis in



order to expose how such dichotomies “have gendered associations that devalue the one of these paired concepts that is generally associated with the feminine” (Martin 2003, p. 68). Figure 5 illustrates some of the more common gendered dichotomies. In the context of this study, the utilisation of FWA for childcare needs could be devalued, as it contradicts the often valorised concepts of masculinity, mind and reason. Motherhood and its concomitant flexible working instead signify femininity, emotionality, body and nature.

Common Dichotomies	
Masculine	Feminine
Male	Female
Objective	Subjective
Rational	Emotional
Competition	Cooperation
Mind	Body
Reason	Passion
Culture	Nature

Often valorised { } Often devalued

**Figure 5. Common dichotomies. Adapted from Martin (2003) and Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002).**

Moreover, Martin (2003) argues that the universalisation of sectional interests, which has been the focus of CT, is also explored by feminist scholarship. While Critical Theorists often emphasise managerial and corporate interests vis-à-vis interests of the non-managerial stakeholders or the community, FT focuses on how men’s interests are assumed to be universal, and women’s interests are disregarded. In other words, universalised interests are those that are assumed to be in everyone’s interests (Alvesson and Deetz 1996) to the detriment of the less dominant or less powerful group. Martin (2003) points out that the more recent feminist scholarship has managed to expose some ostensibly gender-neutral research, organisational cultures or job descriptions that are in fact skewed towards more masculine values. Therefore, as this research focuses on the interests of women knowledge workers and contributes to the largely gender-neutral scholarship on knowledge work, FT agenda can be clearly identified in this study. Moreover, by prioritising women’s experiences of FWA vis-à-vis managerial interests, this study is also underpinned by the characteristics of CT.

Furthermore, the CT’s focus on the domination of instrumental reasoning has also been shared by feminist scholarship. In the context of organisational studies, instrumental reasoning, first and foremost, relates to the managerial concern with profit

and productivity, and CT demonstrates a particularly acute awareness of the dangers of instrumental reasoning. Such reasoning can be recognised in the research focusing on maximising employee productivity (i.e. on technical reasoning): “why don’t workers work harder?”, rather than their well-being, common goals, or practical interests: “why do workers work as hard as they do?” (Burawoy 1982; Alvesson and Deetz 1996). In Alvesson and Deetz’s words,

“the productive tension between technical control and humanistic aspects becomes submerged to the efficient accomplishment of often unknown but surely ‘rational’ and ‘legitimate’ corporate goals” (1996, p. 201).

Martin (2003) admits, however, that some FT, informed by liberal feminism for instance, tends to steer towards instrumental reasoning, whereby gender research is justified through striving to improve productivity, performance or financial outcomes of corporations. It is also possible that some feminist research that aims to explore the humanistic aspects of work organisations is hiding in the disguise of instrumental reasoning in order to satisfy the interests of the business school. This is precisely the dilemma that I faced at the beginning of this research project: should I represent the interests of the researched, or the managerial and business school interests? It has to be clarified that although this study explores women’s experiences of FWA which could be underpinned by instrumental interest, this research leans towards the interests of the individual women, their economic need for survival, self-preservation, and navigating organisational structures.

The last commonality that unites CT and FT is their critique of

“hegemony, including the study of how consent to domination is orchestrated and the ways the subjugated participate in their own subjugation” (Martin 2003, p. 69).

Hegemony can be likened to a “web of conceptual and material arrangements” (Alvesson and Deetz 1996, p. 201) which constitutes our everyday lives. This Gramscian concept of hegemony addresses the society as a whole, but the workplace hegemony is seen as a building bloc of the all-encompassing hegemony of the society. Workplace hegemony is supported by three foundations: the economic, the cultural, and the command arrangements. They include contractual obligations and reward systems, corporate values and visions, and rules and policies (Alvesson and Deetz 1996).

The concept of hegemonic masculinity (in gender relations) is another issue that has been of concern to FT (Connell 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt 2013). It relates to the dominant form of masculinity positioned at the top of the gender hierarchy as the most powerful, and homosexual masculinity and resistant femininity as the least powerful.

Martin (2003) argues that all FT deals with critiquing the patriarchy that exists within hegemonic regimes, and moreover, some feminist strands (such as Marxist/socialist and poststructural feminists) actually prioritise the critique of hierarchical hegemony in their scholarship. Hegemony is problematic because it suggests the existence of dominant and subjugated groups that have potentially different interests, even when the subjugated may be oblivious to this. The three arrangements described above (economic, cultural, command) act as facilitators of the dominant groups achieving “consent” from the subjugated (Alvesson and Deetz 1996, p. 201).

Martin (2003) suggests, however, that there is relatively little research by feminist scholarship addressing how gendered arrangements produce “consent” to subjugation, or how female employees “strategize their own subordination” (Alvesson and Deetz 1996, p. 201), which can have a reproducing effect on structures. The similarity of CT and FT lies, nevertheless, in these methodologies’ attempt to preserve the diversity of the interests of the less dominant, and the subjugated groups which the corporate culture is glossing over to engineer workplace hegemony. Willmott (1993) believes that one way through which critical reflection is curtailed is the establishment of corporate culture programmes which aim to discourage the development of conditions fostering criticality. Consequently, the norms and values within organisations are homogenised:

“[e]mployees are selected and promoted on the basis of their (perceived) acceptance of, or receptivity to, the core values. More generally, employees are repeatedly urged and rewarded for suspending attachments to ideas and mores that do not confirm and reinforce the authority of the core values” (1993, p.534).

FT is also concerned with this problematic, but instead focuses on patriarchal and masculine values within organisational cultures, and how they may reward normative behaviours, and overlook or even punish deviation from the norm (Acker 1990).

I therefore recognise the relevance of both FT and CT to this study. On the one hand, exploring the experiences of women and giving them *voice* draws from feminism

and its concomitant aim of uncovering gender inequality and oppression from patriarchy. On the other hand, CT enables me to look and search beyond the feminists' usual suspects, and interrogate those issues that can also affect men, and consequently women in the long run (e.g. men's lack of access to flexible working). This, for instance, relates to modernist and capitalist ways of organising work and the political backdrop of neoliberalism.

#### **4.2.5. The Compatibility of Critical Theory and Structuration Theory**

As this research project subscribes to the CT paradigm it is important to analyse its compatibility with ST which forms part of the theoretical framework of this study. As CT is concerned with exploring conditions of social regulation, unequal distribution of power, and unmasking domination, ST can provide a means to achieve the goal of CT by investigating such processes and structures. Moreover, it also offers the possibility to examine "the role of power and domination in structuring processes that underlie organisations" (Poole and McPhee 2005, p. 180). Veliquette (2013) argues that ST can help to uncover power which is hidden in complex systems of organisations by digging into layers of structural processes. In this way ST and CT can both work together to critically analyse organisations and explore how change can be possible. This can be accomplished by enlightening the research subjects about the existence of possibly unjust organisational structures that may be distorting their existence and motivating them to initiate change.

The full complexity of ST does not have to be applied as a whole in research projects and "the value of structurationist concepts will vary according to the particular project in question" (Clark 1990, p. 312). ST can help to explore the reproductive nature of practices and structures, and that two empirical questions are especially pertinent to this issue:

"How should we characterize the practices in which the persons studied engage? And what are the basic factors underlying their reproduction across space and time?" (Clark 1990, p. 313).

Veliquette (2013) suggests that **interviews** are particularly useful in appreciation of the context, which is integral to understanding social reproduction. Moreover, she argues that since ST facilitates research from a critical stance, it is crucial that

researchers who utilise ST do not become detached observers, but, on the contrary, are involved in the process of diagnosis and understanding.

This matches Giddens' (1986) approach to ontology which aims to challenge positivist ideas, as he believes that there should be a clear distinction between social and natural science. He insists that the social world must be seen as being made and remade by social actors with their practical and theoretical knowledge about the world. Thus, researchers are only able to encounter the social world already pre-interpreted by actors. Giddens (1986), therefore, argues that unlike natural science, social science cannot be understood through invariant laws, as researchers are unable to produce fixed explanatory frameworks and generalisations, and their contributions to the understanding of the society is only *provisional*. This availability of provisional understandings is only possible as long as the social actors continue to use, make and remake structures in their everyday lives (Jones et al. 2011).

### **4.3. Research Design and the Interview Method**

This study adopts a qualitative approach which facilitates inductive aims of a CT research, as it allows for an iterative and continual pursuit of meaning. The researcher should leave open the possibility that the data sources produce meanings that were unanticipated at the onset of the project (Galletta 2012). This means that I am able to exercise open-mindedness about my participants' accounts and the data that they provide through the interview method. Rather than presenting my participants with an electronic survey, I actively partake in their meaning-making during the interview. Therefore, our relationship becomes not just instrumental, but in some cases fun with modest camaraderie or even therapeutic.

My experiences working in business organisations have been acknowledged in the previous section, and whilst I strive not to distort or bias the research findings, I am transparent about my past and my methodological leanings through self-reflection. Therefore, although I choose a **qualitative approach**, I also recognise that my research cannot be value-free, and is value-laden. The mere act of selecting a particular research approach is of course driven by the research question, but it is also subjective and it depends on the researcher's culture and preferences (Denzin and Lincoln 1998).

### 4.3.1. Interview and Knowledge Production

The interview method for epistemological purposes has not always been recognised, because individual social agents have not always been considered suitable sources of knowledge about their own life world (Holstein and Gubrium 2003). This view of individuals may have stemmed from a pursuit of objectivity and neutrality of science (likened to natural science), where participants' subjective accounts of their lives and experiences could not count as valid, neutral and value-free knowledge. The rise of alternative epistemologies that recognised value-laden research (such as various feminist methodologies or Critical Theory), however, enabled an exploration of knowledge production at different sources, and from knowing agents in particular.

The rationale behind using the qualitative interview method was to enable me to

“see the research topic from the perspective of the interviewee, and to understand how and why they come to have this particular perspective” (King 2004a, p.11).

Moreover, qualitative interviewing makes it possible to investigate an individual's subjective and complex world in-depth (Bryman and Bell 2007), which cannot be achieved by employing a survey or a structured interview alone. As Kvale and Brinkmann conceded:

“Qualitative research can give us compelling descriptions of the qualitative human world, and qualitative interview can provide us with well-founded knowledge about our conversational reality. Research interviewing **is thus a knowledge-producing activity**” (2009, p. 47).

Kvale and Brinkmann defined research interview as “based on the conversations of daily life” and as a “professional conversation”. They see it as:

“an inter-view, where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee. An interview is literally an *inter view*, an inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interests” (2009, p. 2; original emphasis).

Semi-structured interviews are carried out in order to obtain “descriptions of the life world of the interviewee [...] to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena” (2009, p. 3).

Interview knowledge can be characterised by seven key features, namely: produced, relational, conversational, contextual, linguistic, narrative and pragmatic (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). In the context of this study, five of these features are particularly relevant:

*Knowledge as produced* refers to the knowledge that is constructed during the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, as opposed to collected or “mined” knowledge waiting to be “picked”. Such knowledge continues to be constructed and produced through transcription, analysis and reporting. The act of interviewing in the research context is a knowledge producing activity, and the interview itself is a “production site of knowledge” (2009, p. 54).

Kvale and Brinkmann also view *knowledge as relational*, meaning that knowledge is inter-relational and intersubjective and:

“the research interview establishes new relations in the human webs of interlocution, with the goal of producing knowledge about the human situation” (2009, p. 54).

Researchers can either concentrate on what is said in the interview between the interviewer and interviewee, or they can pay more attention to the human and social interaction between them. This research project focuses on the knowledge produced “inter the views” of me as the researcher and my participants, rather than on how we interact with each other. I pay attention, nevertheless, to the way in which my participants behave and interact during the interviews, as this could potentially further inform the knowledge produced by their utterances and provide an insight into the reasons why they choose to recount certain experiences.

Knowledge is also *conversational*, which refers to conceding that objective reality cannot be readily mirrored, therefore “attention must be paid to discourse and negotiation about the meaning of the lived world” (2009, p. 54). This is because interviews depend on conversations that allow us access to knowledge. Kvale and Brinkmann also argue that in interviews we have to recognise not only the potential for producing descriptions about our daily lives, but also for producing “the epistemic knowledge [which is] justified discursively in a conversation” (2009, p. 54).

Knowledge is also *contextual*, because qualitative interview is sensitive to nuances and differences in meaning which may not be generalisable. Since human

experiences and our understanding of our lives are contextual, the knowledge that we produce within one context cannot be readily transferred to another context, and it may not be commensurate in a different situation. Therefore, it is important to provide general descriptions of the context within which the knowledge producing interview takes place.

Finally, interview knowledge is *pragmatic*. This means research should provide useful knowledge that enables humans to cope with the world we live in. There is a tendency in qualitative research to replace the questions about how scientific a study is, or how “true” a particular type of knowledge is, with the questions of whether such knowledge is pragmatic and how it may help us cope with the social world we inhabit. These questions centre in the value of research and in the ethical considerations of a research project (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009).

#### **4.3.2. Rationale for Interview**

The interview method has been chosen in this study for several reasons. Firstly, it facilitates a qualitative approach in that it seeks to elicit in-depth accounts from the participants and it does not strive for measurement or specifying the precise nature of the variables’ relationships. Moreover, the interview method allows room for the participants to elaborate on the aspects they feel most compelling and worth emphasising (Barbour 2008).

Secondly, as the participants were located across many organisations, it would not have been practical to use observation or focus group methods. Observation is more appropriate when a researcher studies a group of people in one particular context, e.g. in case studies and ethnographies. This study, however, did not draw all the participants from one organisation, therefore interviewing appeared to be a more practical and time efficient solution (Silverman 2013).

The interview and the narrative products this method yields have come to be understood as the golden standard in social science research. Atkinson and Silverman (1997, cited in Kvale 2006) have argued that the popularity of the method originates from the interview culture in general, as the production of the self has become central in human life. Miller and Glassner have suggested that the interview can be viewed as an “interpersonal drama with a developing plot” (2006, p. 154), whilst the participants are



continually engaged in meaning-making in order to produce the recognisable descriptions of their daily experiences. Interviews provide versions of subjective experience and they are constituted during the interpretive process of the participant, whose utterances address the “hows” and the “whats” of the interviewer.

This meaning-making activity which is undertaken both by interviewer and interviewee produces construction, and should not be seen as bias or contamination (Miller and Glassner 2006). In fact, the interviewer becomes an instrument in itself, prompting, rephrasing questions, and making changes to the interview schedule (Galletta 2012).

The advantage of the interview method is that it allows the participants to speak about their experiences and perceptions in-depth and in detail. The main reasons for using semi-structured interviews in this research project were to produce rich-data and to uncover unexpected themes. By allowing the women knowledge workers to *voice* their experiences of FWA, and verbalise their feelings and self-reflect, I was able to appreciate how they make sense of the social reality they are in. The participants were also allowed the time to develop their answers and “take control” (Barbour 2008). This is why it was important I avoided giving excessive attention to finding convergence and divergence of thematic trends during the interview. This may have dulled my sensitivity to what was said and not said (Galletta 2012). Instead, I strived to focus on the task at hand, which was seeking to elicit the women’s meanings and capturing this meaning as accurately as possible (Galletta 2012). For example, it meant that I refrained from categorising the participants’ accounts into the existing themes that had emerged in previous interviews. Although, it was challenging to resist the temptation to prematurely assign certain views to the themes, I created new codes and concepts to appreciate the diversity of experiences and meaning-making. However, during the analysis it became clear that these nuanced accounts could be amalgamated in one theme, as they were differently verbalised, but conceptually similar.

### **4.3.3. Semi-Structured Interview**

The adoption of semi-structured, as opposed to unstructured interview, is motivated by the need to find a balance between structure for an analysis of commonalities, and openness for explorative opportunities to thrive (Gillham 2005).

The semi-structured format allows the interviewer to elicit data on the perspectives of salience to the participants, rather than the interviewer prescribing where the interview direction should follow. On the other hand, it is important to emphasise that semi-structured interviews are two-way encounters involving two humans who are both engaged in meaning-making at the same time (Barbour 2008).

Semi-structured interview offers versatility as it can engage an interviewee through both more structured, close-ended and open-ended questions. The segments of the interview can become progressively more or less structured, or focused more or less on the immediate phenomenon in question. For instance, initially I asked my participants a number of closed-ended questions in relation to their descriptive characteristics, and then initiated open-ended questions in relation to their careers and experiences of FWA.

The formulation and ordering of questions requires time for development, and also an element of trial and error (Galletta 2012). In this study, as I conducted more and more interviews it became clear that some of the questions needed to be moved to different stages of the interview process, as the participants often digressed and referred to issues iteratively. Consequently, the interviews became both more effective and efficient as the project progressed and they also yielded richer data.

The interview schedule covered a number of themes, which are presented in Table 2. The themes provided a point of departure to the interview, however as the interview was semi-structured, the participants were able to discuss also issues related to the themes, such as WLB, motherhood, childcare, partnership, relationships with colleagues and manager, and the nature of knowledge work. Therefore, the method allowed the participants to take time to develop their answers, and also gave them an opportunity to elucidate new, potentially important insights that a quantitative method would not have been able to accommodate. I found the majority of the interviewees reflective about their experiences, and the interview process allowed them to verbalise their feelings (Marshall 1995).

<i>Career development</i>	<i>Securing FWA</i>
<i>Career prospects</i>	<i>Advantages and disadvantages of FWA</i>
<i>Understanding good performance</i>	<i>FWA shaping organisational career</i>

**Table 2. Interview themes.**

#### **4.3.4. Interview Limitations**

There are some risks related to using this method, such as both the interviewee's and the interviewer's expectations of the intended outcome. It is possible that the interviewer might expect the participants experience the social order in which they are in. Moreover, the interviewees might attempt to "predict" what the interviewer wishes to hear. Although such expectations are natural attributes of a social interaction, the interviewer has to ensure they approach their participants with an open mind (Bechhofer and Paterson 2000).

Kvale (2006) suggests that research interview is not as free of dominance as those who are arguing against structured interviews and surveys believe. He argues that the interviewer is clearly in a more powerful position than the interviewee, as they set the stage and scripts according to their agenda. This was also the case in this research, as I had questions prepared aligned to my research plan. However, the participants were able to shape and co-create the discussion by emphasising and focusing on points that they deemed important.

On some occasions, I felt that most of the participants could possibly be described as enjoying a more privileged position than me. Many of the participants had already established knowledge work careers, enjoyed financial independence and were satisfied in motherhood, some aspects which I could not associate with myself at the time. On two occasions, when I interviewed academic researchers I felt "junior" and "novice" in their presence and was conscious about their potential judgement of my research and interviewing skills.

On the other hand, I felt I had some commonalities with some of the participants, for example, pursuing knowledge-work careers, being of similar age, being female, being foreign (five participants), and wanting to "achieve" a satisfactory career and WLB. Thus, I actually shared some characteristics with my participants, which allowed me to establish some connections of understandings of realities-for-us (Miller and Glassner 2006). At the same time, I was aware of the potential risk of "intuitively knowing" what my participants were saying, therefore, when appropriate, I encouraged them to explicate on issues.

## **4.4. Data Collection**

### **4.4.1. The Sampling Strategy**

A combination of convenience purposive, and snowball sampling was used in this study. The rationale for purposive sampling was to choose information-rich cases that allowed me to explore the main research questions (Patton 2002). Such information richness provides insights and in-depth understanding, and issues of sampling representativeness and findings generalisability are replaced by a “compelling evocation of an individual’s experience” (Seidman 2013, p. 55).

As the sample was purposive, it was important to discuss with the participants whether they fulfilled the criteria needed for this study’s conceptualisation of knowledge worker and whether they utilised FWA. Frequently, potential participants asked me to elucidate what it meant to be a knowledge worker, as they could not establish themselves whether they would qualify. Therefore, I discussed the criteria for inclusion and judging from the responses I then decided whether to invite the potential candidates to partake in the process. This could be seen as one of the weaknesses of purposive sampling due to possible misjudgements of the researcher. However, the detailed conceptualisation of knowledge worker, which is provided in Chapter 2.2.2., was useful for this selection. This information was discussed prior to conducting the interviews. In some circumstances potential participants did align with the criteria of knowledge worker, but as they did not utilise flexible working, they could not participate. In other cases, potential candidates did work flexibly, but they were not invited as they could only describe their roles as administrative.

In relation to convenience sampling, professional and personal networks were identified and potential participants were contacted to gauge their knowledge worker and flexible working status. Once identified, 42 women were invited by email to participate in the research project with the attached participant information sheet and the consent form (see Appendices).

In order to preserve anonymity, I decided to exclude the exact role descriptions from the participants' profile information (Table 3) to avoid identification. It would not have been appropriate to alter the occupations in order to preserve anonymity, given that

the knowledge work context is central to this study. Therefore, the participants' occupations have been extracted in an alphabetical order and listed as follows:

Accountant, Business Analyst (x 2), Business Development & Performance Manager, Business Intelligence & Social Research Analyst, Business Psychologist, Communication & Marketing Officer, Communications Officer Coordinator, CSR Manager, Data Analyst, Head of Communications, HR Manager (x 2), HR Trainer, Infrastructure Officer, International Affairs Manager, IT Specialist, Market Research Analyst, Marketing & Product Launch Officer, Marketing Officer, Organisational Adviser & Researcher, Principal HR & OD Adviser, Project Manager (x 2), Research & Policy Adviser, Senior Academic (x 2), Senior Consultation & Research Officer, Senior Planning Analyst.

The structure of the invitation email made it clear that the women were free to decide whether to participate or not and the research was not part of their employment contract obligation and was independent. Some of the invited women did not reply to my email, some decided not to participate without giving any reasons, and some initially agreed and then withdrew. Secondly, with regard to snowball sampling, the women who agreed to be interviewed offered their own professional and private networks to provide further participants (Marshall 1995). This offer indicated to me that the interview was a valuable experience to my participants who perceived it to be worthy of their time, and they did not hesitate to recommend their colleagues and friends to be interviewed.

In addition to the in-depth data gathered through interviewing, a short demographics list of questions was also collected, such as age, education, profession, marital status, employment of partner, number and age of children and the type of FWA used. This was collected in order to describe the sample and establish its individual characteristics (Bryman and Bell 2007). Lastly, if I needed further clarification, an email was sent to the participant in question to elaborate on a particular issue. On a few occasions when email data are quoted in the findings chapter, this is specified in the brackets.

No other particular criteria had to be fulfilled to be eligible for inclusion in the sample. For instance, although marital or motherhood status were not specified, the great majority of the women were married and had children. This was not surprising, as

it reflected the themes found in the literature showing that women tend to work flexibly in order to adapt to their public and private spheres (Dex et al. 1998).

The participants were not selected specifically for ethnicity, either, although the majority were White British. This again reflects the ethnic makeup of the geographical context of the South West, as one of the least diverse area in England (ONS 2011).

The total sample for this study comprised 30 female knowledge workers interviewed between October 2014 and December 2015. The interview dates and times were agreed mutually and all but three of the interviews took place either at the university, the employing organisation premises, or in a café, on a face-to-face basis. Only one interview was via the telephone. Two were conducted in the participants' homes, as this was their preference. I strived to minimise the use of the ICT in order to allow for a technology free communication to stimulate an informal and natural environment. All the participants agreed that the interviews were recorded so that I could ensure all the produced data were rigorously transcribed and no loss would occur. The questions designed for the purposes of the interview served as a guide, rather than a rigid structure to be followed in order to encourage elucidation, although care was taken to ensure the questions clearly framed the focus of the research (Xian and Woodhams 2008). Notes were taken during the process of interviewing in order to highlight the limitations of the interview-guide structure. For instance, some questions were not clear to the participants and needed to be improved for consecutive data collection.

Some of the first pilot interviews I carried out were relatively short and I could explain this with my lack of experience in interviewing. I felt I was intruding on these women's busy schedules, and even though they had agreed to participate, I sensed the interview situation was perhaps perceived as a nuisance. This might have come across in the way I rushed the interview questions to "let them go". After the pilot of five interviews, I reflected on this, and decided to consciously attempt to "own the time and space" and assert my confidence as a researcher during the interview meeting, otherwise, the participants would not open up and provide in-depth accounts of their experiences (Wengraf 2001). As the project progressed, I found myself conducting much richer and longer interviews, were both the participants and I actually enjoyed the experience.

The interviews generally lasted between 45-90 minutes. The interviews allowed for the

“participant’s descriptions to be explored, illuminated and gently probed to allow rich, contextual, detailed and meaningful data to emerge” (Grady and McCarthy 2008, p. 605).

The vast majority of the participants gave the impression that they were interested in the research topic and they wanted to share their experiences openly and honestly. As I was not known to them professionally, they were not inhibitive about confiding in me about their negative experiences of FWA, colleagues, managers, and organisational cultures. I did not feel that they were attempting to play down any undesirable outcomes of flexibility.

#### **4.4.2. Sampling Limitations**

Purposive sampling does not provide opportunities for representativeness and generalisability, and would be perceived as bias-producing in statistical sampling. However, in qualitative sampling it is seen as a strength, because the sample is selected with a specific intended focus germane to the research questions (Patton 2002).

Knowing the research participants as colleagues may be problematic (McDermid et al. 2014), as they could mitigate themselves in revealing their true feelings and experiences to avoid the researcher colleague holding sensitive information about them. Moreover, the topic of the interview oscillating around the employment of the participant could have triggered an additional inhibition and a concern with the preservation of the job and the contracted working conditions.

As the study’s strategy also involved convenience sampling, it is important to add that only one of the participants was my direct acquaintance to ensure that data collection was not incomplete or distorted. Wengraf (2001) argues that interviewing people that researcher knows can create difficulties in relation to enhanced problems with social desirability, a sense of vulnerability in the already established relationship, or a misconceived assumption that the two parties know each other well enough without having to seek clarity. I decided to interview my colleague because of her unique experience working in a highly regarded charity known for its progressive HRM agenda. I felt that her insights would be valuable for this project.

All the other participants were not known to me personally prior to this research. One of the interviewees was known to my supervisor, and yet the interview with her lasted only under 30 minutes. I sensed that the interviewee did not want to completely open up about her experiences, and perhaps felt obliged to partake in my study because she did not want to decline.

### 4.4.3. Participants

The interviewed women were given aliases during the transcription and the audio files were saved under the names that assured anonymity. The collected data was qualitatively analysed using a coding approach to data interpretation informed by the thematic template analysis (King 2004a). The interviewees' details and aliases at the time of the data collection are given in Table 3. Twenty-four out of 30 participants were White British, four were from the European Union and one from the Middle East, and one British of Asian descent.

Study Participants (n=30)						
Alias	Age	Education	Marital Status	Sector	Type of FWA	Reason for FWA
<b>Maya</b>	35	PhD	Married, two children	HE	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Aziza</b>	44	PhD	Married, two children	HE	Full-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Tania</b>	43	Master's degree	Married, two children	Charity	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Patricia</b>	36	Master's degree	Married, one child	Construction	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Anna</b>	49	PhD	Married, two children	HE	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Amanda</b>	43	A-levels	Separated, one child	Local Gov	Full-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Charlotte</b>	34	A-levels	Married, two children	Local Gov	Full-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare



<b>Alice</b>	47	Degree	Married, two children	Local Gov	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Teresa</b>	37	Degree	Married, two children	Local Gov	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Lina</b>	36	Master's degree	Married, one child	Charity	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Jan</b>	24	Degree	Married, no children	Charity	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Home-making
<b>Hazel</b>	39	Degree	Married, two children	Charity	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Megan</b>	31	Degree	Married, one child	Local Gov	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Helen</b>	56	PhD	Married, three children	Charity	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Mila</b>	51	HND Higher National Diploma	Divorced, two children	Financial	Full-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Christina</b>	48	Degree	Married, two children	Financial	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Sue</b>	44	Degree	Married, two children	Financial	Full-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Marianna</b>	42	Master's Degree	Married, two children	Local Gov	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Margaret</b>	33	Master's degree	Married, two children	HE	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Stephanie</b>	38	Master's degree	Married, two children	HE	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Sarah</b>	70	Postgraduate diploma	Married, two children	Charity	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Retirement Planning
<b>Magdalene</b>	36	Degree	Married, two children	IT Services	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Yvonne</b>	45	Degree	Married, two children	IT Services	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare

<b>Barbara</b>	36	Degree	Married, one child	Local Gov	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Camilla</b>	33	Degree	Married, one child	HE	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Tara</b>	37	Postgraduate diploma	Married, two children	HE	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Danny</b>	32	Master's degree	Married, one child	HE	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Helia</b>	36	Degree	Married, three children	HE	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare
<b>Bethany</b>	55	Secondary Education	Married, one grandchild	HE	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Grandchild-care
<b>Gabriella</b>	36	Master's degree	Married, two children	HE	Part-time, flexitime, flexispace	Childcare

**Table 3. Participants' profiles.**

#### **4.4.4. Participants' Characteristics**

##### **4.4.4.1. Motherhood and Marital Status**

Twenty-nine out of 30 women were mothers, aged between 24 and 70. The two oldest participants had grown-up children. Nevertheless, one of them was actively involved in rearing her live-in grandchild. The other participant was preparing for retirement by reducing the number of hours worked. Only one and the youngest participant was childfree, albeit she assumed a heavily involved homemaker role affording the priority of her commitment to husband. Thus, the reason for her FWA use was also related to domestic duties. All of the participants were married apart from two who had divorced or separated.

##### **4.4.4.2. Education, Experience and Skills**

The majority of participants were characterised by higher education credentials, as twenty four women were educated to a degree level or higher. Thirteen participants had bachelor degrees, seven master's degrees, and four had or were working towards PhDs. Often they had additional postgraduate qualifications. Few participants, who did not

have higher education degrees, possessed other industry-specific qualifications, such as CIPD or management credentials, or IT and computer programming skills.

They were also characterised by many years of experience in a given industry or role which they perceived as their occupational strength. Twenty participants reported a long length of service (i.e. 6-10 years - 10 participants; 11 or more – 10 participants), five participants reported between 2 and 5 years of service, and five reported working for under 1 year.

#### **4.4.4.3. Knowledge-Intensive Services**

The vast majority of the participants were based in South West England with the exception of three who described their careers whilst employed in London areas. All but one, of the participants were employed within the KIS industry of the knowledge economy which is female dominated (Walby 2011). Patricia, although employed by a leading U.K. construction company, was a knowledge worker located within its knowledge-intensive headquarters. The makeup of the participants' sector was largely public. Eleven participants were employed in HE across a variety of departments; 7 by two local governments; 6 by three charities; 3 by private financial institutions; 2 by private IT services companies; and 1 by a private construction company. All of the participants were employed in roles within minimum or no direct client and customer contact, thus able to benefit from flexitime and flexispace with more autonomy.

#### **4.4.4.4. Flexible Work Arrangements**

All of the participants used FWA, that is, either flexitime/flexispace (or both) on a part-time, or full-time basis. The group's characteristics reflect the use of flexible working across the public and private sector, as public-sector employers are more likely to offer FWA than private sector employers (CIPD 2012). Moreover, women are more likely to be employed on a part-time basis: out of 30 participants, 25 were utilising part-time schedules, as well flexitime and flexispace. Both single mothers were employed on a full-time basis.

Twenty-two participants had husbands employed on a full-time basis with inflexible work schedules. Four of the husbands had flexibility in their jobs affording

them some free days at home; 3 had worked full-time with very little flexibility allowed; 1 was retired; and only 1 was a stay-at-home dad.

#### **4.4.4.5. Homogeneity of the Participants**

The sample of the participants originates from multiple contexts, both public and private organisations and across a variety of industries; albeit it will mainly be drawn from the KIS industry, owing to its most egalitarian characteristics out of all knowledge economy industries (Walby 2011). However, it is important to acknowledge that despite the diversity of the organisational contexts, the group is strongly homogenous in many ways.

Firstly, it is the detailed conceptualisation of knowledge worker that bonds the participants through their role characteristics provided in Chapter 2.2.2.

Secondly, the participants are united through other descriptive characteristics, such as motherhood, marital status, childcare responsibilities, or homemaking.

Thirdly, previous research focusing on *knowledge worker* as the primary unit of analysis has shown that the experiences of similar individuals across different organisations were comparable (Daniels et al. 2002; Truss et al. 2012). It has been demonstrated that:

“different task environments are institutionalised and that individuals working in different sectors and industries can perceive their environments in similar ways” (Truss et al. 2012, p. 748).

These commonalities offer insights from a position of shared experience which in turn facilitates data analysis (King 2012). Therefore, this study also expects convergence of experiences among women knowledge workers.

## **4.5. Ethical Considerations**

Paying attention to ethical issues is of paramount importance in all research activities and it should be exercised not only to satisfy ethical review boards, but also to behave ethically. It is the researcher’s moral duty to protect the participants and ensure that they are not exploited (Holloway and Brown 2012; Love 2012). Ethical approval

was granted by the Bournemouth University Research Ethics Committee to firstly conduct the pilot of five interviews, and then the main portion of data collection.

The Framework for Research Ethics of the Economic and Social Research Council of Britain (ESRC 2015) is underpinned by six key principles related to: (1) free and voluntary participation, (2) mitigating risk and harm, (3) providing appropriate information to all parties, (4) ensuring participants' preferences for anonymity and confidentiality, (5) guaranteeing integrity, quality and transparency, and (6) the independence of research.

In order to fulfil the first principle, I emphasised to all potential participants that their involvement was voluntary. In a few instances, I obtained access to some of my participants via their manager, albeit this person had already retired and was no longer affiliated with the organisation in question. The participants were fully aware of this situation and I felt I had to reassure them that all the interview data were to be fully anonymised, so that they did not need to be concerned about any potential negative repercussions. In fact, since obtaining access to the participants, I had not met their ex-manager again, as meeting this person was completely serendipitous through a one-off opportunity. Secondly, as already mentioned in the previous section, some of the invited potential participants decided to withdraw before commencing the interview without giving any reasons. As I wanted to ensure these women did not feel pursued, I followed up their decisions only once and then terminated all contact.

Even though social research is not as fraught with possible risk and harm as biomedical science might be, it was also important to pay attention to potential problems emerging (Holloway and Brown 2012). I understood that these risks and harms were more related to the women's career repercussions if their managers were to identify them in this study. This is why it was essential to ensure anonymity and remove any obvious indicators and characteristics that may have revealed the identity of the participants. I substituted their real names with aliases, and although provided some ethnic descriptive of the sample, I tried not to pinpoint the exact descent of the individuals where possible. This means that some narratives might reveal that the participants' English was not their mother tongue. However, I decided not to identify which countries these women came from. I also decided not to disclose the job roles, as it would have been highly possible for some of the participants to identify others also

participating in the project. I was explicitly asked by one of the participants not to even mention the department she worked in to avoid any crossreferencing.

Moreover, Brewer (2000) highlights that risks and harms could originate from the participants experiencing the uncalled-for self-knowledge which could trigger anxiety and psychological disturbance. I felt this was a valid point when some of my participants said they had not thought about certain issues before, and I could sense that they were becoming more cognisant of how they were experiencing flexible working and their lives and careers. On the other hand, the intention of any research guided by CT is precisely to enlighten the participants about their potential oppressions, so that empowerment and emancipation can follow (Morrow and Brown 1994). Therefore, I did not want my participants to create a smokescreen to mask any issues and repercussions relating to FWA. I tried to be approachable and open and create a supportive and comfortable atmosphere not only during the interviews, but also throughout the whole data collection process. Some of the participants enjoyed the experience and said that they were able to finally voice their hitherto unverballed concerns, which gave them a sense of relief. As Mason (2002) points out researcher is also often a councillor and being interviewed can become a therapeutic encounter.

In order to be as transparent as possible, I provided all participants with the information sheet (see Appendices) and explained my research focus and aims in the inviting emails. All participants had signed the consent form and agreed to be recorded. They were reassured that should they feel uncomfortable at any stage of the interview process they could withdraw without giving any reasons. The data recorded on the mobile phone was deleted once it was fully transcribed and there is no real name identification or association with any of the electronically held files. I did not reveal the real names and locations of the organisations in which the participants worked, except the sector of the businesses.

The independence of the research was adhered to, as none of the parties benefitted in any way from partaking in the research process, and at the same time, none of the parties suffered any damage, disrepute or dishonour. I feel that my participants took part in this study from pure intellectual curiosity and wanting to be part of something worthwhile.

In retrospect, I feel confident that I adhered to the ESRC principles on consent, anonymity, information, independence, transparency and safeguarding. I believe I achieved balance between being a researcher and being a morally-bound citizen (Williams 2003).

## **4.6. Data Analysis**

The driving objective of the analysis was to develop an in-depth understanding of the participants being studied, and the experiences of women knowledge workers utilising FWA. My focus was on allowing the women to describe their daily experiences of negotiating and using flexibility at work and also *voice* their concerns in relation to their careers and WLB.

There might be more elaborate ways of analysing the data, however I settled on presenting my research as a descriptive study based on a clear social problem of experiencing flexible working by women knowledge workers. Other, more complex analytical tools, such as discourse analysis, or conversation analysis could have clouded the issue and complicated the task of better understanding this social phenomenon (Silverman 2013).

### **4.6.1. Template Analysis**

#### **4.6.1.1. Origin and Philosophy**

This study follows template analysis (TA), which is a type of thematic analysis with the purpose to characterise common threads across a data set. It has been widely used as an integral part of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Grounded Theory, but also as a method in its own right. It has been used in organizational and management research, and recently has also been recommended for research in psychology (Brooks et al. 2015).

One of the strengths of the method lies in its flexibility, as is not wedded to any particular philosophical orientation (King 2012). However, TA is less suitable for radical relativist epistemologies, and more conducive to a “subtle realist approach” (e.g. Hammersley 1992), which is a

“position which acknowledges that a researcher’s perspective is inevitably influenced by his or her inability to truly stand outside one’s own position in the social world, but nonetheless retains a belief in phenomena that are independent of the researcher and knowable through the research process” (Brooks et al. 2015, p. 205).

This aligns with the CT stance of this study which assumes a realist ontological assumption, but a subjective epistemological commitment. There is an external reality, but my participants and I can only see it through our human minds, hence knowledge is only possible through our subjective understanding of it.

#### **4.6.1.2. TA’s Characteristics**

In essence, TA is a “varied but related selection of techniques for thematically organising and analysing textual data” (King 2004b, p. 256). It relies on developing a version of a coding scheme (template), which is then modified during the analysis of subsequent texts. The method allows some *a priori* codes if needed, as opposed to grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008), as well as codes that emerge from the data, meaning that both the “bottom-up” and the “top down” approaches intertwine.

A clear distinction between descriptive and interpretive themes in TA is not strictly required, nor is a particular position for each type of theme in the coding structure, which allows considerable flexibility and freedom. The data under investigation in TA studies are typically interview transcripts.

King (2004) suggests that it is allowable, but not necessary to develop some hard and soft *a priori* codes before starting the analysis. Hard *a priori* codes are useful for testing a theoretical framework and very specific concepts that already exist in the literature or are purely theoretical. Soft *a priori* codes “already exist in the researcher’s head” from reading the available literature on the topic and from the methodological stance of the study, but also from the researcher’s wider contextual positioning.

This method of data analysis is similar in certain aspects to Framework Analysis (FA) (Ritchie and Spencer 1994) and Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic method. Firstly, FA and TA both rely on the “codebook” approach whereby a combination of both *a priori* codes and fresh codes are developed and then applied to the full set of data. The differences lie in TA being more committed to providing guidance on how the template of the coding structure has been developed than FA. Framework Analysis



is also more committed than TA to delineating techniques to help the interpretation of the data when the coding is completed. However, the key difference is that TA is more concerned with “the iterative (re-) development of the coding structure” (Brooks et al. 2015, p. 206).

In relation to similarities to Braun and Clarke’s method, TA also affords considerable focus and flexibility in terms of a hierarchical coding structure. On the other hand, there are three main differences. Firstly, in Braun and Clarke’s method themes are developed when all initial codes of the data are completed, whereas in TA researcher normally produces an initial version of the template on the basis of a smaller section of the data. This facilitates and justifies carrying out a pilot study of 3-5 interviews to develop such initial template, as in this study. Secondly, unlike in Braun and Clarke’s method, in TA it is normal to create theme definitions at the initial template phase, to guide further coding and template development. Lastly, TA does not prescribe how many hierarchical levels a template should contain, whereas Braun and Clarke suggest one or two levels (Brooks et al. 2015).

#### **4.6.1.1. Disadvantages**

Compared to Grounded Theory or Discourse Analysis, TA does not offer equally substantial literature on the method, which may be one of the disadvantages of this technique. Due to the lack of prescriptiveness and set steps there might be a risk of producing a template that is too simple to allow for a deep interpretative analysis, or too complex to be manageable. However, there is a large amount of literature dedicated to thematic analysis which can usefully inform the use of TA (King 2004b).

Another disadvantage of using TA is the risk of “over-descriptiveness and of losing individual interviewee’s voices in the analysis of the aggregated themes” (King 2004b, p. 268). However this research project is more focused on the between-case analysis, rather than the within-case analysis which is more conducive to phenomenological studies (King 2012).

#### **4.6.1.2. Stages**

Template analysis is a flexible method of data analysis, however there are some recommended stages of the process to follow (Brooks et al. 2015):

1. Coding should not be initiated until after familiarising oneself with the content. When there are many interview transcripts, as in this study, it is recommended to select a varied section of the sample to gain a general gist of the nature of the data.

**This study:** I conducted all the interviews and listened to the recordings before committing to any coding in order to avoid jumping to conclusions.

2. Carry out preliminary coding on a sub-set of the data.

**This study:** I completed a pilot study consisting of five interviews to develop an understanding of this method of data collection and analysis, and also to learn about my own interviewing style. This pilot was conducted prior to the transfer examination and the analysis of the data was provided in the document.

Preliminary codes on a sub-set of the data (pilot of five interviews):

1. Ability to say NO
2. Authenticity
3. Availability
4. Becoming Self-Employed
5. Being Made Redundant
6. Being Promoted Early
7. Challenge
8. Change through Motherhood
9. Changing Job Demands
10. Choice Rhetoric
11. Clear WL boundary
12. Close Proximity to Work
13. Emotionalising Work
14. Exchange Theory
15. Expertise as Power
16. Expertise as Weakness
17. Facing Dual Care Responsibilities
18. Fighting for FWA
19. FT as Dominant
20. Inability to Conform
21. Fulfilling Expectations
22. FWA as Barrier to Collegiality
23. FWA as Barrier to Information
24. FWA as Barrier to Opportunities
25. FWA as Barrier to Promotion
26. FWA as Compromise
27. FWA as Facilitating Variety
28. FWA as Family Issue
29. FWA as Lack of Commitment
30. FWA as Legal Obligation
31. FWA as March of Progress
32. FWA as Negative Financial Outcomes
33. FWA as Peace of Mind
34. FWA as Taboo
35. FWA as Temporary Solution
36. FWA Family at Stake
37. FWA Gendered
38. Gaining Control & Power
39. Having NO CHOICE
40. Inability to Conform
41. Increased Visibility
42. Increased Work Intensity
43. Job Satisfaction
44. Knowledge as Barrier to Development
45. Knowledge as Leverage
46. Limited Childcare
47. Losing Confidence
48. Maintaining Competence
49. Manager's Protection
50. Manager's Support
51. Negative Perceptions of FWA
52. No Clear WL Boundary
53. Observing the Contract
54. Organisational & Cultural Support
55. Output Control
56. Partnership
57. Positive Rhetoric
58. Prestigious Activities
59. Rationalising Incompatibility of FWA
60. Redefining Ambition
61. Role Models & Mentors
62. Securing a 'Good' Job
63. Securing FWA
64. Seeing FWA as Desirable
65. Social Support
66. Subjective Career Success
67. Valuing Freedom from Children
68. Visibility

69. Work-Family Conflict  
70. Working Better at Home

71. Workload Imbalance

3. Include hard or strong *a priori* themes if necessary. “Don’t pretend” you are open-minded. Then reapply, redefine, change or remove if needed.

**This study:** Initially, I did not have any explicit *a priori* codes to start with, although admittedly, I had some general ideas of what my participants may have to say. This was expected after reading the available literature on flexible working and existing research into women generally experiencing more barriers in organisations than men; and also after working in the KIS industry as an employee and manager myself for a number of years. My expectation was that this fairly privileged group of educated and experienced women may be more likely to enjoy organisational cultures more relaxed towards WLB, motherhood and outside commitments, with gender discrimination somewhat less pronounced.

I also expected that the participants would be using flexible schedules primarily for family responsibilities, and also that they would be expressing some concerns in relation to how FWA influenced their careers and opportunities for progression. I also saw it likely that they would mention FWA being perceived negatively by colleagues. With these ideas in mind, I paid specific attention to these themes emerging. However, I did not decide to insert these themes as hard *a priori* codes, thus they remained soft *a priori* codes. As opposed to a purely inductive research as in Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008) with no prior literature review allowed, I fully appreciate that I have brought my background knowledge and my methodological underpinning to the study which may have influenced how the data has been analysed. I also discuss how I did develop, albeit temporarily, some hard *a priori* codes in step 5.

4. Define an initial coding template. Typically, after analysing 3-5 initial interviews the developed template is then used to analyse further interviews and this approach was adopted also in the research project.

**This study:** First, I conducted a pilot project and interviewed five participants to allow me to develop some initial template contents and to consider whether my approach and my interviewing style were both effective and insightful. Overall, 71 open codes were created during the analysis of the first five interviews, however after the second cycle of analysis which was designed to amalgamate similar codes or remove obsolete codes

(deletion), 23 codes remained in the template. These codes were grouped into 6 mother codes that became the main themes in the pilot study.

It is important to highlight that the codes and themes were constantly reviewed and adjusted with the addition of new interviews and new data. This iterative process of TA allowed to maintain the ability to revise the template and thus encouraged openness to the data (King 2012).

The first template of the data:

1. FWA Structure for Balance
    - 1.1. FWA Family at Stake
    - 1.2. Choice Discourse
    - 1.3. Facing Dual Care Responsibilities
    - 1.4. Having NO CHOICE
  2. Career Barriers
    - 2.1. Flexibility
      - 2.1.1. FWA as Barrier to Promotion
        - 2.1.1.1. Prestigious Activities
      - 2.1.2. FWA as Barrier to Collegiality
      - 2.1.3. FWA as Barrier to Information
        - 2.1.3.1. FWA as Barrier to Opportunities
      - 2.1.4. Fulfilling Expectations
      - 2.1.5. FWA as Lack of Commitment
    - 2.2. Knowledge
      - 2.2.1. Knowledge as Barrier to Development
  3. Conceptualising FWA
    - 3.1. Negative perceptions of FWA
    - 3.2. Positive Discourse
    - 3.3. FWA as Legal Obligation
    - 3.4. FWA as March of Progress
  4. FWA Outcomes
    - 4.1. Increased Work Intensity
    - 4.2. Work-Family Conflict
    - 4.3. FWA as Negative Financial Outcomes
    - 4.4. Losing Confidence
  5. Strategies to (Un)become Flexible
    - 5.1. Increased Visibility
      - 5.1.1. Physical
      - 5.1.2. Virtual
    - 5.2. Increased Work Intensity
      - 5.2.1. Exchange
    - 5.3. Concealing FWA
  6. Strategies to Become Flexible
    - 6.1. Manager's Support
    - 6.2. Knowledge as Leverage
5. Apply the initial template to further data and adapt as required.

**This study:** The template was consistently revised, amended and reordered as the analysis progressed. The advantage of this method was that it decreased the amount of data being taken into account at any one time, but linked earlier codes found in the data which helped to connect new ideas and codes together (Miller and Crabtree 1999).

After developing the initial template, I felt compelled to somehow show how my data related to the theoretical framework of QNS, and I consequently created some hard *a priori* codes as recommended by Brooks et al. (2015) if the researcher feels necessary. These higher order codes were applied to the theme of *Becoming Flexible*, i.e. *External Structures* defined Line Manager's Outlook and Support, Social Networks and Paid Childcare, Precedent Setters and Co-workers, CEOs and Leaders, and HR. *Internal General-Dispositional Structures* defined Trust and Reputation, Knowledge, Experience and Skills; and *Internal Conjuncturally-Specific Structures* defined Legitimation through Business Need, Strategic Number of Days and Hours, and Awareness of HR Policies.

However, after further interviews, it became clear to me that my theoretical framework was restraining the analysis and creating a situation where it would have to be necessary for the data to be put in a theoretical "straitjacket". In order to explore what was in the data that offered fresh insights I decided to remove the hard *a priori* codes and continued the analysis, which allowed me to start developing interpretive themes of *Leveraging Structures and Agents*, *Legitimising and Rationalising Flexibility*, and *Bargaining for Flexibility*.

The subsequent template of the data has expanded on the *Becoming* and *(Un)becoming Flexible* themes:

1. Becoming Flexible
  - 1.1. Using Internal Structures General-Dispositional & Conjuncturally Specific
    - 1.1.1. Gained Trust (established reputation)
    - 1.1.2. Knowledge
    - 1.1.3. Experience
    - 1.1.4. Skills
  - 1.2. Using “Others”: External Structures Authoritative Resources
    - 1.2.1. Line Manager “Fighting”
    - 1.2.2. Line Manager’s Support
    - 1.2.3. Trailblazers
      - 1.2.3.1. Counterexample of Precedence
    - 1.2.4. HR vs. Line Manager
  - 1.3. Using External Structures Allocative Resources
    - 1.3.1. Technology (ICT)
  - 1.4. Rationalising & Legitimising Flexibility
    - 1.4.1. Building FWA around Business Need
2. (Un)becoming Flexible
  - 2.1. Camouflaging Flexibility
    - 2.1.1. Increasing Presence & Visibility
    - 2.1.2. Increasing Availability
    - 2.1.3. Taking Temporary Secondments
  - 2.2. Re-constructing Flexibility as Normative
    - 2.2.1. Increasing Work Intensity
    - 2.2.2. Accepting Higher Workloads
    - 2.2.3. Increasing Extensive Effort
  - 2.3. Concealing Flexibility
    - 2.3.1. Avoiding Exposure
    - 2.3.2. Hiding Outside Commitments
    - 2.3.3. Complicit Line Manager
  - 2.4. Reciprocating Flexibility
    - 2.4.1. Forgoing Flexibility on Demand
    - 2.4.2. “It’s a two way thing”
    - 2.4.3. Changing Schedules to Fit Work

The remaining codes from the first template, such as FWA Structure for Balance, Careers Barriers, and FWA Outcomes were amalgamated under two new mother codes of *Intended* and *Unintended Consequences of Flexibility*.

6. Finalise the template and apply it to the full data set. “There is never a ‘final’ version of the template” (Brooks et al. 2015, p. 204).

**This study:** Brooks and colleagues suggest that the template is never finished, because it is possible to continue refining and amending coding with further analysis indefinitely. It is the researcher’s decision to bring the template to a final conclusion when the research questions are addressed. Although, the template for this study has been finalised due to the closed-ended nature of this research project and a limited time frame, I appreciate that in the future it might be possible to approach the data afresh.

#### **4.6.2. NVivo 10**

Initially, the analysis was carried out manually using highlighter pens to identify themes. However, after coding the first interview, it became apparent that this approach would become increasingly challenging with the number of themes and codes rising. The level of complexity and the number of individual nodes, themes and categories was too high to be managed in a paper form. Therefore, I switched to using the software and coded all the interviews using NVivo 10. The first five interviews conducted during this pilot provided the basis for the initial template of themes and codes. However, over time the number of codes and themes increased to encapsulate the varied and rich insights of the participants’ experiences of FWA.

My primary concern was that no element or analysis of the data was lost, and using NVivo 10 provided a cache for the entire collection of the interviews and emails from the participants, but also their descriptive characteristics and all of the data analysis in one file. Qualitative data analysis software (QDAS), such as NVivo facilitates analysis in a number of ways. It enables a researcher to develop more complex, adaptable, extensive and exhaustive coding schemes. Secondly, the coded data can be efficiently and effectively retrieved for analysis. The software also enables researchers to link different sources of data (for example, interviews, emails, focus groups) (Woods et al. 2016).



On the other hand, there are some risks in how data analysis may be conducted using QDAS packages. For example, researchers may be tempted to design their projects around the capabilities of the programme, or use a specific technique only because this technique is available to be used. Another criticism concerns how researchers approach the task of analysis and that they may adopt an overly “programmatically” approach, surrendering the task of analysis to the computer (Woods et al. 2016).

During the analysis of the data in this project, I used NVivo in order to facilitate the analysis which would have otherwise been conducted manually. The use of data analysis software package does not mean that I eschewed the analytic task and “capitulated it to the logic of the computer” (Meehan 2012). On the contrary, NVivo has been utilised to facilitate efficiency, categorising and organising, but it is not an instrument which conducts analysis and draws conclusions on its own. This is because qualitative projects are “complex, fluid, evolving, and highly self-referential products of human endeavour” (Richards 1999, p. 425) and their analysis involves an ongoing incorporation of meaning and the interpretation processes. Therefore, NVivo provides support for meeting this type of research.

## **4.7. Summary**

In this chapter, I discussed the ontological and epistemological issues relating to social science research and outlined my philosophical stance influenced by my previous work experience. I explained why I have chosen this particular epistemological approach, so that I can emphasise the importance of the *voices* and perceptions of women knowledge workers. I presented how critical-interest research intersects with some of the aims of feminist methodologies, and how ST can facilitate such critically-driven explorations of the social world.

In the second part of the chapter, I explained how I use the semi-structured interview method for knowledge production and how I address the limitations of this method.

In the third part of the chapter, I described my approach to data collection and my research participants’ characteristics and backgrounds. Moreover, I considered some ethical issues and described my ways of dealing with them. I outlined my approach to

data analysis and presented my initially developed codes and templates. Lastly, I discussed the use of NVivo in qualitative data analysis.

## Chapter 5. Findings

### 5.1. Introduction

Chapters 5.2 to 5.6 present the major findings of the study that address the research questions of how FWA are **negotiated, obtained** and **managed** by women knowledge workers. Figure 6 (in Chapter 5.2) and Figure 7 (in Chapter 5.5) provide graphic illustrations of the conceptualisation of the experiences of women knowledge workers: *Becoming* and *(Un)becoming Flexible*.

The *Becoming Flexible* concept encompasses structures and active agency deployed by the women knowledge workers in response to the need to negotiate and obtain FWA. The *(Un)becoming Flexible* concept, on the other hand, illuminates how the women managed flexible working and strived to re-align with expected norms and behaviours existent in their employing organisations. This conceptualisation of *Becoming* and *(Un)becoming* is an original contribution to this study and it theorises FWA in the context of women and knowledge work.

The chapter also presents the participants' use of the *metaphor of war* in their descriptions of FWA, and it presents how the women perceived organisational expectations and norms in relation to who an *ideal worker* is and what behaviours they exhibit. Lastly, the chapter provides the findings relating to the participants' perceptions of the outcomes, namely the *intended* and *unintended consequences of FWA*.

Although the flow of the visual data structure begins with first-order concepts, the reporting of the findings start from the aggregate dimensions (conceptualised as *Becoming* and *(Un)becoming Flexible*) to facilitate elucidation. This order of reporting findings has been employed in a number of different studies (Dacin et al. 2010; Nag and Gioia 2012).

### 5.2. Becoming Flexible

In order to understand how women knowledge workers experience negotiating and obtaining FWA the following question was asked:

- How did you negotiate FWA with your manager/HR?
- How difficult/easy was it?

- How comfortable were you requesting FWA?

It is important to note, however, that these questions alone did not exclusively elicit the responses. The answers emerged throughout the conversation, as the participants would often dip in and out of topics naturally, which has the intended effect of semi-structured interviews.

The majority of the participants reported drawing on a number of external and internal structures in order to obtain flexible work in their organisations. Therefore, this aggregate dimension has been labelled *Becoming Flexible* (Figure 6), as it encompasses structures and practices that helped the women knowledge workers gain flexibility in their work schedules. These structures, and the resultant enabled practices are the building blocks of the *women knowledge workers' occupational capital*.

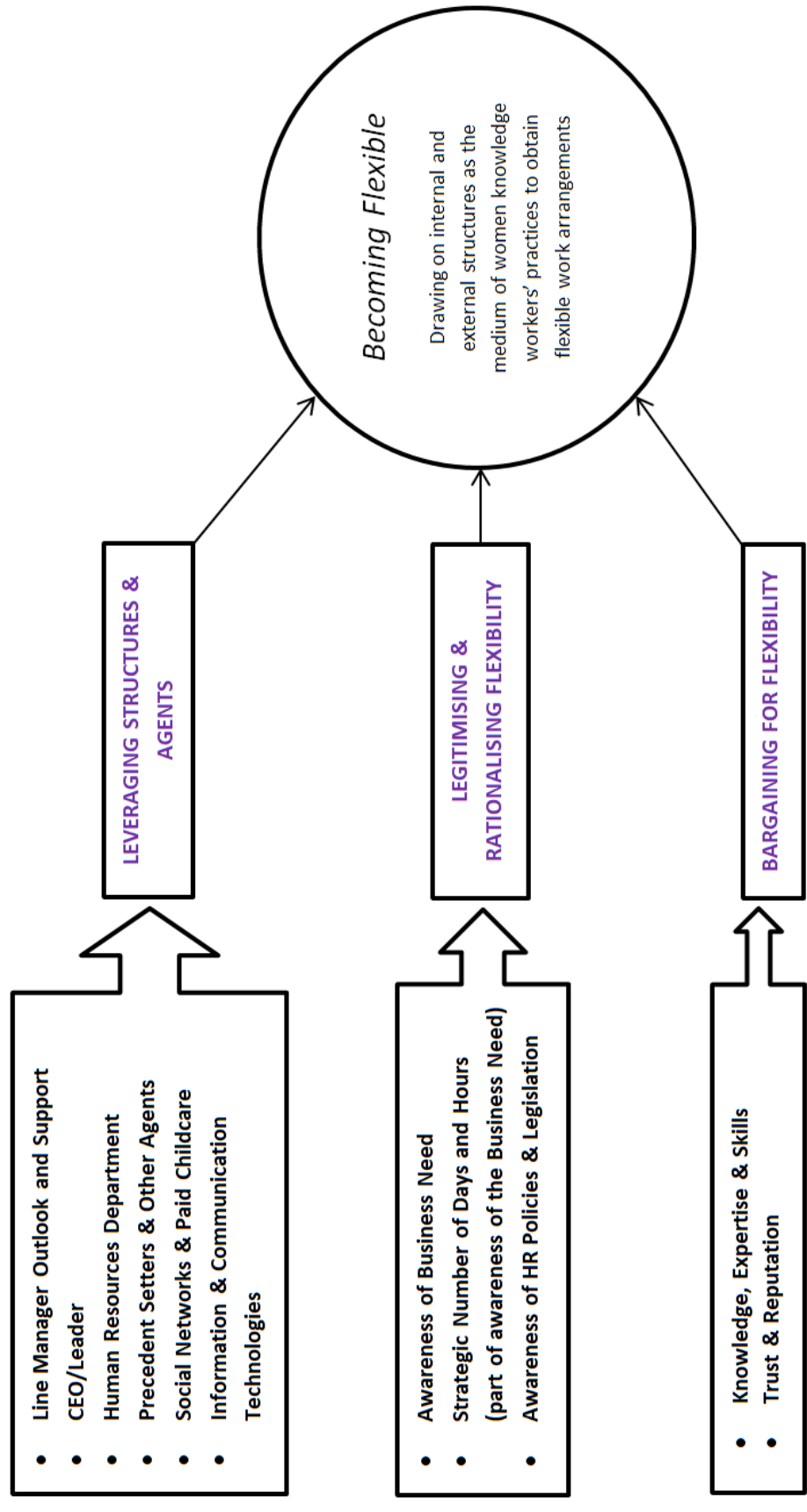


Figure 6. Conceptualisation of *Becoming Flexible*.

## 5.2.1. Leveraging Structures and Agents

The exploration of the *Becoming Flexible* findings will start from leveraging structures and agents and this theme's concomitant first order concepts.

### 5.2.1.1. Line Manager Outlook and Support, CEO/Leader, HR Department

The findings from this study suggest that women knowledge workers leveraged the line managers', CEOs', leaders', and HR departments' support when seeking FWA. The participants were able to succeed in obtaining flexible working if at least one of these agents offered patronage in pursuing these arrangements. This backing, however, appeared to be precarious as the participants viewed their ability to leverage the support of other agents as "luck". This is because managers seemed to have been using their discretion in considering flexibility requests, influenced by their own experience and a general point of view on flexibility.

This situation is evocative of independent forces at play as proposed in QNS (Stones 2005), i.e. structures that build the context of the agent's action-horizon are independent, and therefore completely autonomous from the agent-in-focus, and her wants, desires and conduct. The women knowledge workers felt unable to influence whether their line manager or leader approved of flexible working, and they perceived their support largely as "luck" of being allocated to a particular supervisor, as in the following quote:

"I had quite a good manager, female manager. She was quite happy with [part-time working]. She was quite good. I've been quite lucky. [...] I think it's very much luck of the draw how your manager is." Barbara

This example suggests that managerial discretion is outside of the agent's control and that the discretionary support for FWA provided is viewed as serendipity (Cooper and Baird 2015). The participants highlighted the importance of their line managers' or leaders' discretionary support and personal opinion when it came to agreeing to flexible working requests. Previous research on managerial factors influencing the provision of work-family-life practices shows that such individual-level factors play a more important role than institutional or resource factors (Bardoel 2003).

Managers and leaders do not respond only to the organisational environment, but are instead active agents themselves who exercise their human subjective will (Kaufman 1999). Therefore, as Bardoel (2003, p. 8) argued, they can freely choose whether to accept WLB practices and develop a family-friendly workplace, or to block these initiatives.

Teasdale's (2013) and Kersley et al.'s (2006) findings demonstrated the importance of creating a more sympathetic working environment by female managers to those with caring responsibilities. However, flexibility support-giving was not exclusive to female-only managers in this study. According to the participants, some male managers were also supportive of FWA if they had previously experienced a need for flexible work for childcare or other family issues themselves. Therefore, the findings from the study suggest that both male and female managers can be supportive of flexible work, as their own experience of such schedules influences how they perceive flexible working (McDonald et al. 2007), and how this can facilitate or impede granting access to FWA to subordinates.

The drawback of being "at mercy" of the immediate line manager, was that the participants felt they were unable to influence how their flexibility was viewed when they unexpectedly faced a change to the manager or leader. This may signal some precariousness of their position in a flexible role if they are assigned to a flexibility-resistant supervisor. The case of Tara illustrates such uncertainty and at the same time it provides another example of an external structure, i.e. the HR department that can help to circumvent potential obstacles to obtaining FWA. Although her line manager was resistant, she succeeded in negotiating FWA, because she was able to leverage the influence of the HR department instead:

"I had a different manager at the time and he actually refused my request. [...] He actually said that the job couldn't be done part-time and HR had to intervene and they wanted him to basically provide a business case as to why it couldn't be done part-time and so he couldn't because just saying it can't be done isn't reason enough and so they negotiated for me. Once I put the request in, I didn't actually have to do anything because HR fought my corner in a way I think because he didn't have a valid reason. I think if he had had some valid reasons, then I would have had to put more of a case forward but as it was, I didn't need to." Tara

Tara drew on the power of the HR department to help her obtain flexibility. This enabled her to effectively leverage the external structures she found herself in and allow the HR department to “fight her corner” with the resisting line manager. In some instances, it seems that HR departments are able to assume the employee-advocate role when they identify that line manager’s personal outlook outweighs a reasonable business need as in Tara’s case. This finding aligns with Milliken et al. (1998) who argued that an organisation can comprise a number of different interpretations of managers with regard to institutional and resource constraints that can affect employee access to FWA.

In another case, however, one participant had to circumvent both the reluctant line manager and the HR department by going directly to the CEO to obtain FWA. Such was the case of Helen:

“So I went to the CEO, made an impassioned plea as to why I should be allowed to work four days a week, and ‘Look at what I can do, etc.’ And his reaction was, ‘You can work four days a week as long as you like, [Helen].’ So then when he agreed, then [HR] had to cave in and say, ‘Okay.’ So I was the first person, above like admin secretarial level, in the organization ever to work flexibly. In the intervening, however many years it was, we ended up with a situation where actually everybody was working to flexibly.”  
Helen

The CEO’s accepting attitude allowed Helen to become a trail blazer for flexible work at the higher levels of the organisation. When she faced a blockage from both her line manager and the HR department, she was able to leverage the power and influence of the CEO that eventually enabled not only her, but other employees in her organisation to become flexible, too.

Yvonne also felt her leader’s approval of these arrangements allowed her to work flexibly:

“That’s because [...] we had a director who was like the rest of us, just work flexibly and if there’s result there that’s fine.” Yvonne

These women were able to challenge the system, however, it is doubtful they would have been able to do so without the initial approval from their CEOs or leaders. This finding shows how important it is to secure support for flexibility from at least one



patron within the organisation. What is encouraging, however, is that once such support is found and a precedent is set then it may be easier for others to follow suit.

The importance of leadership in the prevalence of FWA in this study is in line with previous research exploring the attitudes of CEOs to teleworking in output-driven environments (Mayo et al. 2009). The above quotes suggest that women seeking flexibility may strongly benefit from at least one advocate of FWA, whether it is their line manager, CEO or leader, or the HR department. However, such support may not come from all of those sources at the same time.

Moreover, having “someone on your side” can encourage a flexibility-friendly workplace, but women are still relying on the serendipity of who their manager is, what the dominant HR practices are, and whether there is buy-in from their leader in relation to WLB issues. Therefore, as the other powerful agents are independent and autonomous, the participants could only leverage them only partially. This can be illustrated by Helen’s experience in the following years of working flexibly, after her flexibility-supportive CEO left the organisation:

“The big change came when she left, and the second boss, also a female, came in, who clearly disapproved of mothers working. Would never have said that, very clearly. But clearly disapproved of mothers working part-time. [She] started to make it very, very difficult. It was when she took over that you suddenly found yourself being marginalized because you were only part-time. It was clearly that because you only work part-time, you weren't interested in progressing any further.” Helen

This quote shows the precariousness of a once-supportive external structure. Even though a formalised FWA contract cannot be easily withdrawn by the employer, it is possible that more informal sanctions against flexible workers can occur.

Stones’ (2005) independent causal influences explain this dependence on the external structures. The women knowledge workers were unable to influence how their seniors perceived FWA (as these agents are entirely autonomous from others), and they could leverage their power only when they exhibited an accepting stance towards FWA.

#### **5.2.1.2. Precedent Setters and Other Agents**

Another theme identified from the interviews concerns flexible-work precedent setters. For instance, Helen (as in the previous theme) opened up flexible work

opportunities to other women in the organisation. Such trail blazers had already successfully negotiated FWA and were a living proof that these arrangements *can* and *do* work. Teresa highlights this point in the following excerpt:

“[I]t’s easier now that we’ve got some of this work space to actually physically show people what it’s like but when it’s really conceptual that is difficult, because you’re trying to describe something and some people can take that on board, others can’t, they have to see it physically in its innards; [...] now we’ve got a couple of examples where we’ve transformed the work space and people can see ‘Ah, ok, that’s what’s gonna feel like’, ‘This is what it’s gonna look like’. You’ve got case studies, so you can say ‘Right, this person used to work like this, and now they can see how it translates into real life.’” Teresa

The flexible workers already in situ can, firstly, serve as the case studies to resistant line managers and secondly, serve as role models of what flexibility looks like.

Precedent setters initiate a flexible work trend, which can pave the way for others applying for FWA. This mentality of “safety in numbers” and “it can be done” can encourage an increasing number of workers to take up flexible arrangements and can normalise this mode of working. In the quote below, Megan externalises her ability to obtain part-time work onto her team mates who had already pioneered FWA beforehand:

“[...] I was quite lucky because I wasn't the first woman in the team to have a baby and come back part-time. A precedent had already been set. They couldn't really say no. It was just agreeing the days and the times that suited both parties.” Megan

In our conversation, Megan revealed that she would have been quite nervous to request reduced hours, if no one else was working part-time. In her circumstances she felt supported by others working flexibly, because it signalled a degree of acceptance and normalcy. Another participant, Camilla also found that previous cases of flexible employees provided her with much needed confidence:

“I suppose good working examples of other people that managed part-time work well [helps]. It's quite a number of part-time, flexible workers [...], so that probably helps. [...] We all seem to get married and have babies at the same time. Prior to that little flurry, there were a number already. That probably, in two ways, helped: one, it shows that it can work, but also makes it more difficult to say no, I suppose if other people are doing it, and

they're not making an issue of that. Then they have to justify that. That gave me some confidence when I asked for it.” Camilla

Such trail blazers gave the women requesting FWA confidence and evidence that these arrangements could be accepted. Moreover, this precedent afforded them some comfort that it would have been the employer’s responsibility to justify rejection of a flexible working request, meaning that the onus to rationalise this arrangement by the employee was diminished. This finding resonates with previous research showing that the employees surrounded by their immediate workgroup using FWA were more likely to utilise these arrangements themselves due to encouragement and inspiration (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Kossek et al. 1999; Lambert et al. 2008).

Other agents, such as colleagues who showed support for flexible working within the same organisation were also identified as examples of structural support. For instance, the ability to delegate excess tasks emerged as one of the ways flexible working was managed. Sue is a case in point:

“Actually, thinking about it, if there's meeting I can't make and I'm not here, I send [my assistant]. I deputise her. In a way, that works: the counterbalance of part-time and full-time mixing together in a department.”  
Sue

Another example of an agent helping to obtain flexible working was a competent employee to job-share with, who the manager had been already satisfied with, as in Gabriella’s case:

“I think he was very happy with my maternity cover. I think if she had been a nightmare, then it would have been quite different from his point of view”  
Gabriella

Gabriella was able to successfully obtain her flexible arrangement thanks to having a capable co-worker to job-share her role with. In this example, the participant was able to leverage the co-worker’s competence to achieve her own goal of working flexibly. Gabriella felt that the line manager had recognised the benefit of gaining two different talent sets “for the price of one”, however, she felt that if her maternity cover had been unsatisfactory, then her ability to leverage this structure to obtain FWA would have been compromised.

### **5.2.1.3. Social Networks and Paid Childcare**

Another example of external structures drawn upon in order to obtain FWA was social networks and paid childcare. These structures facilitated the daily grapple with work-life schedules, and more importantly enabled the participants to return to work from maternity leave. The participants who had caring responsibilities, but at the same time decided to stay in work for either economic or career reasons reported to be significantly reliant on their social networks. The provision of childcare and the ability to share care responsibilities with other members of the family, or extended family supported the women's choices to return from maternity leave. For instance, Stephanie felt that her ability to work three days a week was only possible thanks to her family agreeing to look after her children:

“[I]t's a challenge. It's never easy working when you've got children as well. I work 3 full days at the moment, and that's fine. I'm very fortunate; I've got family who help out with childcare.” Stephanie

Barbara also felt that the help of her parents and husband facilitated her ability to remain in work on a flexible basis:

“I've got other people that take my daughter to school so I can start early so then I can always finish to do school pickups. [...] My parents help quite a lot and I use things at school, breakfast clubs and stuff. My husband can occasionally do the odd run so I do have those extra things if needs be, if I really needed to stay a bit later and things.” Barbara

This finding aligns with previous research on the importance of both spousal and wider social network support for balancing dual responsibilities (Lee and Duxbury 1998; Almer et al. 2003). This may also extend to the ability to seek flexible working to remain in employment, rather than “opting-out” altogether.

### **5.2.1.4. Information and Communication Technology**

Other identified external structures that facilitated flexible work were the ICT that allowed the participants to work from any location and any time, and transcend time and space constraints imposed by physical offices. In the extract below, Magdalene gave an example of how the ICT facilitated her dual responsibilities and allowed her to work flexibly:

“The constant availability of email and internet, whatever, it does mean that I think that's made it easier for me to do this job. If it wasn't for it, I'm not sure I can do it, because I can work flexibly. The other day my daughter was sick at 8:00 in the morning, so I just emailed work and said, 'I've got to stay at home today, because she's not joining school. She's been sick.' That's fine, because of the internet I can do that.” Magdalene

The existing literature supports this finding that the ICT allows employees to schedule their work hours more flexibly (Handy and Mokhtarian 1996; Kwan 2002; Alexander et al. 2010), and that work tasks completed online are less fixed in time and space, giving the employees higher autonomy (Schwanen and Kwan 2008). The findings also suggest that the availability of the ICT allows the supervisors to monitor the outputs of the homeworking participants. As this clears the uncertainty regarding work contributions, it may be putting the line managers' mind at ease at the same time. This transparency could ultimately facilitate the acceptance of FWA, as in Margaret's example:

“The manager can see the progress of the certain steps and past steps and sections of the training so I think she could see that I was logged during that time. I was picking up emails, sending emails, doing the training online, so I didn't have to prove any further that I'd done this and that.” Margaret

Flexispace or homeworking require high levels of trust between employees and supervisors (Harrington and Ruppel 1999; Martinez-Sanchez et al. 2008), thus the manager's ability to keep track of their employee's online work progress could further contribute to the willingness to grant access to FWA. Although, the ability to monitor online work may be more conducive in circumstances where the levels of trust are low, such surveillance could act as a self-disciplining device for employees, eventually instilling trust between the supervisor and the worker. Therefore, the ability to keep track of online work can act as an external structure facilitating flexible working.

### **5.2.2. Legitimising and Rationalising Flexibility**

The participants reported a number of internal structures (Stones 2005) as a lever to obtain flexible working with their employers. They used their awareness of a particular business need, HR policies and legislation to create a legitimate flexibility request, and they strategically chose specific work-days and hours when rationalising their flexible working application.

### 5.2.2.1. Awareness of the Business Need

Employers are able to reject FWA requests for a number of reasons, however these reasons must be justified with the business need of the organisation (ACAS 2014). Interestingly, the participants reported that their awareness of potential impacts of flexible working on the business was pivotal in drafting their flexible requests. This “insider” knowledge allowed the women to successfully obtain their desired work schedules by being “one step ahead” of their employer. This is illustrated with the following quote:

“It's part of what the role is, what's the role there to do, could you job share it with somebody? Could the role be split? Are there things that actually you could retain and things that could be done by somebody else? I think people have to think about that and how to sell that to an employer and think about what the benefits are to the employer because as far as the employer is concerned, they just want someone to come in and sit down and do that job and get it done.” Tara

Tara underlined the importance of trying to “sell” flexible working through an appropriate job design and a convincing rationale why it would work for the business. This may become problematic for those employees who attempt to negotiate flexibility at interview as they lack the conjuncture-specific knowledge of the organisation, and secondly, those who do not fully grasp the concept of the business case in their circumstances. As in Stones’ (2005) QNS, it is crucial to be able to draw on conjuncture-specific internal structures for agents to achieve their objectives. Here, these structures influenced the participants’ ability to obtain flexible working. These specific structures concerned the particular business setting and the context in which such flexibility could be designed to successfully work for the employer.

The findings show that the women had to exert extra effort to obtain flexible working, as these arrangements were by no means automatically granted. Designing a convincing flexibility rationale may only be accomplished by those workers who have a good understanding of the operations of the organisation, and those more astute with conjuncture-specific knowledge of the internal structures that operate within the business. The awareness of the business case for flexibility was perceived as influential by several interviewees, and one of the participants also suggested that apart from

insider knowledge, it is important to have the capability to recognise what is and what is not desirable for the employer:

“I think individuals themselves need to understand the legitimacy of working flexibly and being confident about that and be your own advocates about it, and design a case that says that this could work, blah, blah to convince [...] there is an issue about individuals’ competence to do that.”  
Sarah

The findings suggest that awareness of the idiosyncratic environment of the organisation and the characteristics of the business need in conjunction with the capability to construct a compelling flexibility request might be useful when negotiating FWA. Powell and Mainiero’s (1999) research on managerial decisions regarding FWA proposed that flexible arrangements disruptive to business may not bode well. The current study supports this finding and highlights that women knowledge workers who apply for FWA may strongly benefit from drafting their requests in a way that their proposed schedules do not pose any risks to the business operations. This in turn could encourage a more accepting attitude towards alternative work schedules among managers. On the other hand, this study illuminates that organisations may be shifting the responsibility of designing flexible working onto the women employees. It is the flexibility users who have to demonstrate how these arrangements would work without impacting the business. This shows that flexibility is an aberration that has to be strategically obtained and the employer persuaded of its neutral and diminished negative effect on the business.

#### **5.2.2.2. Strategic Number of Days and Hours**

This theme is linked to the awareness of the business need and it concerns the participants’ strategies to select specific days and hours when planning their flexible working requests. The participants often demonstrated that they had reflected on how to shape their alternative schedules to fit the business, but also to accommodate their dual responsibilities. Yvonne is a case in point:

“I knew that I couldn't really ask for two days. I knew that they wouldn't agree to that. Other women in the organization had gone to three. I didn't want to do four, because I'd heard that if you worked a four day week it's pretty much working full-time. They give you a full-time job and you've got to cram it into four days. You don't get the money for five days. I thought

three days is probably a good compromise. They were fine. I just said what I wanted and they said ‘Yep, that’s fine. No problem.’ ” Yvonne

In the above quote, it is clear that Yvonne had drawn on the experience of others before requesting her own flexible schedule, but had also considered what would have worked for her personally and what the employer would have been willing to accept. This conjuncturally-specific knowledge of internal structures enabled her to successfully persuade her employer to grant her FWA. Another example is Charlotte:

“That’s the way I kind of always approached it, to show that by working in that way how I still deliver what I’m needed to deliver and how it’d still support the people that relying on me, [...] so when I returned to work from being on maternity leave I was working in a working pattern of 4 days one week, 3 days the next, so there were two days mid-week where potentially I wasn’t there to support the team, so it was making sure that the hours the two days a week that I was out of the office didn’t impact on the team too much, so I still spent time with the team [...] so it was just demonstrating that I was still able to provide that support” Charlotte

In order to “soften the blow” of being absent from work on her flexible days Charlotte selected a specific number of days to cater for her team who also worked part-time. Throughout her interview, she continually highlighted the need to demonstrate her commitment to the business need, rather than to her personal circumstances related to childcare, which suggests that she had internalised the organisational expectations.

### **5.2.2.3. Awareness of HR Policies & Legislation**

The final cluster of structures that helped the participants to legitimise and rationalise flexibility was their awareness of HR policies and the right to request flexible working legislation. Knowledge of how flexible working requests are protected by legislation offered the participants confidence when approaching the employer to request FWA. For instance, one of the participants had actually authored the organisation’s maternity policy, which meant she had a thorough understanding of her rights:

“I genuinely think [knowledge is power] because had I not come from that background, I wouldn’t necessarily have known the people who were working throughout the organization who were part-time. I wouldn’t have had that knowledge that you are able to request it. I know it’s all out there but if you don’t know where to look for it, and because I actually wrote the



maternity policy because at the time that was part of my job, so the thing about flexible work and being able to request it, I actually wrote it so I had that knowledge and I think there are probably examples across the university where people just went, 'Oh, okay then', because they didn't know. They didn't know that they could argue against it or that they could fight against it." Tara

Tara suggested that her comprehensive knowledge of flexibility policies meant that she was able to legitimise and confidently demand her flexible working request, unlike others who might have capitulated when their requests were rejected. This example highlights the power of the conjuncture-specific internal structures that Tara was able to leverage to obtain FWA. The mere existence of HR policies and legislation might not be enough to promote take-up of flexible working in organisations. The individuals' capability to engage in researching this topic and ultimately their knowledge of their rights played a crucial role. Other participants also expressed strong awareness of the organisations' legal requirement to consider flexible working requests and make adjustments:

"That is a legal duty. They have to consider it." Megan

"I was pretty comfortable [requesting FWA], because I'd already done two years full-time, and I had just progressed, and I know that there's legally, you know a responsibility of the university [to employees] with small children to look into this and make, you know adjustment. [...] I think it's a legal requirement, whether they like it or not I think it's a separate matter, [...] so I don't know whether human resources is supportive or not. I think they just have a legal thing. [...] I just knew that legally with small children, they should do that flexibility." Maya

Maya requested her FWA prior to the most recent update to legislation (ACAS 2016) and she was aware of her right to request flexibility for childcare reasons. This knowledge allowed Maya to "comfortably" apply for FWA, despite the possibility that the organisation or the HR department might have "not liked it".

The above findings suggest that the individual women knowledge workers needed to have access to knowledge and awareness of the business need to enable them to negotiate by successfully "selling" alternative working to their managers (Kelly and Kalev 2006; Donnelly et al. 2012). The findings indirectly support previous research which suggested that employees seeking flexibility who have a "poorly developed understanding" of FWA policies and procedures may experience a reduction in their

capacity to negotiate flexible working (Cooper and Baird 2015, p. 574). This study also suggests how important awareness and knowledge of policies and practices are in determining the outcomes of requesting FWA. The participants leveraged their particular conjuncture-specific knowledge of the organisation and how flexibility could have been operationalised. This could be particularly attributed to the women knowledge workers' who enjoy relatively high levels of education and experience. Moreover, their intellectual capability, or general-dispositional internal structures may have enabled them to develop an awareness of flexibility policies and practices over time, but also to recognise the experiences of other women colleagues, and tailor their flexibility request to the needs of the organisation. Interestingly, some participants actually reported to have more knowledge than their line managers:

“I knew ... I had read the policy on flexible working application, so I knew the paperwork that I had to complete, and the kind of questions that I would need to answer on that proposal. [My manager] said, ‘Put the application in’. He hadn't seen the paperwork at that stage, so he wasn't familiar with the policy really, and the questions that I needed to answer, so I told him the questions [...] I knew more about the official policy than he had, so I told him the sort of questions that were on the form, in terms of how are you going to ... What is your proposal? What is the risk to the team? What is the risk to the [organisation]? I said, ‘I'll have a go at that.’ ” Gabriella

Gabriella's awareness of HR policies allowed her to take control of the formal flexibility request and “own” this process. This may strongly benefit women knowledge workers, however, a potential concern is that if other women employees lack this capacity to draw on the knowledge of policies, then they may not be able to successfully obtain FWA, and either abandon the request, or compromise on the scope of their request. Cooper and Baird's (2015) study has shown that when both the employees and line managers display a lack of awareness of flexible working policies and practices, the employees requesting such options may fall victim of managerial authority granting FWA “according to their own understanding and organisational position” (p. 579). This also echoes Kelly and Kalev's conclusion that the right to request FWA “institutionalises managerial discretion, rather than creating outright rights for employees” (2006, p. 379).

### 5.2.3. Bargaining for Flexibility

The participants also reported using their human and social capital to help them obtain FWA. They used their knowledge, expertise and skills, and trust and reputation to bargain with for flexible working options.

#### 5.2.3.1. Knowledge, Expertise & Skills

The analysis of the interviews revealed that in order to secure flexible working schedules the women often drew on their accumulated human and social capital in the form of their knowledge, expertise and skills. These internal structures were used to either secure a flexible schedule in the organisation when applying for a job, or when the participant was already employed often working full-time wishing to switch to flexible working to address her dual responsibilities. For instance, Mila recalls her experience when she worked full-time and decided to switch to part-time:

“They offered me the job [on a part-time basis] actually, because it was working on [...] a system that I knew really well. And had worked on it before and they were looking for some help testing it. Rather than just going and bringing in somebody off the street who they'd have to train up, they knew I was there, I was available, and I was happy to do three days a week. They knew that I could do the job really well. It was less risk to them to employ me.” Mila

Mila's expert knowledge of a particular system afforded her the bargaining chip needed to secure her FWA, which meant that the organisation preferred to offer the part-time position to her, rather than employ someone new on a full-time basis. The organisation perceived Mila to be a less risky option, since she had already proven herself and developed her expertise needed in the business.

Greenberg and Landry's (2011) study showed that when negotiating FWA it was only the awareness of the employees' individual power in the company that helped to obtain flexibility, and that being a high performer or a critical job holder did not show any correlation. However, this study's findings suggest that women knowledge workers' professional expertise might have provided them a vital advantage when applying for FWA. This is because the employer was aware of the desirable to them *know-how* (DeFillippi and Arthur 1994), giving them the advantage of “expert power” (French and Raven 1959) when applying for FWA.

Another example of drawing on knowledge and skills to negotiate FWA is provided by Stephanie who applied to work on a part-time basis in a full-time post:

“The post was advertised on a full-time basis, but I applied with my application I did a cover letter and I said I wanted to work 3 days. I was interviewed and fortunately successful and they employed me on a part-time basis [...]. I think [my qualifications] did help. I can't remember from memory whether it was a [...] qualification, I think they asked for it to be essential. So, clearly I was shortlisted on that basis. Without a doubt, it helped. [...] I hope my experience I guess as well that I could bring.”  
Stephanie

This participant reported that it was her qualifications and the experience she was able to offer to the organisation that provided her with a competitive advantage to secure the part-time post.

#### **5.2.3.2. Trust & Reputation**

Other internal structures in the form of human and social capital drawn upon by the women knowledge workers included their earned trust and reputation. Trust has the potential to facilitate FWA, since it minimises managerial “self-protective actions in preparation for the possibility of others’ opportunistic behaviours” (Jarvenpaa et al. 1998, p. 31). This means that where there is a trusting relationship with an employee, the manager’s concerns about possible shirking are reduced.

One participant, Lina, decided to request FWA to spend some time with her baby daughter, even though her husband assumed the main caregiving role. In the following quote she described her trusting relationship with her supervisor:

“I've got a very good relationship with my manager, and she does trust me, and she knows that if she didn't at least trial it [FWA], then I would be looking elsewhere. She knows that. Yeah, I think she trusts me to get on with it, and we've got that open and honest conversation, if things do need to change, so I have no doubt that she would tell me if it wasn't working, or if there was an issue about something, I'd be probably the first to know. I think if it was a new job and they advertised it and I said, ‘Can I do it part-time?’ They would probably say no” Lina

This example suggests that Lina’s established trust helped to persuade her line manager to accommodate her FWA request. This is in line with the findings from

Martinez-Sanchez et al.'s (2008) study that telework requires high levels of trust in organisational cultures in order for them to work.

As well as trust, established reputation also appeared to play an important role in bargaining for flexibility, as in Bethany's and Anne's example:

“My line manager at the time said yes [to part-time], ‘It's because it's you Bethany that's asked.’ I thought, that's so lovely! He said, ‘Because we feel that you're competent in your work, you know what you're doing, and you will manage your workload without any issue.’ It was a really nice compliment to get back.” Bethany

“[T]o be honest I'm the last person who would want to be arrogant, I was doing a very good job of what I was doing and I think they realised if they wanted to keep me they needed to adapt, because my husband is probably the main breadwinner and I would have had to adapt to his career as well, and I think having also had probably seven or eight years within the department I was known, I was a known commodity. So they knew that I would continue to do my job to the best of my ability.” Anne

Both participants reported that they were recognised for their commitment and hard work by their employers and felt that this made the difference when requesting FWA. Therefore, the accumulated human and social capital the participants possessed allowed them to benefit from the right to request flexible working and negotiate it successfully.

### **5.3. The Metaphor of War**

There was an undercurrent of tension and conflict throughout the interviews when the participants recalled how flexibility was obtained and experienced. Although, as presented above, the participants had supportive structures for negotiating flexibility around them and within them in the form of human and social capital, still they did not feel the process was “peaceful”:

“There was an issue with the contract and [female manager] was quite happy to *fight* for me [...] she was quite happy to pick up a fight for me”  
Maya

“So I decided to make a *fight* of it. So I requested again that I could carry on working four days a week. I was turned down again” Helen

“[Female colleague] works really hard. She's really good at her job and because the person at the top is very anti-women doing that, it took her

*blood, sweat, and lots of tears* to get any agreement, but you know what? She persevered with it and she took it to HR” Mila referring to a colleague who requested FWA

“In a way, hanging on worked in my favour. You can't almost let them *win*. You hang on. All those managers are gone, but I'm still here” Sue

“I learned a lot of the other [...] companies, a lot of my other friends who haven't got that part-time work and the flexibility or they had to *fight tooth and nail* to get it” Sue

“A friend of mine wanted to swap one hour. She works part-time as well. She's a[n] [...] assistant and she wanted to move one hour from one day to another. Now she had to *fight* for it for half a year” Margaret

“[...] have the support from my immediate line manager and I think there was a time when she said ‘I did *fight* for you to have different pattern, but you couldn't’ ” Margaret

“We moved under a new team and an email came out a few weeks ago that was like, ‘You can't start before 8:00’, but my manager, because we're a team within a team, has said: ‘Hopefully we can ... I'll *fight* your corner on that’ ” Barbara

“Once I put the request in, I didn't actually have to do anything because HR *fought* my corner in a way I think because he didn't have a valid reason” Tara

“I was lucky enough to get it without too much of a *fight*” Tara

These quotes illustrate that there was a perceived conflict of interest between the individuals seeking flexibility and the organisation. Thus, the resources that the participants enjoyed while negotiating flexibility could be conceptualised as an “artillery” needed in order to succeed. The key to understanding this tension can be found in the notion of the ideal worker norm presented next.

## **5.4. Being an Ideal Worker**

The ubiquity of ideal worker normativities across different organisations has been evidenced by previous research (Bailyn 2006; Webber and Williams 2008a) and the women's constant pressure to adjust to organisational time norms is well established (Hochschild 1997). The participants in this study also expressed their perceptions of how employees should behave and what they should be characterised by in order to be deemed “good performers” to contribute to future promotion and success. The most

common themes related to the extra mile, commitment, availability and visibility. The interview questions asked related to what good performers behave like and what their characteristics are.

### **5.4.1. Extra Mile**

“Going the extra mile” or working “above and beyond” one’s job description and responsibilities was one of the ways to behave in order to do well in the participants’ organisations. This involved “never saying no” and “not being too militant” about contracted work hours. For instance, Lina described how she understood the role of knowledge worker and that she expected her staff to behave in a certain way to prove they were “true” knowledge workers:

“I’ve got a part-timer who works for me, and she is “inspiring” in the fact that she comes in and then leaves on time, every time, but then is that a true knowledge worker? I think if you want to turn the wheel, then you can do that. I think if you are a true knowledge worker, and you want to do things, then you do have to take that responsibility, take that initiative, go above and beyond to make sure you are on the way. [...] my other colleague who's got paid childcare, if I ask her to do something, she would make it happen. Even if it was inconvenient to her, she would make it happen, and she's a *true knowledge worker*. I think that's where the differences are.” Lina

Leaving on time was not desirable and was not seen as worthy of “true” knowledge workers and Lina subscribed to this ideology herself by conforming to this implicit expectation. This quote illustrates that knowledge workers might be considered superior to non-knowledge workers who are expected to merely “turn the wheel”, and they might be experiencing additional pressure to excel and exceed expectations. They are not just any workers who work from necessity, but they should want to “do” things beyond the instrumental scope of work. This suggests conceptualising knowledge work as higher-status than other work and that only “true” knowledge workers go the extra mile.

### **5.4.2. Commitment**

Commitment was an important ingredient contributing to an IWN. Sometimes it meant that it was easier to be childfree, so that there were no interruptions to the work

sphere. Being committed meant putting in more hours and having the capacity to fully devote oneself to the organisation:

“I think you have to demonstrate commitment, you have to be engaged with the work, go the extra mile, you have to be [...] in the right place at the right time.” Tania

Tania’s quote demonstrates that commitment often went hand in hand with going the extra mile and being able to seize any opportunities when they emerged. Some participants felt that commitment was easier to achieve for men, as they were not involved in childcare as heavily as women. They suggested that a good performer has no children, which confirms that an IWN based on total and full commitment to work is still present in the organisations employing knowledge workers.

### **5.4.3. Availability**

Availability was another key element of an IWN. This often necessitated working full-time in order to maximise the time spent either in the office or online while teleworking. Reduced schedules were seen to hinder this availability, especially when caring for children was involved. The participants felt that it was best not to have children to succeed at work, as it enabled employees to work long hours without interruptions.

### **5.4.4. Visibility**

Visibility was often reported in tandem with presence and presenteeism. It was important to be on “show” for the sake of one’s career, as in Aziza’s quote:

“[C]areer wise I think is better you are at work certain hours. You know, you’re showing that you’re there” Aziza

Being visible also required ensuring that the managers and colleagues were aware of the employee’s contribution to organisational success and this was possible and achievable through becoming own PR agent and “shouting” about one’s accomplishments.

To sum up, working flexibly was perceived as posing a challenge to being able to display the characteristics and behaviours of an ideal worker. Therefore, the participants



generally agreed that although not impossible, FWA made it more difficult to channel the ideal worker image. Tania demonstrated this in the following quote:

“I think it’s probably harder for someone who works flexibly to display all those characteristics. It’s a really interesting question. Yes, I think it can be done, but I think it needs probably extra effort.” Tania

Further evidence to illustrate the notion of an ideal worker is provided in Table 4.

<b>The Extra Mile</b>
<p>“go over and above what you should be doing in the job you’re doing”            “Not getting paid for it [I went] over and above what I was expected to do” Amanda            “doing a good job well and a bit more” Alice            “it's what level you're prepared to go above and beyond” Lina            “Don't say no” Jan            “Just do that little bit extra” Mila            “not to be too rigid or too militant about what she will and won't do and when and where she won't and will do it” Sue            “generally always say yes to everything [laughing]” Barbara            “they put in a lot of extra hours; they go above and beyond what they need to do” Danny            “always ready to take on extra tasks” Gabriella</p>
<b>Commitment</b>
<p>“probably that means a commitment of 50 hours, or [...] they probably need to work a lot harder and more hours and that’s not a possibility with a family” Maya            “still this perception exist that people who work flexibly are not as committed to the organisation as other people. In some way they compromise their loyalty to the organisation by working fewer hours than some of their other colleagues” Tania            “there’s still a perception here that yes, when you’re working part-time you’re not seriously committed” Amanda            “it's the commitment and a lot of the time it's just the workload. I think the higher up you go you've just got to put in those hours generally” Barbara            “Commitment is easier if you’re a male” Anne            “I would say, ‘Become a male.’ I don't know [laughing]” Marianna</p>

Availability
<p>“they are really self-motivated and they have a lot of self-discipline, that’s what I can see in my team. They just work like 24 hours, always available for everything, have to be always available and working day and night and they have so much self-discipline” Patricia</p> <p>“there is a sense of us having to be present and be available” Hazel</p> <p>“Work full-time” Marianna</p> <p>“If you want to progress, you've got to work full-time” Margaret</p> <p>“Does a really good job, is somebody that they work full-time, they don't have kids and they are very thorough” Danny</p> <p>“Works long hours, doesn't have children” Helia</p>
Visibility
<p>“visibility is important, when they see you at work, even if you don’t do much, you’re just sitting behind your desk, they think you’re working and it could help with your career” Aziza</p> <p>“you must be visible to the important people of the company so they know about you” Patricia</p> <p>“Not necessarily because you're working full-time it's just because you're around more and you're more visible. I think it's the visibility issue” Sarah</p> <p>“be very visible and confident [...] I've noticed in this organization in particular you can be really diligent and get all your work done, but actually if you're not going to the right meetings and getting seen by the right people, I think you can get overlooked. I think it's being seen really” Barbara</p> <p>“you need to be visible, so although you're working part-time, so your physical presence here is less, you need to remain visible to people” Gabriella</p>

**Table 4. Being an ideal worker quotations.**

The participants’ perceptions and their awareness of this IWN are important to understand how and why the theme of *(Un)becoming Flexible* emerged from the data, which is discussed next. It appears that the IWN internalised by the participants influenced how they felt they should behave and what characteristics to display in the workplace.

## 5.5. (Un)becoming Flexible

The majority of the participants reported a number of various strategies that they used after they secured FWA. The emergence of such practices was not purposefully elicited by asking whether they used any specific strategies. Rather, these practices were reported through digression when addressing the interview questions regarding their

active agency. For instance, the following questions prompted the participants to list different ways of dealing with flexible arrangements:

- How do you use FWA?
- How do you manage them?

Additionally, supplementary impromptu questions were asked if the participants touched upon the particular issue of what it meant to “keep up” with the managers’ or the organisations’ expectations. Furthermore, questions relating to advantages and disadvantages of FWA also elicited strategies of managing flexible working.

The analysis of these practices suggests that they were carried out in order to re-align with the IWN and fit back into the organisation’s culture, since flexible working can be seen as a deviation from the norm. Therefore, this aggregate dimension is evocative of strategies not to become or cease to be such an aberration; therefore it has been named *(Un)becoming Flexible* (Figure 7).

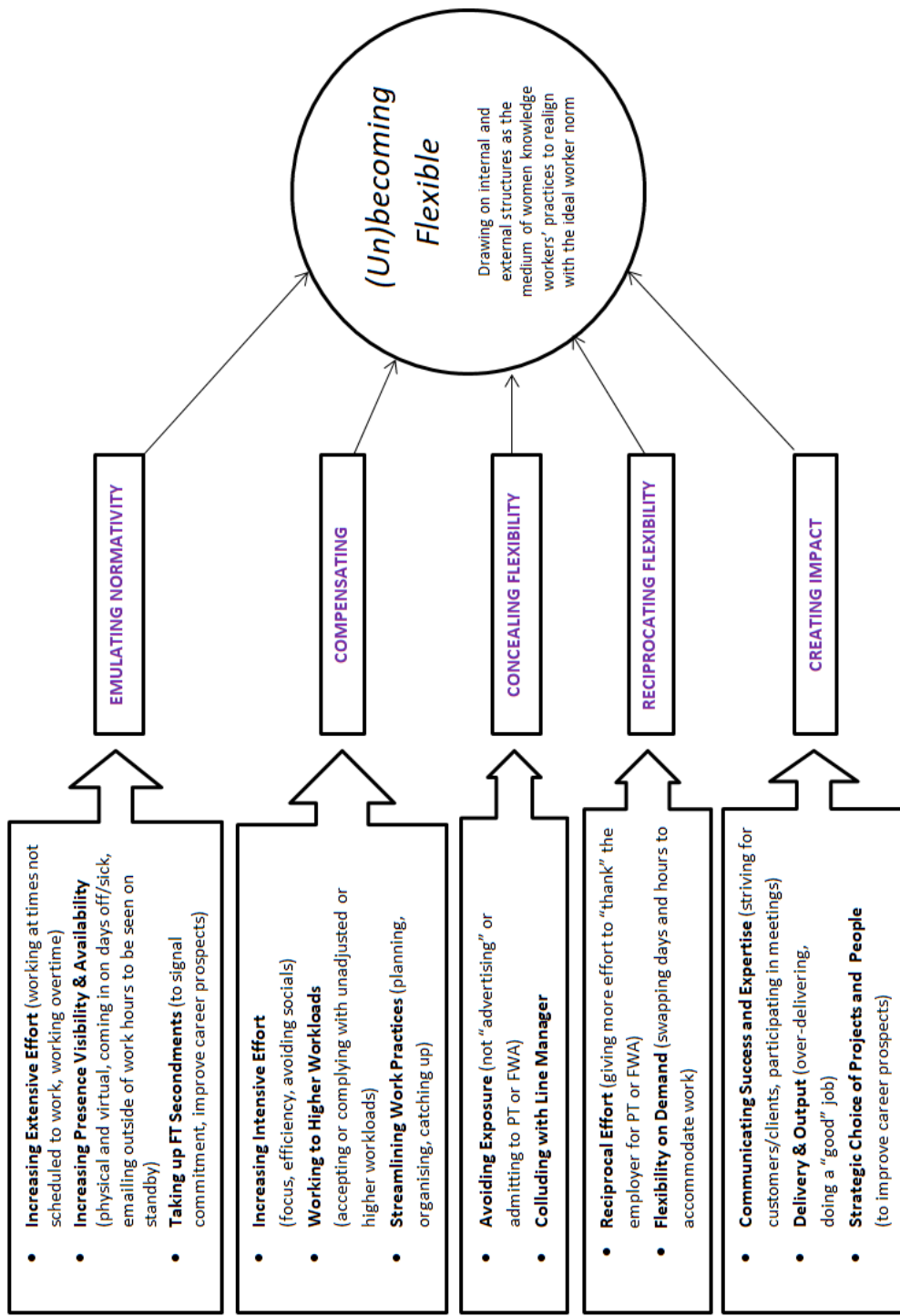


Figure 7. Conceptualisation of (Un)becoming Flexible.

### 5.5.1. Emulating Normativity

The first cluster of strategies has been themed as *Emulating Normativity* and comprises practices such as increasing extensive effort, increasing presence, visibility and availability, and taking up full-time secondments.

### 5.5.1.1. Increasing Extensive Effort

Extensive effort has been previously conceptualised by Green (2001) who defined it as the time spent at work, as opposed to intensive effort as physical and mental input. Most of the interviewed women knowledge workers described their flexible working patterns as extending beyond their contractual hours, such as working at times not scheduled to work or working unpaid overtime. These intensified patterns were not always necessarily imposed by the organisation or the line manager, as in previous research (Kelliher and Anderson 2010), but they were also enabled by the women themselves, as they felt they were choosing to do so. One of the participants, Lina talked about her choices in how she structured her working schedule:

“I know I do more than [my contract hours]. [...] I don't tend to take lunch breaks, but that's my personal choice. [...] I've got emails on my phone, and on a normal Thursday/Friday afternoon, I will have it with me, because I can, and I am contactable if I need to be, and I might just scroll through a few emails, and get a few things moving in the meantime, if I need to. Nothing major, but I just keep things ticking over.” Lina

Not only was Lina fully aware of extending her hours, but she also felt it was her choice, rather than a directly imposed or prescribed way of working by her line manager. Keeping things “ticking over” may suggest her desire to keep in control of her work duties and being able to respond when necessary. Other examples of this “choice” of increasing intensive effort are given by Jan, Hazel, and Christina:

“I'll probably need to work quite late [...] That's my own choice. Because I've got deadlines that I need to meet.” Jan

“I do sometimes find myself working in the evenings or a lot of the reading, research I've done [...] But I wouldn't do it if I didn't really want to do it.” Hazel

“I think the company does benefit from a lot of people's loyalty and wanting to do a good job, not from pressure that's put on them by managers or anybody else, more the pressure they put on themselves. You don't want to let your team down, other people down, so you put in the hours to get the job done.” Christina

These examples suggest that the participants wanted not only to remain in control of their work, but also to ensure that their reputation was preserved among the management and co-workers. Jan felt that not meeting the deadlines would have clearly

sent a negative message to her employer about her commitment. On the other hand, Christina was more concerned about letting her colleagues down and the social consequences of not working as extensively as others (Kelliher and Anderson 2010).

Contrary to the above, Anne felt that the increased extensive effort was imposed onto her by the employer and the standard level agreements she was obliged to observe:

“I’m working too much, I’m doing a job which some people full-time would do, [...] and I am needed to be available and clearing emails as I think, because we are encouraged to respond to students within twenty four hours. I don’t think there’s ever been a day when I’ve ever had a whole day off.”  
Anne

Anne suggested her employer “encouraged” staff to respond within a specific timeframe, which was not explicitly imposed, but rather indirectly expected. This may suggest that even when the participants themselves did not wish to increase their extensive effort, the pressure from the organisation to some extent dictated that they did so. This finding aligns with some existing research on work intensification of those who work flexibly (Baruch and Nicholson 1997). It also helps to explain why this occurs, since flexible workers are often perceived as lacking commitment and less willing to exercise more effort (Steffy and Jones 1990). This may result in flexible workers striving to maintain their good reputation previously gained on a full-time basis, or establish themselves as reputable and trustworthy when joining the organisation on a flexible basis.

#### **5.5.1.2. Increasing Presence, Visibility, and Availability**

The participants also reported increasing their physical and virtual presence, visibility and availability in the workplace. This was achieved by working on their days off, or coming to work despite sickness, or emailing managers and colleagues outside of their working hours to be seen “on standby” or committed. These strategies are illustrated by the examples of Barbara, Tara and Gabriella:

“A couple of years ago, we were going through a restructure and quite an important meeting. I think that was when I was 4 days a week, and it was on a Wednesday on my day off so I asked my parents to look after my daughter for a couple of weeks so I could come in, partly for me because I didn't want to miss out, but also ‘I am committed.’ ” Barbara

“I do think there's a tendency to work perhaps more and I'm certainly conscious when I do work at home. There's always that kind of inverted commas, ‘Oh, she's working at home,’ which means you sat on the sofa in your PJs watching Jeremy Kyle or something and you almost feel like you have to work harder and you have to prove so you have to email everybody every 10 seconds to prove that you're actually working and things like that.”

Tara

“I would say you need to be visible, so although you're working part-time, so your physical presence here is less, you need to remain visible to people, so you need to still keep up with contacts, networking and making those good relationships, not just in your team, but across the [organisation]. You don't want people to forget about you, basically.” Gabriella

A number of previous studies demonstrated a loss of visibility when teleworking (Peiperl and Baruch 1997; Mann et al. 2000; Harris 2003). In contrast, Maruyama and Tietze (2012) argued that the loss of visibility was not as severe as the surveyed teleworkers had originally feared it to be. The findings from this study suggest that this discrepancy could be due to the flexible workers actively strategising their visibility and presence to control the damage that working flexibly may have inflicted on their established reputation. Since visibility is a key ingredient for positive career outcomes (Haddon and Lewis 1994; McDonald et al. 2008), the participants may have reflected that working flexibly could have jeopardised their career prospects and may have decided to engage in such strategies.

### **5.5.1.3. Taking up Full-Time Secondments**

Secondments offer temporary involvement in projects or roles which could contribute to career development. It has been previously recognised in research that employees perceive secondments to be valuable career opportunities (Hamilton and Wilkie 2001; Powell 2014). Correspondingly, they might also help to signal commitment and the worker's willingness to the employer.

One of the ways in which the participants tried to *emulate normativity* was through secondments and increasing their working hours to match the employer's requirements. For instance, Margaret employed on a part-time basis, managed to secure a secondment position and increased her hours to almost full-time:

“[The secondment] was offered as a full-time role, however when applying I was told that it could be a job share of two part-timers. [...] but actually I've

decided that I will ... I had an initial chat with my current [...] line manager saying that actually I could work almost full-time. She goes 'Oh that would be great'. That was the impression she gave, and I said 'Okay', maybe I'll be looked at better if I did offer myself to almost full-time hours.' ” Margaret

Prior to the secondment, Margaret felt that she lacked confidence to be promoted and that by offering to increase her hours she would be looked at more favourably by her line manager. Indeed, her supervisor was satisfied when she suggested increasing her hours to accommodate the secondment requirements. She reported that it “was really the first step [...] to develop [...] career forward” and that this decision had boosted her autonomy and a relationship of trust with her manager.

Another participant, Megan accepted a secondment project which also meant she increased her hours. In the interview, she felt that although she found the additional workload difficult to manage, she benefitted from being solely responsible for the project:

“I suppose, I used to think it first when I first started working flexibly that it was for my career it was a bad thing because you're always missing out on something if you're gone for a couple of days, you come in and you've missed out on something. The last year, being on this secondment because I've been a one-man-band on a project, it doesn't really matter if I'm in there 5 days or 3 days. I'm the one person dealing with that.” Megan

By being a “one-man-band”, Megan felt a total responsibility for her work outputs, which could have resulted in two consequences. First, she felt her career prospects were in “her own hands”, as she had the sole agentic power to steer the project and ultimately claim its success. However, the other possible consequence of such total responsibility was an overwhelming sense of duty and an impossibility of delegating any tasks to anyone to improve Megan’s WLB. During the interview, she complained of exhaustion and working in the evenings and weekends. Nevertheless, taking up temporary secondments with increased hours may have been an attempt to signal commitment to the organisation and re-align with the norm of long working hours.



## 5.5.2. Compensating

### 5.5.2.1. Increasing Intensive Effort

*Intensive work effort* has been defined by Green (2001) as physical and mental input, as opposed to *extensive effort* which relates to time spent working, reported in the previous section. Burchell et al. (2002, p. 72) labelled it as “the effort employees put into their jobs during the time that they are working”. The participants in this study reported several different ways in which increasing intensive work effort took place. This has been interpreted here as *compensating* for their nonconformity to full-time, full-availability schedules and attempting to reconstruct flexibility as something normative.

For instance, the participants reported to increase their focus during working hours, trying to work efficiently to maximise on the time available to work, and avoiding socialising with colleagues in the office. In the extract below, Marianna described how she perceived her own work effort and that of other full-time employees:

“They pay me less. I think you get much better value for the money, actually. I'm very focused when I'm there. I work far harder than most of the people who work full-time, in my opinion. I think they would say that for a lot of the part-timers, actually. People have said that, that they think part-timers are more focused. It's a better value for the money because they're only there for a short time, and yet they're very focused. I probably do four days' work in two and a half days. Whereas, if I was there five days, I might well do four days' work as well. A lot of the managers I work with are sitting there looking at cars on the internet, nothing to do with their work. [...] They don't have to hurry; they've got loads of time to do their work, so they fill in the time chatting and looking at irrelevant websites.” Marianna

Marianna felt that she was working much harder than other employees during the office hours and reasoned that she did not have the luxury of time compared to the full-time employees (Higgins et al. 2000). Aziza was also compelled to work harder while at home to counteract any negative perceptions of homeworking:

“You're more focused and also you feel inside you that you have to work more, I don't know. Because they think you're at home, maybe you are not working, and you're working extra.” Aziza

Kelliher and Anderson (2010) suggested that there is absence of research on intensive effort, as it appears illogical that work intensification can be a result of WLB

policies. However, the authors identified a number of ways in which increasing intensive effort might occur whilst working flexibly. This study's findings suggest that increasing intensive effort may be linked to the flexible knowledge workers' desire to compensate for their flexible working, and control any negative effects of FWA on perceived commitment and reputation.

#### **5.5.2.2. Working to Higher Workloads**

Many participants in this study experienced full-time workloads unadjusted to their reduced-time schedules. However, there was a sense of either acceptance, or inability to influence this situation by the participants. Some of the women felt that having a high workload was the price for the ability to work flexibly, and others suggested that accepting higher workloads was their own choice to maintain their position in the organisation. For instance, Helen illustrated how she felt it was her choice to accept the unadjusted workload, and at the same time she suggested that the manager's expectations of her contributions remained the same:

“I did the same amount of work. I just did it in four days. [...] It was your decision. But there was a certain expectation. And the expectation on me wasn't any less just because I worked four days a week. [...] I was still exactly the same as full-time.” Helen

Another participant, Charlotte reported that she had to adopt to the expectations she placed on herself, and learn about how much work she was able to complete in her reduced-work schedule:

“I think there's the tendency to try and still maintain a full-time workload, I think you have to, it's that you have to learn to accept that you can't if you're working part-time, and that it's not part of the job share, that you can't be as productive as a full-time person, because you're not here and you're not paid to do that amount of work.” Charlotte

The above two quotes suggest that the women were reflective about the unadjusted full-time workloads, but they placed the locus of control on themselves in that it was their decision. Contrary to the above belief in having a choice by Charlotte and Helen, other participants felt that their workloads were imposed by the organisation:

“The workload [is] definitely not adjusted to the fact that I only work part-time, no. I don't have 80 per cent workload for 80 per cent, you know, full-

time equivalent, working hours. Definitely not. [...] I've got an over, it's a ridiculous workload. It's really busy." Helia

"I'm expected to do the same amount. Nobody does my type of work, but they do still expect me to work on the same amount of projects or to get the things done." Jan

Women knowledge workers are thus facing a double problematic: not only are they compelled to channel the ideal worker behaviours of juggling high workloads, but also they are operationally unable to decrease their workload due to their unique roles within the organisation. They are trapped by their own skills, as Patricia observed:

"I doubt there will be a second person to just to split the work" Patricia

Whether the amount of work was their choice or it was imposed by the manager, the majority of the participants did not want to "rock the boat" with their supervisors to get the workloads reduced to match their hours:

"I don't think I would push back on my line manager saying, 'You need to get involved in this.' I would accept that. I would do it." Gabriella

Previous research (Lewis and den Dulk 2010) suggests that generally workers have limited influence on the amount of work they are assigned and that flexible working is in fact undermined by increasing workloads. The expectations are that flexible employees shoulder full-time workloads despite their part-time hours (Walker 2007; Donnelly et al. 2012). However, these studies do not generally address why flexible workers choose to accept higher workloads. The findings from this study suggest that it may be the women's attempt to reconstruct their flexibility as normative, and to compensate for the reduced-time schedules and decreased availability.

### **5.5.2.3. Streamlining Work Practices**

In order to achieve maximum efficiency whilst working flexibly, most participants reported they streamlined work practices by careful planning, organising, and catching up. This strategy appeared to be one of the ways in which the interviewed women were attempting to match with a full-time productivity, and keep to a minimum any negative impact from flexible work schedules on their ability to conduct work. The following quotations from Yvonne and Danny illustrate how they streamlined their work practices:

“I found that I had to be really organized and that I had to plan ahead a lot more, so that if I need said information to come in for the week ahead then I had to make sure that it was going to come in. Whereas, I think if you're full-time you're able to just not have to plan ahead quite so much, I think”  
Yvonne

“I suppose just to be organized and be methodical. Personally what I do is make sure that things are really clear in my diary so if I'm not in on the Monday and Tuesday and people need to know what I'm doing [...] they check my diary. [...] I think it is just about being organized and also being really clear with them. What I do on a Friday is a hand over to my boss and I list everything I've done on the Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.” Danny

The importance of ensuring that work is carried out quickly and efficiently was voiced by many participants, who recognised that they had to introduce changes to their existing practices after becoming flexible. The participants often felt they no longer had the luxury of time and procrastination to complete their tasks compared with their full-time counterparts, and that they started to notice their full-time colleagues' lack of efficiency and urgency. This observation by the participants made them feel that they had to work “smarter” to achieve the same outcomes as the non-flexible staff. Therefore, by working in a carefully planned and organised manner, they were able to compensate for their flexible schedules.

### **5.5.3. Concealing Flexibility**

#### **5.5.3.1. Avoiding Exposure**

A number of participants felt they wanted to hide the fact that they were working flexibly from other people in the organisation. Some recalled “sneaking out” on several occasions to avoid being seen leaving the workplace or attending their childcare duties, even though their immediate colleagues were aware of their flexible arrangements. The women knowledge workers felt the need to hide their FWA to preserve a positive atmosphere in the office, not to cause any distractions, not to remind others that they work flexibly, or generally to avoid being negatively perceived. One of the participants, Barbara, recalled how she felt every time she left work for home:

“I find when I do go; I'm quite quick down the steps... I'm like I hope I don't bump into my boss' boss. Even though they know that it's the work pattern, I think it is seen as, ‘Oh right, that's it, I'm off’” Barbara

Another participant, Sue, exhibited a more defensive strategy of not disclosing her work arrangements to any third parties:

“I just never say ‘I don't work days...’ I don't even say I'm part-time when I was part-time. I don't put that on. [...] I don't tell people I don't work Fridays. I will just say ‘I'm out of the office or I'm at another office’ because there is still a culture of ‘Oh, so you only work 4 days a week!’ I just think, ‘Why should it make any difference to you? Why do you need to know that?’ Why should I be talking about part-time? That's no one else's business as far as I'm concerned.” Sue

The above quote suggests that Sue was attempting to pre-empt the negativity related to how she might have been perceived if her colleagues realised she did not work full-time. The examples demonstrate that the participants were aware and reflective about the potential consequences of working flexibly and how it may have impacted others' perceptions of their commitment and dedication to the organisation. It resonates with Kumra and Vinnicombe's (2010) findings that women may be using impression management of availability to prevent negative perceptions of their commitment. Moreover, Epstein et al. (1999) identified techniques such as “passing” and “information control” to evade stigma (Goffman 1990) in their study into female part-time lawyers.

This is where the concept of flexibility stigma comes to the forefront. Working part-time (Stone 2007; Campbell et al. 2012) or flexibly (Stone and Hernandez 2013; Cech and Blair-Loy 2014) carries the risk of being perceived as having made the “wrong” choices and being uninterested in advancing one's career, and it has been argued that generally WLB policies attract considerable gender stigmas (Southworth 2014). Boyce et al. put forth a model for temporary worker stigmatisation proposing that:

“perceptions do not automatically follow from poor treatment, as there must be a connection between the treatment and possessing an attribute (e.g. temporary work status) to feel stigmatized” (2007, p. 14).

Therefore, it is posited that the strategies of the interviewed women knowledge workers to conceal their flexibility were intended to avert the stigma, or diminish the discrediting properties of FWA (Goffman 1990).

### 5.5.3.2. Colluding with Line Manager

The negative connotation of the word “colluding” in this theme has been carefully considered here. In this context, however, it has been recognised that “most people allow for exceptions in which self-presentational deceit is permissible” (Leary and Kowalski 1990, p. 40). Strategies to conceal FWA with the assistance of the immediate line manager came as a surprise and were not anticipated to emerge in the study. There was a sense of something more significant than just agreeing to FWA informally, or bypassing the HR department to establish an informal arrangement. This “team effort” was deployed to ensure that the women knowledge workers had access to flexible work, but at the same time were protected from the immediate organisational environment that stigmatised flexibility. The case of Mila, Sue, and Patricia illustrated this finding:

“I had a private arrangement between me and my boss. We didn't tell anyone else about it, but two Fridays a month I had off [...] it wasn't in the contract. It was just an unspoken agreement between me and my line manager.” Mila

The suggestion that Mila and her line manager did not disclose this information to anyone else suggests that the informal arrangement was kept secret, and that her manager was cognisant that such secrecy was needed to keep up the appearances.

“If [my manager] was talking to someone about me that [I'm part-time] should not come up in conversation. That should not have any bearing.” Sue

Sue also expressed trust that her manager would not reveal her part-time status. This suggests a reflective mutual agreement between the two parties that such information should be kept confidential.

“[L]ast time, the nursery called ‘It's fever, you have to pick her up’, I said ‘Oh, ok?’, ‘Just go’ [role playing manager whispering]. You know how it is. Otherwise, it would be impossible and I think it wouldn't help with the atmosphere in the office.” Patricia

In Patricia's example it is the whispering of her manager that exposes the importance of retaining the secrecy of the arrangement.

The above quotes suggest that managers who wish to grant flexible work schedules to their women employees might be doing so apprehensively, as the arrangements do not easily fit the IWN. By agreeing to, yet concealing such

arrangements, line managers might be inadvertently reinforcing the message of stigma and the need to hide alternative work schedules and childcare responsibilities. The positive outcome of such practices is only achieved through the ability of the women workers to attend to their life spheres, however the negative consequences of reinforcing full-time, full-commitment norms might be more complex and will be addressed in the discussion chapter. This finding enhances our current understanding of the line managers' importance in the process of obtaining FWA. It demonstrates that their support might not only be needed at the entry level, but also post-negotiation in order to help the employee manage their self-presentation and preserve their reputation. Although such "support" might be desirable on a daily basis in the short-term, the consequences of such reinforcement of organisational norms could be detrimental to women's long-term prospects, as the IWN is further cemented.

#### **5.5.4. Reciprocating Flexibility**

##### **5.5.4.1. Reciprocal Effort**

That employees can work harder in exchange for their ability to work flexibly has been observed by Kelliher and Anderson (2010) in their study of professional workers, and by Golden (2001a) who suggested that offering FWA may encourage employees to accept long-work hours. Therefore, it might be expected that similar findings also appear in this study. In fact, several participants reported their intrinsic need to reciprocate additional work effort as a "thank you" to their employer for accepting their FWA requests. As Blau suggested in his theorising on social exchange

"an individual [here: organisation] who supplies rewarding services [FWA] to another [here: woman knowledge worker] obligates him [sic]. To discharge this obligation, the second must furnish benefits to the first in turn" (1964, p. 89).

Such reciprocation is in theory voluntary, however in reality there is a strong element of duty (Mauss 2002). The quote below illustrates this point:

"I feel obliged, I know that they give me this time to take my son home, then I'll work even more, more than my usual hours and I do other things extra. Because you feel [...] that they give you your time, you are flexible, and you give them, you know. When I have time, I give extra time [...] to them and work more." Aziza

Aziza highlighted that she felt obligated to increase her extensive effort in return for allowing her flexible time for childcare. She was not explicitly requested to work extra hours, but the willingness to do so stemmed from her internal urge to reciprocate the “favour” done by her employer. Other participants also felt a strong need to “give back” more effort in return for flexibility:

“[Y]ou feel indebted.” Hazel

“I need to try and give that back.” Megan

“[I] work harder. It makes me want to prove that I can do the role with this flexi arrangement.” Margaret

“Sometimes I feel like I ought to work harder to prove that I'm worth my part-timeness. I don't know, but that might be an internal thing rather than what's being expected of me.” Tara

Similar to Kelliher and Anderson (2010) there was much discourse of “give and take” and being thankful for the employer’s benevolence allowing the participants to work flexibly. For many participants it was important to prove that they were worthy or that they deserved being given the option to work flexibly and this compelled them to increase both their intensive and extensive work effort. Some of the interviewees showed a degree of reflectivity in that they recognised the trade was unequal, which contradicts Kelliher and Anderson’s (2010) findings:

“well I know the organisation gets more than its paying for” Alice

and

“they're probably getting more out of it than me” Megan

Surprisingly, this realisation did not compel the participants to equalise the imbalance, though.

#### **5.5.4.2. Flexibility on Demand**

Many participants also reported that they reciprocated by returning their flexibility back to the organisation, and foregoing their time off on demand to fit the business need. For instance, swapping days and hours to suit peaks and troughs in schedules, or



to attend conferences and delegations was often reported. Alice and Barbara illustrated this point:

“I try to work from home at least one day a week [...] Sometimes I have to ditch that if there’s urgent meeting that I need to go in” Alice

“[I]f I'm trying to be as flexible as I can as well so that I will say, ‘Actually, I'll sort something else out and I'll be here if needs be’ is probably the way I generally will show that I'm committed, that actually I can't do it all the time, but I'll stay a bit later if needs be either to get something done or go to the meeting or training or something.” Barbara

Some participants were able to bank the extra hours worked, but then they were often unable to use the credit of hours they had accumulated anyway, as in the case of Amanda:

“[...] I work additional hours, so I bank some, so if I need to take time out, I can. But do I ever take all those hours back? No, not at all.” Amanda

Therefore, there was little opportunity to equalise flexibility with the traded-in additional hours and the reciprocal exchange frequently benefited not the individual, but the organisation (Kelliher and Anderson 2010). Another example provided by Jan shows that the free hours were problematic to arrange alongside their busy workloads, anyway:

“If I work a day I’ll get another day back, but I don’t get paid for it, which then makes it even more tricky because you’re free on a different day, which means you can’t get enough done in that week” Jan

Jan was not paid overtime for her extra hours, but she was expected to swap the hours and take time off on a different day, which would have further exacerbated the problem of presence and availability.

Nevertheless, offering flexibility back to the employer on demand was a recurring theme, and although some participants recognised an unequal trade, they still used the discourse of choice to show commitment and maintain their reputation.

## **5.5.5. Creating Impact**

### **5.5.5.1. Communicating Success and Expertise**

Previous research has shown that impression management used for self-promotion in work organisations can pave the way to better rewards, working conditions, and career prospects (Leary and Kowalski 1990; Kumra and Vinnicombe 2010). It may be also used by women professionals to construct an impression that they align with prevailing norms to help them achieve career success (Kumra and Vinnicombe 2010). Also, in this study, some of the participants strived to create an impact through vocalising their successes. For example, Yvonne and Gabriella reported:

“Not that you were told that's what you have to do, but you just knew you were a bit in the bun fight and that if you didn't say, ‘I've done that’ then you were sort of sink into the background.” Yvonne

“Just because you're not there yourself full-time, it's still important to commit to things, and to progress things [...] and when it is achieved you do have to sing the results about it a bit, so don't let it go under the radar. You do have to make a bit of a song and dance about it, ‘Look, this project may have taken 5 years, but now it's finished, and we did it, and the end product is this.’ ” Gabriella

The fact that the participants worked flexibly or on reduced-hour contracts carried the risk that their professional impact could have been less visible or hidden. Therefore, it was important to “reclaim” the lost presence by ensuring their successes were known and vocalised.

### **5.5.5.2. Delivery and Output**

Flexible work, especially flexi-space, can result in decreased face time and opportunities for a supervisory control over an employee. This is often perceived by managers as a substantial problem, since there is an increased scope for employee abuse of FWA (Mayo et al. 2009). This perception can be exacerbated by the social construction of the value of inputs and outputs, since unlike in the case of manual workers this value tends to be inexplicit among knowledge workers and professionals (Van Dyne et al. 2007). Gajendran and Harrison (2007) suggested that telecommuters are conscious of the supervisors' perceptions, and they might engage in a strategic

development of high quality relationships with managers to minimise such concerns. It is posited here that women knowledge workers might be striving to achieve such relationships both with their manager's and co-workers through delivery and output in order to signal their commitment and to preserve their reputation. The following examples illustrate this point:

“I think people get a bit nervous if you want to drop your hours, and then come back to work after maternity leave. I think people do question how committed you are, but if you come back and you deliver, and people see that actually it's okay, and duh, duh, duh, you're delivering results, I think people tend to relax a bit about it.” Lina

“There is a certain pressure with that, because if I don't deliver, it's my problem [...] I just have to make sure I do a good job and deliver what I say I'm doing. That's, again, that comes back to that is up to me to do a good job [...] that matters more than what hours you're in the office.” Magdalene

Both Lina and Magdalene demonstrated in the quotes above that they felt it was their individual responsibility to avert any potential disquiet about their reduced work schedules, and that they achieved it through delivering results that ultimately made people “relax” about their commitment.

“It's really about having that emphasis when you get back in to the work place, about really throwing yourself into it, and getting it done, rather than like hiding away and not being seen to be doing stuff. I think that was important to provide assurances that, ‘Yeah, I'm here. I'm doing the job,’ and all the rest of it, and they don't even notice that I'm not there now.” Lina

Lina who returned from maternity leave was consciously offsetting her recent absence by “being seen” and not “hiding away”, which eventually led to her colleagues and managers accepting her flexible schedules and no longer noticing her flexible absence. This theme goes beyond simply being visible and present. This is evidenced in Lina's perception that it is about “throwing yourself” into work again and emphasising that the work gets done. Another participant whose flexible work schedules involved reduced face time reported:

“If somebody comes to me, I guess I make a bit more effort to be the solution, because the opportunity doesn't come up that often. It is frustrating, and it's a little bit demotivating, I suppose. Again, it's the gratitude for my situation, that I don't make a fuss about that, essentially.” Camilla

Camilla ensured that she created the right impact by seizing the opportunities where she could solve problems and by being proactively engaged with her colleagues.

### **5.5.5.3. Strategic Choice of Projects and People**

Knowing which projects and people to work with has been identified as a building block of the six the career competencies developed by DeFillippi and Arthur (1994; 1996): *know-why*, *know-how*, *know-whom*, *know-what*, *know-where*, and *know-when*. Selecting the right projects (*know-what*) and the right people (*know-whom*) to collaborate with is therefore needed in order to identify and proactively respond to opportunities for career building. Several participants reported their strategic choices of both assignments and clients to maximise the opportunities for creating impact. Helen is a case in point. Working in a prestigious role as adviser and researcher in an influential organisation, she was compelled to invest in her future by seizing career-propelling opportunities:

“It was one of those things you had to work around. Just because I worked part-time and was a flexible worker, didn't mean I could say no. If a call came in, ‘Oh we want someone to be on the radio tonight at six o'clock.’ Or ‘We want someone to go and do breakfast TV tomorrow morning at six o'clock in the morning.’ I would have to be prepared to sort something out so that I could do that. Because if I didn't do that that would be a real ... in the kind of job that I was in, where profile did count, you had to be prepared to sort that out.” Helen

Another participant, Camilla, recounted her experience of taking ownership of a particular project as she felt it would bring her closer to a powerful individual within the organisation:

“I kind of taken a bit of ownership of that, and that certainly made a mark on, [...] at quite a senior level, which is nice, because I think in that kind of situation if, in a year or two, a job were to come up, that's the sort of person you want to know [...]. You want them to be saying good things about you, and to have remembered the things that you've done. That's not as calculated ... That sounds very calculated, but I've kind of been quite proud of that project, and taken that initiative.” Camilla

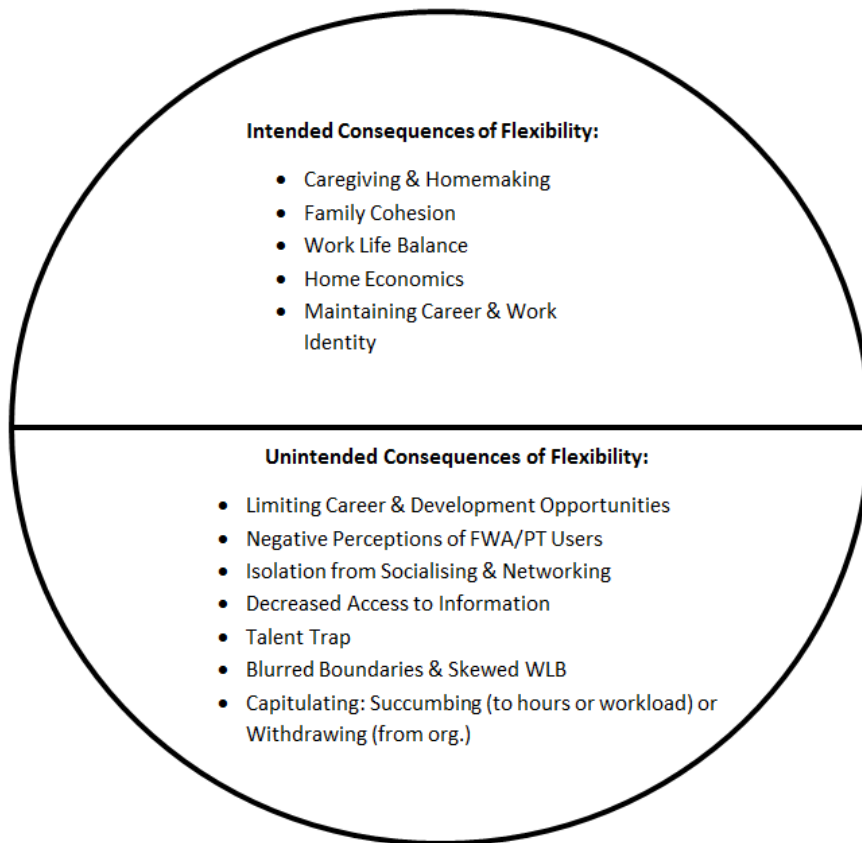
This investment into the work relationship through the specific project was a strategy that Camilla decided to utilise to increase her future career prospects within the organisation. Moreover, she wanted to be acknowledged for her positive impact and

ultimately to avert any negative consequences of working flexibly. It is posited here that creating such impact was part of the overarching strategy of self-presentation and constructing an impression consistent with the prevailing organisational norms of how work should be done. Moreover, such strategic self-presentation could solve a lack of cues about the flexible worker's individual contributions as their exposure to other agents in the organisation tends to be reduced (Van Dyne et al. 2007). As Kumra and Vinnicombe (2010, p. 535) observed, such tactics could therefore act as a mechanism to elicit professional acceptance in chronically-time deprived organisational environments, but also where employee contributions are less visible and less explicit.

## **5.6. The Consequences of Flexibility**

This section explores the outcomes of working flexibly the women knowledge workers anticipated, but also the repercussions that were not necessarily expected by the participants. The majority of the data relating to this theme was elicited by asking the participants what they felt the advantages and disadvantages of flexible working were. Additionally, as semi-structured interviews were adopted, this allowed the data to emerge impromptu through digression. Moreover, it was the overall process of data collection that allowed me to understand the lives of the participants deeper. For instance, it became clear to me that all of the women were running extremely busy schedules when I discovered it was difficult for them to find time for the interview whilst juggling both work and family commitments. Occasionally, data emerged during the interview, when the participants quietly talked about how they felt and how they experienced FWA, as if to avoid being overheard by their colleagues and managers next door. The unspoken messages and the body language that the participants communicated through form the context in which the narratives guided my analysis.

Figure 8 summarises the findings of the consequences of flexible working and illustrates the order in which the findings are discussed.



**Figure 8. Outcomes: the intended and unintended consequences of flexibility.**

### **5.6.1. The Intended Consequences of Flexibility**

#### **5.6.1.1. Caregiving and Homemaking**

Several intended consequences were reported by the interviewed women knowledge workers. Most of the outcomes of flexibility related to dual care responsibilities and family issues. Not surprisingly, addressing the caregiving and homemaking needs were the most recurring intended consequences of flexible schedules, since women still tend to assume these roles more often than men (Felstead et al. 2000; Teasdale 2013). This finding is also in line with the kaleidoscope career model (Mainiero and Sullivan 2005) which posits that women pursue balance when they become mothers, and they are likely to request FWA in order to attend to their non-work responsibilities (Beham et al. 2012). The following quotes exemplify the women’s choices to obtain flexible working:

“The benefit is the freedom to respond to the needs of my family, first and foremost.” Anne

“It's really to work around the children's term time, so I can be there more for them during the holidays, and not just leave them with people.”  
Marianna

The overwhelming majority of the participants had children and reported that this was the main reason for their flexible schedules. However, there were some exceptions, such as the case of Jan:

“That's mainly because my husband has got a very busy job, and I'd like to be able to be there at home. I'd like to have that wife element [...]”

“I think my choice for being part-time might be different, because I really want to invest in my husband, my home. I think that's something that my colleagues don't really seem to understand. Yeah, they are strange.” Jan

Jan was childfree, however, she wanted to prioritise her husband's needs and homemaking. The intended consequence of flexibility was that she was able to make this choice. Yet she felt a lack of understanding among her colleagues at work, who might have perceived her attitude to marriage outdated. Other participants, such as Anne, Christina, Alice and Tania reported that they utilised FWA in order to meet the requirements of the so-called sandwich generation, whereby women find themselves caring for both their offspring and their elderly parents at the same time (O'Sullivan 2015).

#### **5.6.1.2. Family Cohesion**

This theme emerged in addition to caregiving and homemaking as a distinct intended consequence of flexibility. Family cohesion here is understood as “emotional bonding that family members have toward one another” (Olson and Gorall 2003, p. 516). Therefore, this intended consequence of flexibility transcends a purely utilitarian function of FWA. The participants reported their desire to go beyond simple caregiving and attending to house chores by ensuring that the family was bound together emotionally and had a sense of equilibrium (Stevens et al. 2006). The often recurring words were bonding, not missing out on the children growing up, quality time, and family time. For instance, Patricia, showed her anticipation of the relatively short time when children are small and need her care, and her desire not to miss out on forming a relationship with her child before she grows up and moves out:

“I can spend more time with my daughter and I really want to see her grow and develop, and I know it’s only for a short time before she moves out [laughter] to which country she goes and I just want to spend as much time as possible with her and to have an afternoon off, and to see some sunshine and go to the beach and it’s just more life, it’s not that I get more things done. When I pick her up, it’s not that I go shopping and do all the necessary things” Patricia

Also Anne explained that the ability to have flexible work schedules enabled her to “be there” for her children and participate in their everyday lives:

“Well, I mean, it’s silly things probably from when the children are at primary school to you know, being, have to be a mum that’s there when they have their cakes, to have had the time for them to bake their cakes and stand in the school playground with them, so they can sell their cakes; to having time to stitch costume for national book day and having the time to run and get a birthday present or take them to a birthday party, and yeah, it’s been about doing all those things that mums do” Anne

Generally, it is recognised that family cohesion has been neglected in the work family literature and there is little research on its influence on work–family relations. A notable exception is Stevens et al.’s (2006) empirical study which suggests that the more flexibility women have in their work schedules, the greater is their reported level of family cohesion. The findings from this study also highlight the importance of FWA as an essential tool for developing family cohesion and parental bonding.

### **5.6.1.3. Work-Life Balance**

One of the most important intended consequences of flexibility also appeared to be WLB. Many participants felt that they managed to achieve good WLB thanks to flexible working:

“It’s good. It’s good. I feel for the first time in quite a long time that it’s brilliant because as I say I’m able to be involved with my kids while still having a career that I want and if I’m really clever with managing my time I can even get a little bit of time for me which is amazing. Don’t tell anyone [laughter]” Hazel

“There are so many other things I get done in that day, so much other stuff that I get done, so the house admin, or seeing other friends during the day that have got young children, that we don’t get the time to see in the evenings, that kind of thing, so yeah, that definitely has, but I cram a lot into that Friday, and my weekends. Yeah, it’s definitely helped my work-life



balance, and I wouldn't want to change it anytime soon, anytime soon.”  
Helia

This finding is not at all surprising, since the major premise of FWA is strongly related to work-life spheres and work family reconciliation.

#### **5.6.1.4. Home Economics**

The imperative to earn dual income for financial stability was reported to be one of the main intended consequences of staying in work after maternity leave. Remaining in employment was only possible in practical terms if flexibility was built into the participants' schedules. The majority of the women's husbands were engaged in full-time work with limited or no flexibility from their employer, therefore the onus of seeking FWA often fell onto the women. Some participants, like Hazel, appeared to be in agreement with their partners about this arrangement:

“I like my kids, but not too bothered about anyone else's, and so I've always wanted to keep working and it just so happened that my husband is going up the career ladder a little bit and he's got the better paying job so naturally he would carry on working full-time and I would be the one to reduce my hours. But if I had a brilliant career and was bringing lots of money then probably you know he would've thought about going part-time or freelancing or something.” Hazel

The findings from this study align with previous research on British social attitudes to female participation in the labour market and caring responsibilities. It has been shown that the modified breadwinner model, where the mother works part-time, and the father works full-time is preferred by both genders (Scott and Clery 2013). However, in contrast to this trend, there were a few exceptions where the participants felt short-changed. For instance, Yvonne felt resentment that this was the only option:

“My husband's work isn't flexible at all. He was at that time and still is the main bread winner. It really, really pains me to saying this, but his job was more important than mine. And I hate that. Being an independent woman that studied, etcetera. Like all my friends. His work couldn't really suffer ... because of mine.” Yvonne

Yvonne's case illustrates that women's careers are shaped by a multitude of social structures. Limited opportunities for flexible jobs available widely for their partners and spouses also mean that women may be trapped in the dual burden. As they are unable to

shift home responsibilities onto anyone else in the household, they accommodate their working partners in order to protect the main income.

#### **5.6.1.5. Maintaining Career and Work Identity**

In contrast to the functional imperative of home economics, also maintaining career and work identity emerged as one of the intended consequences of flexibility. This is arguably a relative luxury compared to the need of earning an income, as several participants reported that they did not have to work, rather, they chose to. Generally, the women felt that remaining in work as opposed to becoming a full-time mother was beneficial to their sense of identity and self-worth:

“Is, in the workplace, keeping almost your level of self-worth and value, and I think it’s also important to me, may not be to other women, that I still wanted to retain my identity. It used to drive me absolutely spare when I used to go to the playground and I was called [Tom’s] mum or [Greg’s] mum, because you know my name is [Alice]. And one of the reasons selfishly about coming to work was that I was no longer [Tom’s] or [Greg’s] mum, but I was me! And I kept my identity and I kept my independence, I earned my own money and I was able to be me and it was only for 20 hours a week whatever, I wasn’t actually just that person, and it wasn’t because I was a bad mum, but because I wanted to create that divide really.” Alice

“To be honest with you I was climbing the walls after about six months because I’m not used to ... I need to use my brain, you know? It’s quite boring looking after the kids. I thought ‘The same thing all the time’. As lovely as they are, I wouldn’t be without them, but it’s dull. Yeah, I went back to work [laughter], and they went to a nursery, but I only went back to work three days a week there.” Mila

A strong sense of professional identity increases the likelihood of women persisting in careers despite experiencing obstacles at work, such as male-dominated cultures, discrimination, gender bias and a lack of female role models (Buse et al. 2013). The findings from this study appear to align with this observation. The participants either felt a strong urge to return to work and “rediscover” their old selves, or they did not want to waste their education and experience and completely opt-out of the labour market. This allowed them to retain their identity as professional women, and fulfilled their intellectual needs.

## 5.6.2. The Unintended Consequences of Flexibility

The following section will focus on the undesired unintended consequences of flexible working reported by the women knowledge workers.

### 5.6.2.1. Limiting Career and Development Opportunities

Career slow down, plateauing, or flat lining were reported by the majority of the participants. This finding has been partly anticipated, since the literature on career penalties in relation to flexible schedules is well-known and established (Gatrell 2007; Brown 2010; Leslie et al. 2012). On the other hand, it is surprising that the majority of these women were unable to protect themselves from the “inevitable”, despite the advantages of possessing the human capital and expert power (French and Raven 1959) from their knowledge work:

“[I]n terms of career progression, I think to go part-time of course that I’m just happy to keep the [same post], so there’s never been any question about demoting, but the question about progressing I think it’s slowed down, inevitably” Maya

What is striking in the above quote is the apparent acceptance and “logicality” (also in vivo from Maya) of the negative career consequences. This may suggest strong internalisation of the IWN, and perception that flexible schedules are incongruous with career success. Generally, the participants viewed their career slow-down not as an outcome of organisational cultures and persisting stereotypes, but rather a consequence of them working flexibly. Hazel highlights this point in the following extract:

“I don't know whether it's society's pressure that's on women or our own personal pressure on ourselves to try and do everything to such a high standard, but you know it is hard and the minute you make that decision to work flexibly or reduce your hours, you start limiting, and unless you have an exceptional reputation where you are and you're known as like a really top performer then you can be side lined I think by working part-time” Hazel

The above two quotes illustrate that the discourse of an ideal career necessitating full-time commitment is internalised by the participants. Moreover, Hazel highlighted that the onus is on the individual to be “exceptional” and a “top performer” if she wants to continue progressing career, whilst the organisation is “let off the hook”. Most of the

participants hoped that the career slowdown they were experiencing was only temporary and that they could resume their focus on career progression once the childcare needs abate and the need for flexibility decreases.

#### **5.6.2.2. Negative Perceptions of FWA Users**

Experiencing negativity and stigmatisation as a result of working flexibly were some of the unintended consequences reported by the participants. The main issue the women observed was that co-workers and, on some occasions, their supervisors, perceived them to be not as committed as their full-time, non-flexible counterparts. This was often expressed by their colleagues in the form of unwanted running commentary about their “easy” work schedules, and early clock-offs. The following quotes from Barbara and Jan illustrate their experiences:

“Sometimes I have this thing when I walk out at 2:00 or 2:30, I feel like ... I don't know. Sometimes you almost feel like it's viewed like, ‘Oh you're just waltzing out.’ It's like, ‘Oh, you get to go early’ [...], that kind of thing.”  
Barbara

“I think people might take me a bit less serious as well, because I'm not there, because I can't attend the meeting, or because I don't have the time to do it.” Jan

The problem of stereotyping of flexible workers is well documented in the literature and therefore it is not a surprise. Flexibility and part-time work attract perceptions of limited or no commitment (Kahn et al. 2005; McDonald et al. 2008; Harrison and Gregg 2009), and a stigmatised status due to deviation from the organisational norms of full-time and full dedication (Epstein et al. 1999; Stone 2007; Stone and Hernandez 2013). Such negative perceptions and “cattiness” (in vivo from Mila) may push flexible workers to engage in impression management to conceal their discrediting stigma (Goffman 1990) and minimise the undesirable treatment. It is surprising that even though flexible working is supported by legislation and is especially conducive to knowledge work, those who use FWA still feel their schedules are an aberration.

### 5.6.2.3. Isolation from Socialising & Networking

Feelings of isolation when working flexibly, especially while homeworking, have been discussed in previous studies (MacDermid et al. 2001; Wilton et al. 2011). Likewise, the participants in this study reported a sense of missing out on social interaction with their colleagues, because they either did not have any time to “waste” to engage in a conversation during work hours, or they were out of office. In the following quote, Helia shared her experiences of not working on Fridays:

“I feel like I miss out on quite a lot. People go out for drinks on a Friday lunchtime, or a Friday after work [...] Friday is always a bit of a relaxed day, or I hear about things that happened, yeah. I just feel like I'm not so much a part of the whole team, by not being there for certain things like that.” Helia

Helia reported a sense of not being part of the team and being unable to partake in the social side of work. However, there might be deeper consequences of such seclusion. Professional and social isolation of homeworkers has been linked to limited personal development, limited opportunities for mentoring, and informal learning and networking (Cooper and Kurland 2002). This was also voiced by Sarah:

“[B]ut the information that's very important is the conversations that you might have. It might just be mentioning to somebody when they're passing your desk or getting a coffee or at lunch or whatever. It's those informal communications that are very important in collecting an idea somebody might have and then it mushrooms from there. That's when you need the face to face time as well as just having more formalized emails. [...] [Y]ou need face to face time. You shouldn't be exclusively working at a distance and not knowing who the hell your colleagues were or what they look like or whatever. That becomes much more difficult to develop a relationship of trust.” Sarah

As Cooper and Kurland (2002) concluded, not engaging in professional networks can prevent employees from establishing relationships that can ultimately lead to accessing information needed for career development. Therefore, isolation can undermine professional development, and in the instance of women knowledge workers who are especially reliant on networks for career advancement (Pringle and Mallon 2003; Legge 2005), this outcome might be particularly detrimental.

#### **5.6.2.4. Decreased Access to Information**

One of the most recurring themes of unintended consequences of flexibility related to limited opportunities to engage in the formal and informal information flow. As information is an important aspect of human capital accumulation, especially the *know-what* needed for career development (DeFillippi and Arthur 1994; 1996), those who utilise FWA may be missing out. One of the participants, Marianna, highlighted this point in the following quote:

“Just in terms of having your ear to the grapevine in terms of jobs, knowing what's going on, I think if you're not there as much, you're out of the loop quite often in terms of if there are job opportunities, you're less likely to access them because you're not there as much or hear about them.”  
Marianna

Interestingly, some key information can be disseminated by managers informally if they are unable to openly share the information with their employees via traceable channels (Davis 1953). Therefore, those who work flexibly and whose presence is reduced may suffer from being excluded from the grapevine.

The participants recognised, however, that being excluded from the information flow by co-workers and supervisors was not a deliberate act, and that not being in the office inevitably meant that the women were “out of sight, out of mind” (in vivo by Yvonne):

“[M]aybe conversations or meetings that happened and, not deliberately, but somebody may forget that I'm not there, and then I found out through some other route. It's not deliberate at all, but it's going to happen.” Stephanie

This may be problematic for flexible women's careers in the long term, since isolation from both formal and informal organisational information may compromise their ability to add value and contribute to the organisation (MacDermid et al. 2001), and consequently may further marginalise them and jeopardise their prospects.

#### **5.6.2.5. Talent Trap**

Knowledge economy relies on the competitive advantage of human skills; therefore talent retention is a topical issue for organisations that depend on knowledge workers (Dewhurst et al. 2013). In order to avoid losing female talent, the introduction

of FWA is usually recommended to persuade women to stay in organisations (Grady and McCarthy 2008; Grant-Vallone and Ensher 2011), and the benefits of such practices are generally reported to be mutually beneficial (Hewlett and Luce 2005). The findings from this study, however, illuminate a darker side of FWA contributing to our understanding how flexible working impacts individual women, rather than organisations. That is, the findings suggest that women who utilise FWA may feel temporarily trapped in a “golden cage” of flexible working schedules and their benevolent employers. For instance, the participants reported the fear of restructuring or losing their current supervisor and having to work for a less tolerant manager. Tara felt safe and secure in her arrangement but only in the existing context:

“[W]hat I do recognize is that I have a very supportive boss and what in the back of my head, what does concern me is what would happen if he goes? Because I am very, very lucky.” Tara

The participants also talked about the comfort of their arrangements and their reluctance to apply for more challenging jobs they would normally prefer, so that they did not lose their current jobs with flexible schedules. One of the participants, Helen, highlighted this in the following extract:

“Again, the thing that kept me there (FWA)... I then became unhappy. I stayed because I still had a relatively young child. And it was that difficulty to find part-time work. If I could've found a part-time job at a comparable level, I would have gone much sooner than I did.” Helen

Helen worked for a prestigious organisation as adviser and researcher. She felt that the quality jobs she was qualified to do did not exist on a flexible basis, and she had to endure working for an organisation that she was starting to resent for its culture of undervaluing part-time women. Other participants also found that aspirational quality knowledge work was only advertised on a full-time basis, and they were not prepared to risk applying for these jobs, as it was not guaranteed they would be able to negotiate similar family-friendly schedules. Megan also illustrates this point:

“I've not applied to jobs because they've been advertised as full-time and I don't want to leave and then turn down or say they would offer flexible work and they don't give me. [...] It stops me from applying to certain things. Again, that's my choice. That's my decision. Nobody else's influence.” Megan

Megan thought that it was her decision to persevere with her job in the organisation, despite being overworked and unhappy about her workload. Interestingly, she did not feel that the choice she was making was the product of a wider problem of the unavailability of quality flexible jobs in the labour market. This may suggest that women who are in a similar position may feel that the possible negative career outcomes are the consequence of their flawed agency, rather than a lack of supporting structures in organisations accommodating family responsibilities.

#### **5.6.2.6. Blurred Boundaries and Skewed Work-Life Balance**

The introduction of flexible working is often recommended to organisations that aspire to help resolve WLB issues of their employees. The literature suggests that workers who use FWA display higher levels of WLB than those who only work fixed schedules (Hayman 2009). However, unexpectedly, many participants reported problems with their WLB, working flexibly.

On the other hand, flexible schedules are blamed for making work-life boundaries indistinct (Rubery et al. 2005). In this study, the main culprit causing inability to clearly demarcate work from home appeared to be the technology, which enabled the participants to continue working late in the evenings, weekends, and outside their contract hours. The participants, however, were prepared to take the full responsibility for succumbing to the temptations of the laptop:

I can't [switch off] and it drives me mad because I really wish I could. Really, really wish I could. Sometimes I can't and I'll sit at home at night and think, worry about that all. I think the problem with the flexible working, being able to access stuff from home, is that you've got to have a real degree of control not to crack open your laptop. Again, that's more about me." Megan

Stephanie also felt that the ICT was a double edge sword in relation to FWA and homeworking:

"I think technology helps. It helps and it hinders by default. You're always available and you can always work." Stephanie

Another participant, Anne, reported her inability to delineate work from home, which she felt had a psychological impact on her:



“It may just be me, but sometimes when work is tough e.g. student complaints, colleague tensions etc., I find the fact that I work from home psychologically difficult. I can’t cut myself as easily so have at times developed almost a fear of opening the laptop. It is most odd, but it means I have a bit of an aversion to technology, as the technology can bring the hassles. I don’t know if that makes sense, but my desk area certainly has bad vibes around it! It is a kind of negative space. I think this is the damaging down side of flexible working!” Anne, follow-up email.

This finding challenges some previous research suggesting that home-office working is associated with greater WLB, as opposed to virtual-office working (Hill et al. 2003). The participants in this study felt that working from home posed a challenge to deciding when to stop, or when to ignore the urge to check their emails.

#### **5.6.2.7. Capitulating: Succumbing or Withdrawing**

The final undesirable outcome of flexibility, capitulating, appeared to be a cumulative overall effect of the previously presented unintended consequences. In this context, to *capitulate* means to succumb to the hegemony of the workload and time demands and in some extreme cases withdraw from the organisation or employment altogether (opt-out). For instance, some participants observed that as their workload crept up despite their reduced schedules, they ended up increasing their official working hours to almost match the full-time contract. Their agreed FWA started to be slowly eroded. This finding is illustrated by Teresa:

“In day to day practices it started to creep up and that and I started to think well actually I’m never gonna be able to take the hours back, because that’s just not gonna work, because I’m never gonna be here if I take the hours back. So eventually I contractually changed my hours, so I went from 18.5 to 22, then from 22 to 25, and then I got to 28, and then to 30. So overall, I’d probably say over a period of 3 years it increased.” Teresa

Like Teresa, many participants succumbed to the pressures of the workload and time demands, and readjusted their contracts. However, in some extreme circumstances a small number of the participants thought about leaving or decided to completely withdraw from the organisation. Megan reported that she was starting to search for alternatives:

“I don't mind doing above and beyond, when needs be, but it's become the norm and I never went part-time and the expectation that I'd [work] every

week, do evenings... [...] I've thought about leaving and going maybe freelance. I've set some feeders about how that might work.” Megan

Other participants, like Helen and Yvonne, explained why they eventually decided to leave their organisation:

“I did mentally make a shift between, ‘I'm ever so grateful you let me work only four days a week’ to ‘No, I'm part-time and I'm not going to let you exploit me anymore and expect me to work.’ [...] Ultimately, [I left the organisation] because I wasn't happy with the way I was being treated because I was part-time. That was a factor.” Helen

“So it [leaving] was just necessity really. It was just the pressure of work, and the pressure of travelling, and trying to keep everything together with kids. Just really disappointing when you can't. And you don't want to do it anymore.” Yvonne

Although, only a small minority of the participants decided to leave their organisation or started to think about changing jobs, this finding resonates with the notion of the female opt-out revolt that attracted much attention in the literature (Mainiero and Sullivan 2005, 2006; Stone 2007; Stone and Hernandez 2013). This opt out has been blamed on women's life stages (Mainiero and Sullivan 2005), rigid time norms and temporal patterns (Stone 2007), and flexibility stigma and bias (Stone and Hernandez 2013).

Overall, little evidence has been found that the participants actively resisted the organisational pressures to align with the IWN, and protected their flexible schedules and workloads. A small number of the participants reported trying to demarcate work-life boundaries, or being protective of their work hours to resist working overtime. However, at the same time they seemed to strive to *(un)become flexible* through the strategies and behaviours discussed in the previous sections.

## 5.7. Summary

This chapter outlined in detail the study's findings supported by the appropriate quotations from the participants. It presented the findings in five parts: themes relating to *becoming* and *(un)becoming flexible*, *the metaphor of war*, *being an ideal worker*, and finally the *consequences of flexible working*. The next chapter will focus on the

discussion of the findings, illuminating how the themes are intertwined, and revisiting the research questions to demonstrate what answers the study has provided.

## **Chapter 6. Discussion**

The research questions focused on investigating how women knowledge workers negotiated, obtained and experienced flexible working, and on the exploration of how such provisions impacted their lives and careers. Previous chapter outlined the findings of the study in the form of themes, supported by the participants' quotations. This section concentrates on the discussion of the findings and the theoretical contributions this study has made.

This chapter answers the research question (1) by discussing the structures and actions that the participants drew upon to negotiate and obtain FWA; research question (2) by discussing how they perceived and managed FWA; and finally research question (3) by discussing the intended and unintended consequences of flexibility.

### **6.1. Negotiating and Obtaining FWA by Women Knowledge Workers**

Despite the right to request flexibility, utilisation of FWA is problematic on a number of levels. Firstly, this is because the right to request does not automatically mean the right to obtain (ACAS 2016). It merely allows an employee to request flexible working, but it is down to the managerial discretion to accept it (Kelly and Kalev 2006). Rejection of a FWA request must be constructed around a business case and the needs of the organisation. Therefore, flexible schedules can be granted to employees only if such arrangements do not collide with organisational and managerial interests. It is posited here, that this legislative context in which FWA can be requested and obtained may require additional effort from employees in order to succeed in the application process. Secondly, take-up of flexible working is also problematic on a cultural level within organisations. It has been evidenced that FWA can signify a direct violation of the IWN (Williams 2000) and utilisation of such provisions has been linked to stigmatisation (Boyce et al. 2007; Cech and Blair-Loy 2014) and female ghettoisation (McDonald et al. 2008). Therefore, some employee apprehension of the take-up of FWA to address WLB issues can be reasonably expected. Flexible working is not only

challenging in relation to successfully negotiating such deals, but also in relation to repercussions of such arrangements on a personal and work level.

To address the research questions, QNS (Stones 2005) facilitated the analysis to understand the interplay between structures and agency (practices) that women knowledge workers had at their disposal. The findings from this study have revealed that these women appeared to be leveraging structures, and human and social capital, and investing additional effort in order to successfully negotiate and obtain flexible schedules. I will now discuss how this was specifically achieved through a number of different structures and practices drawing on Stones's (2005) theory of structuration.

### **6.1.1. Becoming Flexible**

The women knowledge workers drew on both external and internal structures as the medium of their practices to obtain flexible working. Multiple in-organisation agents such as line managers, CEOs and leaders, the HR department, precedent setters and other colleagues delivered possibilities and opportunities for these women to gain FWA. This finding is in line with previous literature on the importance of managerial support in promoting WLB practices (McDonald et al. 2007), which may be more essential than institutional and resource factors (Bardoel 2003). However, these external structures were autonomous from the women knowledge workers, and therefore, there may exist a degree of precariousness in the stability of this given supportive structural context. The independent nature of these action conditions means that women knowledge workers may be vulnerable to the changes of this structural context, and that the possibilities and capabilities that initially inhabited these external structures may unexpectedly turn into constraints and barriers. The formality of a flexible working contract ensures that it is not easily changed by the organisation once it is secured. However, it is possible that the workers who had been allowed to work flexibly when a more flexibility-supportive context was present may suffer upon a restructure, a change to the manager or leader, or introducing a new organisational vision and contingency planning.

This could be also exemplified by a change to the organisational culture in relation to WLB practices (as in the case of two organisations in this study). Indeed, since one organisation can comprise a number of various managerial interpretations of

institutional or resource constraints (Milliken et al. 1998) there may be existent subjectivity of managerial attitudes that can either facilitate or hinder access to FWA. For instance, even though flexible working is secured in the contract and cannot be withdrawn, if the surrounding informal support is not available anymore, the everyday experiences of the flexible worker may deteriorate. Moreover, other women knowledge workers seeking flexibility may not be able to draw on the same external structures which had supported their colleagues. Thus, FWA may be even more difficult to obtain. These changes to external structures within a single organisation can create a situation where different departments could have “micro-cultures” and varying support for flexibility.

It is, therefore, not surprising that such external context was viewed by the participants as serendipity of organisational benevolence, ultimately entrapping the beneficiaries to work for their current employers to avoid endangering the flexible arrangement they had negotiated. This is illustrated by one of the unintended consequences of flexibility, namely the talent trap. Moreover, other agents and structures, such as social networks, and paid childcare provisions provide women knowledge workers with possibilities and capabilities in relation to obtaining FWA. For instance, the findings from this study show that the help of family members and access to affordable, quality childcare offer a peace of mind. This can enable women to decide not to opt-out of the labour market and maintain their careers. As in the majority of this sample of participants, these external structures are arguably available only to the more privileged social groups of educated middle-class women who can either afford paid childcare, who are able to rely on healthy retired parents, or able to share or offload childcare and house chores in egalitarian partnerships.

As in the case of intra-organisation agents, these structures can be also vulnerable to the volatility of change. For instance, as in this study’s findings, some participants experienced their parents passing, or marriage break-ups, which ultimately led them to reassessing and readjusting to their external context. The QNS helps explain these findings, since the autonomy of these external structures means that the women knowledge workers were unable to influence their stability, permanence and dependability. Therefore, if external structures are advantageous to pursuing FWA, they can be successfully leveraged. However, it has to be recognised that the independent

nature of this structural context creates precariousness in the position of women knowledge workers who want to work flexibly.

Finally, the technology (external structure) was leveraged by the women knowledge workers to obtain flexible schedules. It released the participants from a space and time bound work (Schwanen and Kwan 2008) giving them both spatial and geographic autonomy (Alexander et al. 2010). This finding was to be expected, since the rise in popularity of FWA is partially attributed to a role the ICT plays in supporting and fostering the implementation of such arrangements (Alexander et al. 2010). As Orlikowski argued, what users do with technology is not an “appropriation” but an “enactment”. This enactment is reflexive, as:

“people are purposive, knowledgeable, adaptive, and inventive agents who engage in technology in a multiplicity of ways” (Orlikowski 2000, p. 296).

This enables a structuration process to take place, as women knowledge workers take up the affordances of the ICT structures to move across the organisational boundaries into the home, thus they are enacting flexibility (Golden 2013).

Although, the ICT is leveraged in order to *become flexible*, at the same time it also enables an extension of organisational control in which employees may be monitored by their managers. Thus, leveraging the ICT to work from home enables agency, but at the same time it reproduces organisational norms of dual presence and constant contactability (Golden 2013), which may erode the autonomy and independence of knowledge workers.

The caveat of such unbinding of work activities from the constraints of space and time also creates opportunities for work-life boundaries to blur (Glover and Kirton 2006), or break down altogether. This is because as in the case of many participants, out-of-office workers may be at a loss as to when they are at work, and when they are at home (Hill et al. 2003). This was one of the many unintended consequences of flexibility.

Another problem identified in this study is that although the technology removed the participants from the workplace, it also removed the women’s physical visibility and presence at the same time (Epstein et al. 1999). As visibility is a necessary ingredient to establishing one’s perceived commitment to an organisation, and building a career (McDonald et al. 2008), this situation may be problematic to flexible women knowledge

workers. This is where the link to increasing one's virtual and physical presence and availability appears to exist, since it can provide the desired effect of *(un)becoming flexible*. Consequently, the ICT forms a double bind, whereby it solves the problems it has originally created. Namely, it helps women knowledge workers to increase their virtual presence in order to avert the negative consequences of homeworking. This shows that the external structure provided by the ICT was both enabling and constraining the women knowledge workers at the same time.

The findings also suggest that the women knowledge workers were striving to *legitimise* and *rationalise flexibility* through their awareness of the business need, strategic choice of the number of days and hours, and their knowledge of HR policies and legislation. Firstly, this knowledge, specific to the organisation and the role in which they were employed in, allowed the women to craft their FWA requests in a way that would maximise their chances of having these schedules granted. They drew upon their knowledge of the interpretative schemes (internal conjuncturally-specific structures) within the organisation, which enabled them to predict how their flexibility request should be presented in order to be accepted.

This knowledge proved to be vital to the participants, since it permitted them to sense what "interpretative conclusions of the agents-in-context [here: management] were likely to be" (Stones 2005, p. 91), which informed their strategic actions. This would suggest that the participants were aware of the process of interpretation within the agents representing management. That is, they were aware of the implicit requirement to "responsibilise" (Saltmarsh and Randell-Moon 2015) themselves for providing a rational reason for their flexibility request. This could be linked to taken-for-granted neoliberal values which assume that individuals, not organisations or the state, should take the ultimate responsibility for one's career and WLB. These neoliberal values postulate that women are in control of their careers and at the same time they should "turn the blind eye" to the constraining properties of structures.

Secondly, the participants were cognisant of the distribution of power in the context of requesting a flexible schedule. That is, they understood their relative absence of power in the employee-employer relationship. This conjunctural knowledge of power capacities compelled them to act in line with the most pragmatic solution, which in the



context of the findings, was to legitimise and rationalise a flexible working status seemingly deviant from the expected organisational norms.

This leads to the third point that the women knowledge workers drew upon their knowledge of normative expectations and principles of the organisation-in-context, which permitted them to foresee whether managers would be likely to accept or reject their FWA request. This was achieved through

“their perception of the fit or tension between [the] agents’ ideal normative beliefs about how they should act *and* how they may be pressured to act” (Stones 2005, p. 92; original emphasis).

Therefore, the findings suggest that despite the WLB, flexibility, and female talent retention rhetoric in the context of knowledge work, the organisational-managerial interest still trumped the humanistic needs of women employees, such as their social wellbeing and happiness (Saltmarsh and Randell-Moon 2015).

The findings demonstrate that transferrable knowledge in the form of professional expertise, experience and skills (human capital) along with an established trust and reputation could be leveraged by women knowledge workers in order to obtain FWA. This cumulative capital could prove essential in negotiating desired flexible schedules, since it acts as a currency with which women knowledge workers are able to bargain. Therefore, it is suggested that having professional expertise could offer the vital advantage of expert power (French and Raven 1959) in the context of securing FWA.

This finding helps to explain a theme in the literature suggesting that only certain groups of workers are likely to benefit from FWA, and they tend to be in the managerial, professional and clerical occupations, predominantly holding desirable expertise or skills (Purcell et al. 1999). This may signal a lack of equality of access to flexible schedules for workers who engage in low skilled occupations, as they cannot benefit from the occupational power of expertise. It is worth noting that this power is not sufficient to render women knowledge workers indispensable, or afford them freedom of choice of flexible jobs.

This study has shown that although the participants held “an ace up their sleeve” in relation to their skills and experience, they could not insulate themselves from realities of the job market, and actually reported a lack of quality flexible jobs. Only 8.7 per cent of good quality vacancies with decent pay offer FWA in the U.K. (The

Timewise 2016). Therefore, these women form a white collar *flexibility precariat*, whereby their accumulated human capital is only advantageous to a degree (i.e. to obtain flexibility), which is then weakened once FWA are negotiated and obtained. Such *flexibility precariat* is characterised not by the employer-centred flexibility Standing's (2014b) *precariat* refers to, but flexibility-by-choice in relation to WLB policies for the benefit of the employee.

This again links back to the unintended consequence of being entrapped in the organisation providing the quality flexible job, and an apprehension or inability to apply for alternative, perhaps career enhancing or more satisfying roles elsewhere. The advantageous power of expertise (French and Raven 1959) is traded-in for flexibility, which then limits and destabilises career opportunities.

## **6.2. Experiencing and Managing FWA by Women Knowledge Workers**

The study illuminates how women knowledge workers experience and manage flexible working. Firstly, the findings suggest that utilising FWA somewhat deviated from the ideal knowledge worker expectations. Secondly, the participants felt that they needed to work harder than others, or longer than their fractional contractual obligations. Thirdly, they felt their flexible schedules may have caused an implied disapproval among their managers and colleagues and that their reputation could have suffered. Fourthly, they reported that being “allowed” to work flexibly had left them feeling indebted as the implication was that the organisation was doing them a favour. And finally, they felt they needed to strategise for creating positive impact from their contributions in order to be noticed and remembered by key members for future opportunities.

The study has revealed that while using FWA, the women drew on conjuncturally-specific internal structures understood here as the ideal worker expectations, and they engaged in certain strategies and techniques to deal with undesirable perceptions of others about them. These strategies appeared to be exercised in order to avert the perceived negativity around the concept of working flexibly, or realign with what is expected from a knowledge worker, i.e. being competent, available, and acting in accord with organisational norms. These techniques appeared to help the

women knowledge workers to effectively *(un)become flexible*, and to actively try to diffuse any potential concerns of managers about flexible working. This interpretation is supported by the structuration theory by Stones (2005):

“A central factor in the relationship between the ideal normative dispositions of the agent in context and her likely actual actions will be her conjuncture-specific sense of the distribution of power. She may not like what the agent-in-focus is about to do, but given her desire to continue trading with or working for that agent, together with her relative lack of power, she may have to act according to pragmatic schemas that embody pragmatic norms rather than the normative ideals that will, thus remain hidden from view” (p. 92).

This “normative ideal” here relates to what agents think they *should* do, as opposed to what they *need* to do (pragmatic) in order to succeed or retain a positive relationship or image. As the women knowledge workers may be aware of the unequal distribution of power in the employee-employer relationship, they opt to do what is needed to appease the organisational expectations.

The participants developed five disparate strategies for this purpose: *emulating normativity*, *compensating*, *concealing flexibility*, *reciprocating flexibility* and *creating impact*. Each of these concepts is grounded in the participants’ every day experiences of flexible working and in specific practices that these women engaged in. It is not posited here that these strategies were always enacted consciously in order to prevent others’ negatively perceiving the flexible working women. Such techniques are not necessarily duplicitous or under constant conscious control. As Tetlock and Manstead assert, these strategies

“may be the product of highly overlearned habits or scripts, the original functions of which people have long forgotten” (1985, p. 62).

These functions may have their foundations in the ingrained IWN and which work organisations expect, and so employees strive to channel them. The issue of normativity and the IWN in organisations have been explored in the literature for some time (Acker 1990, Williams 2000). These two concepts are founded primarily on the premise that organisations presume work must come first for their employees, and that their lives outside of work are invisible, insignificant, and reduced to a minimum. ST helps to explain this phenomenon, as it recognises that norms within social systems are modalities which are drawn upon by agents in order to avoid micro-level sanctions. At

the same time, they contribute to the legitimation of social structures and the strengthening of domination within social systems. As Giddens puts it:

“[n]ormative elements of social systems are contingent claims which have to be sustained and ‘made to count’ through the effective mobilisation of sanctions in the contexts of actual encounters” (1986, p. 30).

These sanctions may be expressed through various negative consequences of using FWA, such as marginalisation and stigma and they demonstrate structural asymmetries of domination, with the organisation holding the more powerful position. The first and foremost responsibility of workers lies in meeting all organisational demands and performance, and any other responsibilities that a worker might have should be inconsequential to the organisational practice (Bailyn 2006). This way of organising wage-labour may be particularly detrimental to women who still tend to assume homemaking and caregiving responsibilities (Williams 2000). In this work system, engaging in activities outside of work may signal inferior commitment. This is rooted in the taken-for-granted concept of commitment based on

“someone for whom work is primary (...) and the demands of family, community and personal life are secondary” (Rapoport et al. 2002, p. 29).

The IWN is an example of an internal conjuncture-specific structure related to domination, legitimation and normative expectations that refer to agents’ alignment with the norm either voluntarily, or by pressure (Stones 2005).

The role of motherhood has long been understood to be “incompatible” with the role of a committed worker, due to normative cultural assumptions in organisations that devalue motherhood as a status characteristic (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Ideal worker and ideal mother norms continue to be based on clashing premises with an increasing, rather than a decreasing imbalance between the two domains (Shapiro et al. 2009).

Furthermore, it is also the need for presence and face time that defines capitalism’s normative workers (Gregory and Milner 2009). Therefore, it has been argued that FWA are a direct violation of the IWN (Williams 2000), since flexible schedules represent a reduction in availability, presence and face time by default. Such normative assumptions in organisations promote hegemonic time and commitment discourses. Furthermore they may weaken a sense of entitlement of FWA, but they also

discourage from requesting flexible arrangements to avert potential career and reputation penalties (Teasdale 2013).

There is also an assumption of universal desire to have a successful career linked to managerial hierarchy, status, social position and extrinsic rewards (Bailyn 2006). Flexible work has been perceived as a soft option used to merely “keep a hand” in work, rather than to achieve any meaningful progression opportunities whilst engaging in non-work activities. Therefore, women knowledge workers appear to be engaging in strategies to avert this perception and to emulate their desire for a career, as they are cognisant of these organisational norms. These internal conjuncturally-specific structures may be either consciously and critically perceived by women knowledge workers, or in a taken-for-granted sense, “drawn on ‘naturally’ without thinking” (Stones 2005, p. 88). Nevertheless, they construct this *normativity* through the practice of *compensating*, *concealing flexibility*, *reciprocating flexibility*, and *creating impact* to signal that they fit the mould.

The context of knowledge work adds another layer of complexity, as it represents challenges on three levels: ambiguity, image and identity (Alvesson 2001). Firstly, knowledge and knowledge work are notoriously difficult to evaluate (Legge 2005). Consequently, knowledge workers in particular, struggle with the ambiguity of their competence and performance. What do knowledge workers engage in? How do they accomplish their tasks? How do others know that they are competent? As these issues are difficult to ascertain by the external environment, image becomes an extremely important tool to demystifying the ambiguities of the workers’ skills and knowledge. Therefore, knowledge workers need to make the right impression to demonstrate their competence and performance to get on at work (Alvesson 2001). The current study locates this knowledge work ambiguity in the even more complicated context, as it involves women knowledge workers and FWA in particular. Management and manipulation of social relations which are vital to knowledge workers to demonstrate competence and performance are supported in this study, illustrated by the participants’ distinctive strategies to *(un)become flexible*.

Although, knowledge workers enjoy relatively high levels of education, experience, skills, pay and stimulating work, they may also experience insecurities relating to their work self-identity, as their competence, performance and confirmation

are difficult to evaluate. Knowledge workers are believed to struggle more for the accomplishment and maintenance of their self-identity, and to be more “vulnerable to frustrations contingent upon ambiguity of performance and confirmation” (Alvesson 2001, p. 877). Therefore arguably, flexible women knowledge workers experience a triple whammy of ambiguity related to knowledge work, and both gender and flexibility stigma. It seems that the women knowledge workers in this study aimed to safeguard their professional identities through enacting the rhetoric of the organisational norms (e.g. emulating normativity, compensating) to defy the negativity of their woman/flexibility status, as well as their insecurities relating to demonstrating competence and confirmation of their “worthiness” of being a knowledge worker.

Moreover, as observed by Kunda (1992), a strong work identity among knowledge workers and professionals may be used as an object of management control and regulation, whereby it is the employees themselves who become the enactors and enforces of the organisational ideology (Alvesson 2001). If women want to retain their knowledge worker identity, which is built upon the values of commitment, availability and competence, then they need to enact what is purportedly expected from a knowledge worker. If they stray from the ideal knowledge worker norm, then they are no longer knowledge workers. Therefore, such an internal control suits the organisation and management, since women can exercise self-discipline and self-control. This may explain why the participants often used a discourse of choice and voluntarism when describing their increased work efforts.

### **6.2.1. (Un)becoming Flexible**

The practices the women knowledge workers engaged in appeared to contradict the taken-for-granted philosophy of flexible working that is WLB and the de-intensification of work for the benefit of the home/life sphere. The five strategies of *emulating normativity*, *compensating*, *concealing*, *reciprocating flexibility* and *creating impact* will be discussed in light of previous research investigations that could explain why these strategies emerged in the first place.

Stones (2005) within the QNS theory, has proposed that such agency and practices may be the effect of responding to irresistible causal forces (as part of external structures). This happens when agents-in-focus *do* have the capacity to resist certain

structures (here: the organisational norms and expectations), however in phenomenological terms they *feel that* they do not have this possibility. This is an example of how agency can only operate within limited options. The subjectivities of women knowledge workers (such as their wants, desires, values, beliefs existent in their internal structures) act as their hermeneutic frame of meaning which to a degree limits their “feasible options” if for practical purposes they want to preserve their worker status and safeguard themselves in the face of organisational hegemony.

The findings that concern the *(un)becoming* practices resonate with the knowledge worker image problematic (Alvesson 2001), as discussed above, but also with the concept of impression management (IM), which has been explored and further developed in a number of organisational behaviour studies (Gardner and Martinko 1988; Leary and Kowalski 1990; Rosenfeld et al. 1995; Kumra and Vinnicombe 2010). Sociologically defined, IM is a prop used in social interaction to reach “a common understanding of appropriate role-governed behaviour” (Kumra 2014, p. 274). However, psychologists view IM as an aid to further one’s interests or influence other agents in order to gain power or a competitive advantage (2014).

Goffman (1959) further developed the concept of multiple selves into self-presentation by viewing people as “‘actors’ engaging in ‘performances’ in various ‘settings’ before ‘audiences’” in order to create and maintain desired perceptions of themselves (Gardner and Martinko 1988, p. 321-322). Leary and Kowalski (1990) advanced our understanding of IM and how it might be used to improve subjective well-being, financial outcomes, and working conditions. They argued that this could be achieved through maximising reward-cost ratio, improving self-esteem, and constructing desired identities.

One of the social facets of a woman knowledge worker is rooted in her knowledge worker role which is in conflict with her flexible worker status, as such status is misaligned with the ideal worker expectations extant in the organisational “setting” (Karam et al. 2013; Afiouni and Karam 2014). Moreover, working flexibly does not sit well with the rhetoric of a knowledge-intensive organisation, because then it may be more challenging for knowledge workers to provide important “convincing accounts of what they do, and what sort of people they are” (Alvesson 2001, p. 871).

Therefore, rhetorical skills and rhetorical acts are highly needed for the constitution of women knowledge workers.

Flexibility, although often framed in gender neutral terms in organisations, continues to be perceived as a woman's issue relating to child rearing and homemaking. Being a mother represents another facet of social self, often discrepant with the professional identity, therefore to expose the "whole" self may be perceived unacceptable and jeopardous to career (Sheppard 1989). A parallel may exist between motherhood, pregnancy, and FWA use. Sheppard argued that pregnancy is perceived as a threat to women's organisational control, and if pregnancy is "not strategised for, this will inherently produce a loss of power" (Sheppard 1989, p. 152). Similarly, if FWA are not strategised for, the accumulated human capital of women knowledge workers may eventually be eroded and leave them vulnerable to the hegemony of organisational culture and norms.

This multiple-self misalignment may thus become the foundation of "performances" exercised for two reasons. Firstly, these strategies of *(un)becoming flexible* may be used to address tension from the expected organisational norms. This is evocative of Goffman's "passing" concept of misrepresentation of the self as a member of the favoured group (Reid 2015). The professionals in Reid's work needed to project the right image to *pass* as someone who embraced the organisational ideology, and they also strived to hide their stigmatised social identity (i.e. parenthood in the context of "greedy organisations"). Similarly, these manipulating practices may be performed to preserve reputation or to construct a better self-image or identity through *emulating normativity*, *concealing flexibility* and *creating impact*, thus effectively *(un)becoming flexible* in the eyes of the audience – the management, colleagues, and even the self.

Previous studies identified specific behaviours employed by workers in organisations in order to create the "right" impression, such as self-promotion (to appear competent and knowledgeable), or ingratiation (to appear likeable and attractive) (Gardner and Martinko 1988). The authors argued that these techniques can be consciously controlled to achieve desirable organisational and personal success. The participants in this study did not report these specific practices, although many participants suggested that they were consciously cognisant of the need to strategise through some form of IM practices.



The ways in which people manage how they are perceived have been previously explored and it has been suggested that such techniques may be gendered. Women tend to impress in order to “get the job done”, and men tend to focus their energy to win encounters with senior figures (Greener 2007). Singh et al. (2002) focused on the practising managers’ promotion techniques and concluded that women relied on additional high performance and commitment to be visible, whereas men believed in emulating prevalent success model and fitting the mould. This study arguably supports Singh et al.’s (2002) findings, as the women knowledge workers often demonstrated increased extensive and intensive work effort, and virtual and physical visibility.

Rudman (1998) would have explained women’s uneasiness towards the masculine assertive techniques to impress with the so-called female modesty effect, meaning that women may fear being perceived as “pushy” and too confident (Singh et al. 2002). However, people can also engage in less assertive and more defensive strategies instead (Tetlock and Manstead 1985). Defensive techniques are more conducive to protecting an already established image or reputation and they are evocative of the findings. In this study specifically, the women knowledge workers who had proven themselves in full-time roles appeared to protect their reputation in response to flexible working. As defensive strategies are prompted by negative states and statuses (Tetlock and Manstead 1985), such as flexible working, this may explain why the majority of the strategies used by the participants related more to protecting established their positive image, and aligning or conforming to the norm, rather than winning encounters with influential, people, networking and getting themselves “out there”. Thus, the current study seems to support previous findings, as the participants’ efforts focused less on the assertive techniques identified in the *creating impact* practices, and more on the defensive strategies aimed to preserve the status quo through *emulating normativity*, *compensating*, *concealing* and *reciprocating flexibility*.

Schlenker’s notion of predicament used by Rosenfeld et al. (1995) strikes a chord with the current study, as it forms a basis to the strategies used by the interviewed women knowledge workers. Predicament, as defined by Schlenker, is “any event that casts aspersions on the image, character, conduct, skills, or motives of an actor” (cited in: Rosenfeld et al. 1995, p. 66). Similarly, applying for and utilising flexible schedules in the organisational context that is founded on long hours and full-time availability

may be perceived as a predicament that requires some remedial tactics, or image-repair efforts (Rosenfeld et al. 1995).

Giocalone and Rosenfeld (1984) suggested four tactics in response to a predicament: reducing the negative impact, negotiating it, neutralising it, and redefining it as positive. Although, their tactics focus on verbal repair statements to avoid negative evaluation, there might be some commonalities in respect of how this study's participants dealt with their flexible status through certain *practices*. For instance, the interviewed women strived to reduce the negative impact of their status by trying to *conceal* their *flexibility*, and they neutralised it by *emulating normativity* through their increased extensive effort. They also attempted to redefine it as positive through *compensating* (reconstructing flexibility as normative), and through a “give and take” discourse and flexibility on demand in order to thank their employer for accepting their FWA requests.

More recently, Kumra and Vinnicombe (2010) explored social capital accumulation strategies in the context of women's career advancement in consultancy firms. They suggested that female credibility issues existent in organisations formed the basis for specific IM techniques aimed at overcoming negative gender stereotypes. Their participants demonstrated strategies to signal ambition, likeability and availability in order to advance in their organisation through promotion to partnership. The authors argued that women

“face additional hurdles in their attempts to advance in their organizations. Not only must they work hard and be technically excellent, they must also take on the additional burden of dispelling negative gender stereotypes” (Kumra and Vinnicombe 2010, p. 541).

This study builds on this conclusion, and argues that on top of the problematic of gender, it is also the flexible status and knowledge-intensive roles that exacerbate the need to demonstrate competence, effectiveness, conformity and compliance.

*Concealing flexibility* as an act of complying with what is claimed to be the organisational norm deserves a separate appraisal here. It is an especially compelling strategy reported by the participants, as it was one of the unexpected themes to be found in this study. It is evocative of Foucault's (Foucault and Gordon 1980) normalisation as a way of

“disciplining people through a standard of behaviour and performance, where any perceived or experienced discrepancy between the norm and the actual triggers efforts to reduce the discrepancy” (Alvesson 2001, p. 880).

Similarly in this study, the participants were observing the cues of what was claimed to be acceptable and expected from an ideal worker through the signals from others (managers and colleagues). As flexible arrangements heavily contributed to such a discrepancy, the women then acted in a self-disciplining manner in order to align to the “optimal” ways of behaving, or making the organisationally deviant behaviours invisible. Additionally, the notion of being a knowledge worker served as a control mechanism:

“I think if you are a true knowledge worker, and you want to do things, then you do have to take that responsibility, take that initiative, go above and beyond (...)” Lina

The behaviours that were claimed to be expected from knowledge workers became so strongly internalised by the women workers themselves that they were inseparable.

The current study illuminates women’s active agency aimed at not necessarily advancing one’s career, but remaining under the radar, protecting the status quo, or controlling the damage FWA may have imprinted on the women’s careers. The additional burden Kumra and Vinnicombe (2010) refer to is extended in this study to women’s every day efforts to merely sustain their career and reputation, whilst career promotion seems to be consciously accepted as “on hold” for the time during which flexibility is utilised. The women in this study did not self-promote or ingratiate to elevate their careers, but strategised to *(un)become flexible* in the eyes of managers and colleagues immersed in organisational normativity valuing full-time commitment and presenteeism. They pre-reflectively or routinely strived to erase the flexibility predicament, blend in, and divert attention from their flexibility status. By focusing on damage control through defensive strategies, the women knowledge workers seemed to have been expelling much energy for self-preservation, rather than self-enhancement. Despite the extra efforts, the women knowledge workers’ currency of professionalism, expertise and high commitment may have been traded in or diminished by their flexibility status, which despite the recent normalisation by legislation is still perceived as a stigma or predicament in the organisational setting.

### 6.2.2. The Consequences of Working Flexibly

The emergence of positive consequences of working flexibly in this study is reassuring and encourages an optimistic evaluation of FWA. Nonetheless, this reassurance may only be superficial. At first glance, the perceived consequences of flexibility do align with the policymakers' intentions to facilitate caregiving and homemaking, family cohesion, WLB, financial stability, and talent retention. It may seem heartening that the interviewed women had their options and made their choices that would have been impossible only a few decades ago. Above all, the women were able to decide to stay in work, rather than "opt-out", have families, and still be the main caregivers and even breadwinners.

Most of the participants disassociated themselves from the career girl label or something analogous to the highly derogatory German "raven mother" who palms off her children to paid care to focus on her career. They could not imagine having children and not looking after them, and developed what seemed like an alternative "mother who cares" self-identity in opposition to the organisational IWN. However, this alternative *self* seemed to facilitate only their internal grapple with the decision to utilise FWA, and acted as self-justification why they worked flexibly. This particular sphere of their lives did not appear to be celebrated or readily exposed in the office, and perhaps this observation reveals something about the foundations of the unintended consequences of flexibility. Still perceived as pejorative and not in line with the organisational norms, the status of flexible female worker seemed to matter more than the alternative self-identity the participants were trying to comfort themselves with.

This could be explained by the crucial importance of professional self-identity (as opposed to other self-identities) among knowledge workers, as their performance and competence are ambiguous and difficult to evaluate (Alvesson 2001). By maintaining a work self-identity which aligns with the organisational norms and expectations, the women knowledge workers were safeguarding their self-esteem and attempting to lessen the insecurities relating to the frustrations from the lack of professional confirmation.

Most of the time, the unintended consequences of flexibility were reported by the participants with perceptiveness, self-reflection, and conscious critical faculties. They

emerged either framed within the “disadvantages of flexibility” questions, or naturally without prompting. However framed, more often than not, they were seen as direct shortcomings of working flexibly, rather than inevitable outcomes of organisational normativities and persisting stereotypes. Limiting career and development opportunities, being negatively perceived, isolation, blocked information, feeling entrapped, and blurred work-life boundaries were the most recurrent perceived outcomes of working flexibly. Most of the participants eventually succumbed to the pressures of the organisational norms, and a small number started to consider withdrawing, or had already withdrawn from the organisation.

Some participants felt that there was *logicality* to how their careers had plateaued, or that they had expected their commitment to be questioned. This would suggest how far the IWN must have been internalised by the participants and taken as undisputed and undisputed (Stones 2005). This appreciation of career slowdown shows that:

“once a particular discourse becomes normalised, the actors involved cease to question and challenge their own subject positions relative to those of others” (Roper et al. 2010, p. 665).

Other participants expressed their surprise at how difficult it was to work on a reduced schedule as they had not anticipated the extra hours and the effort that they were expending. Some women even commented on their reduced WLB, despite the opposite intentions.

Drawing on QNS, *outcomes* represent the final stage of the structuration cycle. Firstly, women knowledge workers draw on external structures as conditions of actions. Secondly, they either routinely and pre-reflectively, or strategically and critically draw on their external and internal structures, which enable active agency. Finally, the outcomes of agents’ practices involve effects on both external and internal structures, or events, which can either represent change and elaboration, or reproduction and preservation (Stones 2005).

The minutiae of the intended and unintended consequences of flexibility at the in-situ (agent data) level have been discussed in the findings chapter. The consequences of FWA, such as caregiving and homemaking, family cohesion and WLB represent the women’s ability to choose their level of engagement with family relationships and responsibilities, which can be seen as a welcome and intended *change* to their lives

prior to obtaining flexible working. Through FWA they were able to maintain their contribution to the financial stability of the home, and to *preserve* their career and work identities, and also nurture the alternative identities of mother or carer, albeit not readily exposed in the workplace.

The unintended consequences of flexibility, i.e. limiting career and development opportunities, being negatively perceived, isolation, blocked information, feeling entrapped, and blurred work-life boundaries epitomise an inadvertent *modification* of the women's every day experiences of their work spheres. These unintentional by-products of FWA, recognised and grappled with on a daily basis, were perceived by the majority of the women as only temporary and as directly linked to the flexible worker status.

The above consequences can be defined more as in-situ, micro-level concerning each individual agent. However, at a broader socio-structural there are certain outcomes in general, which may concern women in this particular occupation. The outcomes of the *(un)becoming* strategies and working flexibly may have more powerful and long-term effects on women knowledge workers through four distinct interplays of structures and agency - structuration. That is, (1) change to the internal structures by weakening of professional currency and expert power and entering the *flexibility precariat*; (2) reproduction of the IWN and the expected knowledge worker image; (3) reproduction of the traditional gender roles; and finally, (4) cementing the neoliberal values of "responsibilising" professional women for their own WLB and career success. Each potential outcome will be discussed in turn.

### **6.3. The Socio-Structural Outcomes of FWA - Structuration**

#### **6.3.1. Weakening of professional currency and expert power by utilising FWA – entering *flexibility precariat***

The findings have shown that the participants had enjoyed professional and expert power prior to their flexible schedules. They either capitalised on their expertise and experience when entering the organisation on a flexible basis, or when negotiating a flexible schedule, most often after their maternity leave. Change, however, seemed to occur once flexible working had been secured and the women knowledge workers felt

that their choices in relation to work and career became limited in scope. They either feared that change to management may jeopardise their FWA, or they were unable to find flexible quality jobs in other organisations. These findings suggest that utilising FWA may result in the weakening of the women knowledge workers' professional currency and expert power due to the lack of broader acceptance of workers requiring such schedules. By seeking flexibility and utilising FWA, women knowledge workers may be unwittingly condemning themselves to limited career opportunities, and entrapping themselves in organisations "benevolent" enough to agree to flexible working requests, but not progressive enough to proactively champion the careers of these workers.

The word precariat is borrowed from Guy Standing's appraisal of the current global labour situation which concerns a new-mass class of citizens subjected to the uncertainty of zero-hour contracts and diminished state welfare. It would be incongruous to place the status of the well-educated middle-class professional knowledge workers benefitting from secure salaries on an equal footing with the type of insecure workers this author refers to (Standing 2014a, 2014b). However, there are some clear parallels between these two types of workers in how their employment security may be uncertain:

"[t]he word precarious is usually taken as synonymous with insecure. But being precarious also means depending on the will of another. It is about being supplicant, without rights, dependent on charity or bureaucratic benevolence" (Standing 2014b, p. 21).

Likewise, women knowledge workers may perceive insecurity as long as they require flexible work, and may also feel overly reliant on their employing organisations' goodwill to grant it. As flexibility is only legislated as far as the right to request it, rather than to obtain it, this can leave many women knowledge workers unable to progress their careers in the flexible mode. This could create a degree of underemployment, whereby women knowledge workers' expertise and experience is not fully utilised, and it may result in something similar to Cohen's (1955) *status frustration* characterised by desire, but at the same time inability to achieve a certain professional status.

### 6.3.2. Reproduction of the IWN and the expected knowledge worker image

There may be certain consequences to the wider structural work system from working flexibly and from employing the *(un)becoming* techniques. The practices which the women knowledge workers engaged in, may have in fact, reinforced and cemented the existing ideals within the organisations. Strategies, such as avoidance of being seen to have outside commitments, or the line managers who (un)helpfully kept their women employees' flexible schedules discreet, were effectively perpetuating the perceived deviance of flexibility.

Thus, women knowledge workers may be effectively reproducing the constraining structures through their own practices designed for precisely the opposite purpose: to penetrate the negative stereotypes. That is, by attempting to transcend the deviancy of FWA through *emulating normativity* and realigning with organisational expectations, female knowledge workers may be unwittingly strengthening the structures that have originally constrained them. By trying to show themselves as good as their full-time counterparts they are not challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions that real work is done only on a full-time basis with constant presence and availability. Hence, women knowledge workers may be themselves partly preventing any meaningful system change facilitating WLB, and reconceptualising the IWN in a way that encompasses the richness of women's lives and commitments.

By subscribing to the IWN, but at the same time accepting certain logicity in career stagnation or anticipating career penalties, the women are unwittingly becoming ideal workers themselves (Acker 2006). As Morini has pointed out:

“[B]ehind the impetus of the spectre of precariousness, people bend towards an *adaptable/sacrificial/oblative position* which is a cultural feature in the history of female experience” (2007, p. 48, original emphasis).

Women knowledge workers do what is best for the organisational interests: workers who are flexible on demand, compliant, efficient and effective, grateful, and are prepared to accept sacrifices in relation to salary, career and stimulating assignments (Maxwell and Broadbridge 2014). They do not require a direct and explicit



organisational control, as they are able to deploy an internalised control upon themselves.

Secondly, women knowledge workers are attempting to signal their competence and performance through the behaviours that increase their availability and presence, and in the practices that maximise their intensive efforts. As such, they are also contributing to the cementing of the organisational expectations that require them to dispel any ambiguities of performance and competence, so important in the unique knowledge worker context. The knowledge worker identity as an object of management control is therefore strengthened through self-discipline and self-control hidden in a discourse of choice and voluntarism.

### **6.3.3. Reproduction of traditional gender role norms**

Sex roles (Parsons 1942), gender roles or social roles (Eagly 1987) lock people into categories of mutually expected behaviours, qualities and norms. They are founded on the grounds of sex or gender being:

“a form of human variation that is highly susceptible to cultural generalisation as a primary category for framing social relations (...); male-female distinction is virtually always one of a society’s primary cultural-category systems” (Ridgeway 2009, p. 148).

This primary cultural frame takes priority over any subsequent categorisation such as leader, manager, and employee and tints how people construct the meaning of those classifications (Brewer and Lui 1989; Fiske 1998). Even if people do not agree with this categorisation, they tend to conform and enact these norms, because it is expected that others will make judgements according to them (Ridgeway 2009). This enactment and conformity through behaviours and practices reproduce the norms through the process of structuration (Giddens 1986; Stones 2005), since:

“gender is a multilevel structure, system, or institution of social practices that involves mutually reinforcing processes at macro-structural/institutional level, the interactional level, and the individual level” (Ridgeway 2009, p. 146).

By partaking in the practice of flexible working, women knowledge workers compromise their professional self-image by the “burden” of family commitments, and they may be further cementing the expected gender norm of the family-accommodating

woman. The reproduction of the gender roles may, therefore, arise from the agents' practices they chose to engage in and conform to.

However, it is also possible that the right to request policy itself can have a structure-reinforcing effect. This is because, similar to parental leave policy, flexi schedules:

“may actually weaken the housework bargaining power women get from full-time employment, by helping to maintain women's primary role as mothers even when they are employed” (Fuwa and Cohen 2007, p. 528).

This is based on the bargaining theory (McElroy and Horney 1981), which suggests that women who enjoy quality jobs and high income may possess a significant amount of power when negotiating household responsibilities with their partners. The caveat in social policies that attempt to address the conflict between work and family responsibilities lies in the risk that such policies may reinforce traditional gender roles by enabling women to still assume the primary carer roles despite being employed. This may continue to leave men less likely to contribute to household responsibilities, even though the flexible working policy is now ostensibly gender-neutral, and not restricted to any particular reason for the request (ACAS 2016).

*Becoming flexible* in order to adapt to *both* home and work spheres symbolises the postfeminist discourse characterised by individualism and empowerment (have a career), the notions of “natural” sexual difference (be a mother), and retreating to the home as choice not obligation (agency, not structure). These three characteristics of postfeminism capture the co-existence of moderate feminism (achievement in the masculine world of work), and femininity (feminised behaviours, motherhood and home) (Lewis and Simpson 2017). Thus, a woman knowledge worker who utilises flexible work schedules is the embodiment of “the new postfeminist subject who ‘chooses’ both home and work and aims to excel in both arenas” (2017, p. 121).

#### **6.3.4. Reproduction of neoliberal values, “responsibilising”, and the dual burden**

The neoliberal project in the U.K. permeates beyond the free market economy and the laissez-faire state intervention ideology, as it reaches into everyday structures and practices through the notion of individualism, meritocracy, aspiration and achievement

(Hall 1988). This is also reflected in the way in which employment and careers have been conceptualised as the concern of workers, whereby:

“organisations assume progressively less responsibility for their members’ careers, [so] individuals must correspondingly assume more” (Roper et al. 2010, p. 663).

Consequently, any failure to secure employment must be blamed on the individual’s shortcomings, or must be explained as their freedom of choice not to work. Moreover, it is the neoliberal subject (here: woman knowledge worker), who takes market risks, rather than the employing organisation. This results in the individual becoming “both vulnerable and necessarily competitive; competition being necessary for survival” (Nikunen 2012, p. 716).

Work-life balance policies, including the introduction of flexible work options have also been argued to fall into the category of disciplining and “responsibilising” devices (Rose 2000) via the notions of risk and reciprocity (Saltmarsh and Randell-Moon 2015). To “responsibilise” means that employees are posing risks to their employers through their human dimensions of life beyond work. Therefore, they are made responsible for minimising and absorbing these risks by ensuring sustained levels of productivity, efficiency and performance. By aligning to the IWN and maintaining high levels of effort and effectiveness despite reduced and supposedly family-friendly work schedules, women knowledge workers are complicit in the neoliberal game of managing their “risky humanity” (Saltmarsh and Randell-Moon 2015) of outside commitments. These risks can be described as various unwanted incursions of women’s everyday lives into the running of the organisation. Thus, flexibility and WLB policies and practices are only “worth” supporting if these risks on organisational and managerial interests are minimised. The findings indeed show they tend to be minimised by women knowledge workers themselves. This is because these flexible women:

“see themselves as responsible for maintaining productivity in a much more precarious and volatile capitalist environment” (Saltmarsh and Randell-Moon 2015, p. 665).

This links back to the weakening of their professional currency and expert power by working flexibly, thus these women are entering the *flexibility precariat* as discussed

above. The neoliberal rhetoric focuses on the individual and their freedom of choice, but more importantly, on their responsibility to be an idealised player in the market game (Nikunen 2012). Therefore, professional women face a double problematic: what happens if they want to have children and maintain their careers? The compelling prospects of fulfilling careers that can now allow women access to the new world of work signify “specific modalities of much sought-after independence” (McRobbie 2007, p. 734), which have not always been within reach in the socio-historical context of women’s struggles in work organisations. However, at the same time, women have been expected to accept a new social compromise based on heterosexual women playing a dual role, which is participating both in employment *and* being primarily responsible for the familial and domestic sphere (Crompton 2002). The implications of this new arrangement are that flexi-reliant women knowledge workers with children, who juggle the double load of work and domestic responsibilities, have rather reduced chances to succeed in the workplace (McRobbie 2007). This in turn reproduces the competitive neoliberal values of winners and losers (Nikunen 2012), since the women knowledge workers may have to endure in the organisations that have granted them flexible working, rather than joining those that may have better career prospects on offer (McRobbie 2007).

As the essentialist and female-oppressing “caregiver model” recedes into the past and the “universal breadwinner model” takes over, women are increasingly able to partake in economic activities, be it on a full-time or flexible basis. However, it has also been argued that the dominant “universal breadwinner model” still fails to address the egalitarian agenda because its normative assumption that women will partake in both economic and domestic activities continues (Fraser 1997). The intended consequence of flexibility in this study - home economics - is founded on:

“the logic of the new flexible capitalism in the affluent West and the decline of the welfarist underpinning of the so-called family wages (which) means that everyone who can work must do so” (McRobbie 2007, p. 730).

Therefore, by electing to work flexibly and engaging in both economic and homemaking responsibilities women are unwittingly reproducing the neoliberal values of individualism, are being “responsibilised” for own WLB and career, upholding the

game of winners and losers, and the reproducing dual burden (Hochschild and Machung 2003) comprised in the new social compromise they are expected to make.

## **6.4. Contributions to Knowledge**

This study contributes to our understanding of the issues of knowledge work, flexibility, and women in work organisations. I will now demonstrate how this research has contributed to closing the research gaps identified in the introduction and how it has provided new and original insights to better understand how women knowledge workers experience flexible working.

### **6.4.1. Addressing the Research Gaps**

*Research Gap (1):* Knowledge work scholarship generally has tended to be gender-neutral (Scarborough 1999; Flood et al. 2001; Hunter et al. 2002; Thompson and Heron 2005; Benson and Brown 2007; O'Donohue et al. 2007; Christensen 2011; Nicolopoulou et al. 2011; Reinhardt et al. 2011; Cushen and Thompson 2012; Kinnie and Swart 2012; Erhardt and Gibbs 2014; Harney et al. 2014; Wolfram and Gratton 2014), with some notable exceptions (Walby 2007, 2011; Donnelly et al. 2012; Natti et al. 2012; Truss et al. 2012; Donnelly 2015; Olsen 2016; Peterson 2017). By explicitly focusing on women, this study has contributed to the body of scholarship on knowledge work in the context of gender. It has shown that despite the utopian assumptions that the knowledge work context provides an ideal environment for women to thrive, women knowledge workers are compelled to realign their work conduct to meet organisational expectations in relation to ideal worker behaviours. Women do enjoy relative agency in terms of their cumulative occupational capital allowing them to negotiate flexible schedules, but they are not free and autonomous, as they are still subject to normative organisational constraints.

*Research Gap (2):* There is a dearth of studies on how flexible working is experienced by women in the context of knowledge work. Specifically, scholarship on FWA has so far tended to focus on idiosyncratic contexts and case studies (e.g. medical academia - Brown et al. 2003; Open University staff - Donovan et al. 2005; police force - Dick and Hyde 2006; Dick 2010; radiologists - Chertoff et al. 2001) or particular professions (accounting - Cohen and Single 2001; Almer et al. 2004; Johnson et al.

2008; solicitors – Campbell et al 2012; medical and accounting – Crompton and Lyonette 2011; managerial – Brown 2010; Durbin and Tomlinson 2010, 2014), with no explicit focus on knowledge work, with notable exceptions in relation SET industries (Herman and Lewis 2012), the IT industry (Hill et al. 2003; Hill et al. 2004) and KIS, such as civil (Lewis 1998) and public (McDonald et al. 2007; McDonald et al. 2008). This study has contributed to filling this research gap, as it has explored the experiences of women knowledge workers employed within the KIS sector. It has shown that this most egalitarian sector is not necessarily a “safe space” for women to openly engage in family responsibilities, work flexibly without penalties and thrive career-wise. This research has offered additional insights on flexible working by exploring not the business-case related outcomes and concepts, but the everyday experiences of women knowledge workers. This research departs from the tendency of previous studies to examine performance, productivity, and profitability (Konrad and Mangel 2000; Eaton 2003; Stavrou 2005), or WLB issues of its users (Higgins et al. 2000; Beham et al. 2012; Hofäcker and König 2013). By exploring the perceptions, every-day experiences and ways of negotiating and managing flexibility, the study has illuminated why and how flexible working is problematic, even for the relatively privileged middle-class, white-collar, well-educated women who are more likely than anyone else to access these forms of working (CIPD 2012).

**Research Gap (3):** Knowledge work scholarship on flexible working has hitherto focused on exclusive knowledge worker samples, as it has mainly concerned high-status, highly privileged groups of employees, such as management consultants, lawyers and accountants (Epstein et al. 1999; Donnelly 2006; Donnelly 2009a, 2015). This study’s attention to a more democratic, inclusive sample of knowledge workers reflects the increasing prevalence of knowledge workers as organisational members across public and private KIS organisations. This research, therefore contributes fresh perspectives on how the more ordinary and prevalent knowledge worker groups experience FWA.

**Research Gap (4):** More research is needed in the context of the right to request flexible working, as it has been substantially endorsed by the government in 2014. Although the right to request flexible working legislation has been heralded as a well-established option for mothers seeking to reconcile their home and work responsibilities

(ACAS 2016), not much scholarship on flexible working has situated its focus in this legislative context, with a few exceptions of studies in Australia (Skinner and Pocock 2011; van den Broek and Keating 2011; Skinner et al. 2016), New Zealand (Donnelly et al. 2012) and the U.K. (Lewis and Campbell 2007; Atkinson 2016; Phillipson et al. 2016). This study helps to close this gap, as it extends our understanding of the women knowledge workers' experiences of FWA with the right to request, as the legislative backdrop of this research. It suggests that the caveat of the right to request mechanism, which benefits the employer, is circumvented by women knowledge workers who leverage their occupational capital to successfully negotiate flexible working. The implication of this finding is that those worker groups who do not enjoy similar levels of occupational advantage and human capital may have limited access to flexible working, and that these provisions will continue to be the preserve of the skilled, educated, white-collar knowledge worker professionals.

**Research Gap (5):** This study transcends the trend in the current literature that focuses on identifying barriers, obstacles, closure regimes, and other structural constraints that impede women's progress in work organisations (Donovan et al. 2005; Broadbridge 2008a, 2008b; Campbell et al. 2012; Cullen and Christopher 2012; Michielsens et al. 2014; Spoor and Hoye 2014). Instead, this study advances our understanding of the prominence of both structure and agency in the problematic of gender and organisations. It exposes that structural properties of the social order are not gender-neutral (such as the right to request flexible working legislation, flexible schedules as lived in by individual women, societal and organisational level roles and responsibilities, etc.). Instead, they are gendered and shaped by agentic actions performed by individual women knowledge workers who, at the same time, contribute to the reproduction of these gendered structures. Therefore, it is reflective of Joan Acker's *gendered organisations* (1990) and provides the empirical material that substantiates this ontologically-focused theory.

Moreover, this study illuminates how patterns of gender inequality are generated and sustained in work organisations through agency, and moreover, it addresses the hitherto neglected focus on the extent to which actors themselves contribute to their own oppression (Wharton 1991). As argued by Wharton (1991), women workers have often failed to appear as agents of resistance in structural accounts of gender inequality,

but also of passivity as argued by McNay (2003). This study contributes to this caveat in the literature. The adoption of agency in this study emphasises its creative, autonomous and reflexive dimension which transcends conceptualising it purely in passive terms as being an effect of discursive and constraining structures. As McNay (2003) argues, agency has too often been conceptualised as a practice of subjection to the detriment of viewing it as a practice of autonomous choice. Subject formation occurs from both subjection and liberation, so instead of exploring how women resist subjectification, research also needs to focus on how actors' practices may be generative of this subjectification (McNay 2003). Thus, this work provides a fuller account of agency, as it points to more *generative* and *sustaining* processes of gender inequality.

This study illustrates how structure is both the medium and the outcome of agency, and ST has enabled a critical investigation of both structures and practise of the women knowledge workers. ST undergirds the inductively emergent theory of women knowledge workers' experiences of FWA. This particular contribution is presented and elaborated on in the next section.

#### **6.4.2. Providing Unique and Original Contributions**

Firstly, this study has made a unique contribution to knowledge in respect of exploring the empowering structures existent in the lives of women knowledge workers. Namely, it has illuminated how these women drew upon internal and external structures to negotiate flexible working. Whilst a significant amount of literature on women in work organisations identifies and explores structures that are of a constraining nature, often framed as career/work barriers, obstacles and constraints (Donovan et al. 2005; Broadbridge 2008a, 2008b; Campbell et al. 2012; Cullen and Christopher 2012; Michielsens et al. 2014; Spoor and Hoye 2014), this study has illuminated structures that can have a strong facilitating effect when seeking flexibility. The women in the study appeared to use a number of various structures extant in their action horizon in order to adapt to their mother (or carer) role through a successful request of flexible working. This study suggests that securing flexible work schedules may be more difficult (if not impossible) to achieve if working women do not have access to these structures, for instance as in the case of unskilled women workers of lesser privilege and poorer human and social capital.



Secondly, this study explores how flexible women knowledge workers use their active agency to address ideal worker and mother/carer role misalignment. So far, existing research on FWA has tended to focus on either structural factors impeding women's progress in work organisations (Brown et al. 2003; Brown 2010), or on the agency of female flexibility users (Jackson and Scharman 2002; Cabrera 2009). However, there has been a dearth of studies to date that illuminate how both structure and agency play out in the context of women using FWA (Crowley and Kolenikov 2014). Therefore, this study makes an important contribution to this existing scholarship. The findings suggest that women are not passive individuals that surrender to the flexibility stigma, but they actively seek to minimise the impact of flexible schedules on their image and work outputs. This study shows the grapple of the women knowledge workers to reconcile the competing binaries of mothering and working, and their attempts to enact the IWN. The practices of *(un)becoming flexible*, although not without the penalties discussed in the previous chapter, allowed the women knowledge workers to attempt to conform to the organisational expectations of presence, availability and visibility. Yet at the same time, these practices could have never substituted full-time commitment implicitly celebrated in organisational normativities. Therefore, the women knowledge workers could have aligned with the IWN only to a degree, and avoided stigma only partially, since they still reported negative short-term and long-term consequences of working flexibly.

The study has contributed to the existing body of knowledge with an original theory of *Becoming* and *(Un)becoming Flexible* based on the perceptions, experiences, and ways of negotiating and managing flexible working of women knowledge workers (Figure 9). I will now explain how this conceptual model theorises the experiences of women knowledge workers of flexible working.

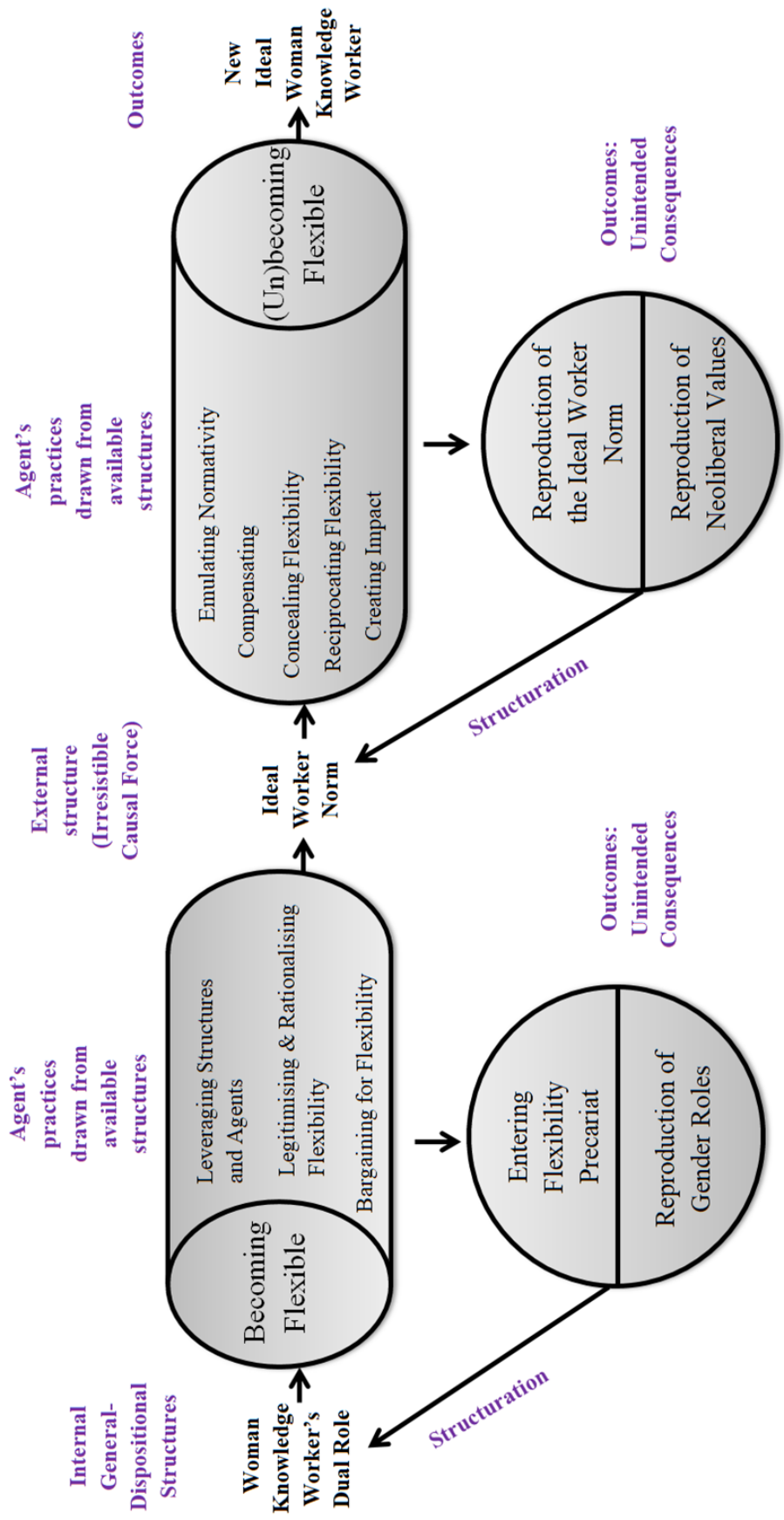


Figure 9. Theoretical model of women knowledge workers working flexibly.  
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These experiences are theorised as a process flow, which starts with the women's needs to reconcile both work and home responsibilities with flexible work schedules. Women knowledge workers who become mothers or assume caring responsibilities decide to request FWA to enable them to continue working. This practice is an example of drawing upon an internal general-dispositional structure, or habitus, which is often taken-for-granted and unquestioned. The necessity to fulfil both economic (productive) and familial (reproductive) responsibilities has been argued to increase in prominence in the postfeminist landscape of the neoliberal West, with the U.K. and the U.S. as leading examples (Lewis and Simpson 2017). This is captured in the model as *Woman Knowledge Worker's Dual Role*, as the way women feel compelled to fulfil this dual role provides the necessary condition for them to utilise their right to request FWA. This gives rise to the practices to *become flexible* in the first place and these strategies help explain how women knowledge workers achieve this goal. To achieve such dual role adaptation (of productive and reproductive processes), women knowledge workers draw on a number of internal and external structures to negotiate and obtain flexible working, i.e. they *leverage structures and agents*, they *legitimise and rationalise flexibility*, and they *bargain for flexibility*.

*Leveraging Structures and Agents* such as *line managers' outlook and support*, *CEO/Leader*, *HR department*, *precedent setters*, *social networks and childcare*, and *the ICT* aims to harness the capabilities extant in the structural conditions available to women knowledge workers to obtain or negotiate flexibility.

*Legitimising and Rationalising Flexibility* refers to the practices of drawing on the internal structures to gain flexible working, that is, the women knowledge workers' *awareness of the business need* specific to the organisation in question, *strategic choice of the number of days and hours*, and an *awareness of HR policies and legislation*. These actions are designed to present flexible working as a legitimate and rational business case in which FWA is not seen as obstructing the managerial agenda. What should be emphasised here is the location of this exercise not within the organisation's remit, but rather, this necessity is assumed by the individual.

*Bargaining for Flexibility* refers to capitalising on the *knowledge, expertise and skills*, and *trust and reputation* available to women knowledge workers and trading it in for the concession of working flexibly. This option is only available to those women

knowledge workers who possess a characteristic desired by the organisation or have already proven themselves to be “occupationally worthy” of the privilege of flexible working.

This exposes the taken-for-granted political neutrality and the indeterminacy (of who benefits and how) in which the right to request legislation is constructed. Based on the findings, it suggests that *becoming flexible* is a complex endeavour, necessitating not only the facilitative structures in place to be “drawn upon” (Stones 2005), but also strategic, often creative practices to best exploit these structures, and above all, knowledgeable agents capable of autonomy and reflexivity. This part of the theoretical model suggests that our understanding of flexible working and the rhetorical “democratic availability” is inadequate, which merits more attention to be paid in different research contexts. Although women knowledge workers are relatively privileged actors best able to leverage their social positioning to negotiate flexible working (Kelly and Kalev 2006), they are not immune to organisational and managerial constraints. It is their “responsibility” to identify and seek support for their work adaptations, craft their requests in the way that goes with the grain of the managerial agenda, and use their occupational capital as a currency to bargain for flexibility. Thus, FWA only benefit those who are “capable”, but also “worthy” to *become flexible*. Middle-class women knowledge workers appear to partially fulfil these preconditions, but this might not be the case in other contexts, where different layers of inequality intersect.

The next part of the theoretical model, the Ideal Worker Norm (as an irresistible causal force, Stones’ external structure) which pre-dates women knowledge workers is experienced. Evocative of the notion of misalignment (Afiouni and Karam 2014) and the previously explored incompatibility of being a mother and an ideal worker, the women are experiencing a dissonance of the competing position-practices. This structure is also a taken-for-granted mode of being which is deeply ingrained in the agents, who undisputedly draw on this norm of action as the dominant one, albeit this normative behaviour is contextual within the organisation in focus.

This then leads to women knowledge workers pre-reflectively or routinely using strategies to control the damage that a flexible worker status brings and effectively *(un)becoming flexible in the eyes of the organisational audience*. This is achieved

through a number of practices, namely *emulating normativity*, *compensating*, *concealing*, *reciprocating*, and *creating impact*.

*Emulating Normativity* refers to the practices of *increasing intensive effort*, *increasing presence, visibility and availability*, and *taking up full-time secondments*. These cumulative practices neutralise the flexibility predicament and aim to externally signal that flexible women knowledge workers are still engaging in the conduct that is implicitly expected in the organisation and seen as normative (what should be occurring).

*Compensating* refers to the practices of *increasing intensive effort*, *working to higher workloads*, and *streamlining work practices*. These actions are internal efforts of flexible women knowledge workers to match their outputs with the non-flexible counterparts or their pre-flexibility performance.

*Concealing Flexibility* refers to the practices of *avoiding exposure* and *colluding with line manager* which aim to reduce the negative impact of being flexible. This feature of the theory exposes the perceived and internalised deviancy of FWA, and the collaborative work between the individual woman and her supervisor to obscure flexibility. This points to the inadvertent reinforcement of the stigmatisation of FWA and cementing the undesirable status that flexibility brings.

*Reciprocating Flexibility* refers to the efforts that are framed in the rhetoric of “give and take” to express the gratitude to the employer for allowing women knowledge workers to work flexibly. It also involves offering back flexibility on demand to suit the operational objectives of the organisation. What is important here is that it is the organisation that mostly benefits from this reciprocity, which is in effect unequally skewed.

Lastly, *Creating Impact* refers to engaging in the assertive strategies to *communicate success and expertise*, using *delivery and output* as mechanisms for signalling occupational value to the organisation, and *strategically choosing projects and people* to re-establish one’s worth, self-presentation, and elicit professional acceptance.

The nature of these strategies, albeit creative and agentic, is suggestive of irresistible organisational pressures necessitating that the women realign with the normative, which results in the re-subjectification of the actor. Thus, although flexible

women knowledge workers in this study symbolise agency, capability, resistance and emancipation, as they have a strong occupational capital to *become flexible*, they then revert to acting within limited options. These practices do require a degree of agentic creativity and capability, and they are in effect allowing women knowledge workers to *(un)become flexible*.

The nature of the dichotomy of *becoming* and *(un)becoming* reflects the competing forces and the simultaneous interplay of structure and agency in women knowledge workers' organisational behaviour. Even though, these women may be constricted by the IWM and other organisational sanctions, they are not completely passive subjects. Instead, they both resist and generate their own subjectification through partial emancipation (or "microemancipation" – Alvesson and Willmott 1992) and conformism hidden in self-control and the knowledge worker identity.

ST in this study provides a unique angle to study flexible working, as it exposes how the women knowledge workers might be contributing to the reproduction of constraining social structures. They achieve this through specific practices, yet they "condemn" themselves to an inferior flexible worker status. They are also contributing to changing, but also to strengthening a number of structures with the intended and unintended consequences of working flexibly:

They (1) change the internal structures by weakening their professional currency and expert power through FWA utilisation, and entering *flexibility precariat*; (2) reproduce the IWN and the expected knowledge worker image; (3) reproduce traditional gender roles, camouflaged in the adaptive woman embodiment of postfeminist discourse by engaging both in productive and reproductive processes; and lastly, (4) cement the neoliberal effect of "responsibilising" women workers for their own WLB and career success, whereby the organisations shed any responsibility for these issues.

Through these cumulative consequences of structural reproduction they become the *new ideal women knowledge workers* that embody both the neoliberal and postfeminist discourses of individualisation, self-responsibility for one's career; who are self-controlling and self-monitoring, agentic, adapting to both work and family needs, and striving to excel in all. These *new ideal women knowledge workers*:

1. Offer the necessary human capital for employers to operate;
2. They are complaint, efficient and effective workers;

3. Utilise FWA which weakens their transactional power – makes them vulnerable and less likely to leave the organisation;
4. Have internalised control mechanisms that compel them to realign with the IWN, so that the employer control remains hidden from their cognisance;
5. They see the organisational power as legitimate; hence they are unlikely to contest it;
6. They are located in organisations where gender inequality is not highly visible due to the idiosyncratic nature of flexi-deals that prevent the creation of one group consciousness;
7. They are compliant in being “responsibilised” for their own career, and thus fit the neoliberal discourse;
8. They absorb the risk of their humanity by minimising the influence of the home sphere on work;
9. They feel indebted for being granted FWA, so consequently their impulsive reciprocity benefits the employing organisation.

They, thus, reify an ideal of the adaptive woman (Lewis and Simpson 2017) which functions to advance managerial interests through maximising productive processes in work organisations; capitalist interests through reproductive processes in society to maintain a future labour supply; and also becoming a weaker player in the labour market through a heightened sensitivity to WLB provisions.

## Chapter 7. Conclusion

### 7.1. Summary of the Findings

The findings from this qualitative study into 30 women knowledge workers highlighted a number of themes, which have been organised into the theoretical framework of *Becoming* and *(Un)becoming Flexible*. The research questions of the analysis were:

**RQ (1) How do women knowledge workers negotiate and obtain FWA through both structure and agency?**

**RQ (2) How do women knowledge workers experience, and manage FWA on a daily basis through both structure and agency?**

**RQ (3) What do they perceive as the consequences of utilising FWA in relation to these women's lives and careers?**

**The following will summarise the findings in response to RQ (1):**

The majority of the participants reported that in order to obtain FWA they leveraged the power or influence of one or a number of different structures and/or agents. The participants felt that it was important to have the support of their line managers, or CEOs and leaders when pursuing FWA. When, in some circumstances, this was not available, the participants reported that the help of the HR department enabled them to successfully negotiate FWA. Surprisingly, despite the resistance of their immediate line managers, the HR function was able to assume an employee-advocate role to help the participants secure a flexible schedule. On other occasions, however, the reluctance came from both the line manager and the HR department, in which case the CEO's support was leveraged. One of the unintended consequences of such dependence on other agents and structures was that the participants felt entrapped in the organisations and indebted to the benevolent agents who supported their flexible schedules.

Other agents, such as peer flexible co-workers also enabled the participants to obtain FWA through the benefit of precedent and embodying an example that flexible schedules can work. This allowed the women knowledge workers to feel "safety in numbers" and exercise their right to request FWA, since several other employees had



already been enjoying flexible schedules. Moreover, the participants highlighted the importance of the structure of social networks and the provision of childcare in their ability to both work flexibly and look after their children.

Knowledge work, which is characterised by its capacity to be accomplished almost solely through the use of technology, and the availability of the ICT infrastructure within the organisations and the participants' homes enabled the interviewees to organise their work in a flexible mode, often working from home, or after hours from various locations. This resulted, however, in the blurring of the work and home boundaries, since the participants struggled to define strong demarcation between the two often overlapping spheres.

It is important to emphasise that these structures and agents could be *leveraged* by the participants only to a degree, since the lack of these facilitating structures could have seriously handicapped the women's ability to request FWA. It is to be expected that in other contexts it is easily possible to fail to find support for FWA from anyone with relative power within an organisation. Therefore, the structures these women found themselves in were correctly perceived by them with a degree of serendipity. Here, the theoretical framework underpinning this study, QNS, helps to understand the nature of these structures: they were independent causal forces autonomous from the participants and both enabling and potentially constraining these women at the same time.

The participants reported that in order to obtain FWA they drew on conjuncturally-specific internal structures as they utilised their contextual knowledge of the organisation, their awareness of the business need, and their rights for flexible requests. They were able to craft their flexible request in such a way as to successfully "sell" a good case for flexibility without impacting the business. Therefore, they could effectively *legitimise* and *rationalise* an otherwise organisationally-deviant work schedule. There is a degree of precariousness in this internal structure, too. This know-how and know-what may be more prevalent among knowledge workers, and less so among semi-skilled or unskilled employees who do not possess the benefit of such insider knowledge.

Lastly, the participants drew on the power of their expertise and skill, but also their established trust and reputation in *bargaining* for flexible work schedules. They demonstrated to their employers that they were "worthy" a flexible arrangement, so that

their talent was retained within the organisation. This also points to the relative privilege of knowledge workers: they may not be easily substituted, unlike less skilled or less experienced staff. Moreover, the fact that they were trustworthy, had already proven they worked hard and did not shirk helped the women knowledge workers to “buy” flexibility with the currency of a good repute. However, the unintended consequences of acquiring flexibility related to limiting career and development opportunities as the participants felt their career effectively stagnated or plateaued.

**The following will summarise the findings in response to RQ (2):**

The majority of the participants reported that after switching to FWA they were working at times not scheduled to work or working overtime (increasing extensive effort); increasing their physical and virtual presence, e.g. coming to work on days off or when sick, or monitoring emails outside of work hours to be seen on standby; or taking up full-time secondments in order to signal full commitment or improve their career prospects. These behaviours and practices allowed them to *emulate* what was perceived as the organisational *normativity* within their work institutions. This resulted in some of the participants feeling overworked and compromising their WLB, despite the opposite intention.

Moreover, the participants felt they were increasing their intensive effort through a heightened focus and efficiency, and also cutting down on social interactions with colleagues whilst at work. They accepted or complied with dealing with higher workloads that were often ill-adjusted to their flexible or part-time schedules. The women also reported that they streamlined their work practices through increased planning, organising and catching-up in order to keep up with the demanding work. This is how they *compensated* for their flexible status and lost time, so that they could maintain fulfilling the organisational expectations.

The interviewees admitted to avoiding exposure as working flexibly or part-time, as they refrained from disclosing their work schedules to colleagues and clients. Additionally, they felt they avoided reminding those who had already known about their flexible schedules. In some circumstances, both the women knowledge workers and their line managers colluded together in order to *conceal* the participants’ flexible status. This finding signals the persisting broader resistance towards FWA, its deviance, and its negative connotations in organisational cultures.

The participating women felt that they exerted more effort in order to show gratitude to their employer for granting them FWA. They often used the discourse of “give and take” when talking about their ability to work flexibly. They perceived FWA as a significant perk and a privilege they felt compelled to thank for. This meant that they *reciprocated* through going the extra mile or offering back their flexibility on demand, for instance, swapping days and working hours to accommodate the business needs.

Lastly, the participants ensured that when they *created impact* through their work when possible in order to invest in their future career. They communicated their success and expertise through striving for customers and clients and actively participating in meetings. They were over-delivering and doing a “good job” to signal they were quality employees that the organisation should retain, and they strategically chose key projects and worked with influential people who could propel their career prospects.

**The following will summarise the findings in response to RQ (3):**

The participants felt they greatly benefited from the granted flexibility on a number of levels. The most recurrent intended consequences of working flexibly reported by the participants related to: caregiving and homemaking responsibilities and creating a sense of family cohesion. This allowed the women knowledge workers to feel that their WLB was improved and that they could maintain their career and work identity at the same time. Moreover, the financial reasons dictated that the participants stayed professionally active to contribute to the household income. Some participants were the sole breadwinners, in which case the responsibility to earn an income was the main driver to seek flexibility.

The majority of the unintended consequences related to the detrimental effects on the participants’ work sphere. The first and foremost unintended outcome of flexibility perceived by the women related to having their career and development opportunities limited. They reported that their careers were put on hold while working flexibly and that only resuming their work on a full-time basis would have averted this career stagnation.

Being negatively perceived and stigmatised due to a flexible work status also prevailed among the participants. Working flexibly attracted unwanted comments from full-time colleagues, which indicated that the status of a flexible woman worker was

perceived as deviant from the normative full-time worker model. This relates back to the participants feeling compelled to avoid the exposure of their flexibility status.

By working flexibly and increasing the intensive and extensive work effort the participants felt that they were missing out on socialising and networking opportunities within the organisation. Not only did this prevent them from building their *know-whom* capabilities in order to grow their careers, but also it decreased their sense of access to vital information about organisational developments (*know-what*) (DeFillippi and Arthur 1996).

The participants reported feeling entrapped in the organisations that allowed them flexibility, since they did not see many opportunities to apply for flexible jobs elsewhere. They also feared that their flexibility “haven” supported by their line managers could have been jeopardised if the management structure changed. Therefore, the participants found themselves in a precarious position of organisational benevolence, where their talent was trapped.

Blurred boundaries and skewed WLB was often reported by the participants, as their work was completed both at home and in the office. Flexibility allowed the participants to defy the geographical and work time norms, but at the same time, they had fallen victim to the inability to decide when to stop working and when their home life after work began and finished. Interestingly, although one of the intended consequences of flexibility was WLB, in many circumstances flexibility actually tipped the balance toward work, especially when the participants were increasing their extensive work effort.

Most of the participants succumbed to the regime of new flexible schedules with the help of altered work practices in order to cope with their workload and organisational working norms. In some cases, however, the participants had decided or were considering withdrawing from the pursuit of career due to their perception of unequal and unfair balance that benefitted the organisation. Lack of career progress, inferior work status and work overload were blamed when the participants felt they could no longer continue working in their organisations.

Studying the experiences of precisely the women who were led to believe they had work barriers removed and who could enjoy equality has revealed that not all obstacles have been cleared yet. Although, the studied women knowledge workers

appeared to enjoy relative power when negotiating flexible work options, this power seemed to shift back to the employer once the flexibility was secured. One of the reasons behind this may be the prevalent organisational culture based on the IWN, and its lagged adaptation when it comes to embracing the value of outside commitments, parenthood and WLB.

Thus as Acker (2006) has suggested, work organisations continue to provide the structures and locations for the regenerative cycle of gender divisions, choices and behaviours, in which women themselves participate. They are unwittingly involved in the reproduction of expected gender norms by striving to adapt to both productive and reproductive tasks. This is taking place in precisely the work context which at first appears egalitarian, reformed and enabling women to flourish in relation to career – the relatively privileged knowledge economy of the “missing middle”. This seems to suggest that female-friendly KIS may not be the safe spaces we are envisaging.

The traditionally skewed power problematic of the employee-employer relationship is somewhat transformed, albeit only as far as the negotiation of FWA is concerned. Thereafter, it appears that the power shifts to the employer’s advantage as the women honour the ideal worker behaviours which are ultimately beneficial to the organisation. There is still an undercurrent of flexible working stigma, as women try to avoid it through agentic practices. Diminished client hegemony in this knowledge work context did not significantly relieve the women from temporal and spatial constraints.

Acker highlights an important distinction between the gendered organisation of work (requiring full-time presence, availability, commitment, etc.) and the gender characteristics of the ideal worker:

“[a]lthough work is organised on the model of the unencumbered (White) man, and both women and men are expected to perform according to this model, men are not necessarily the ideal workers for all jobs. The ideal worker for many jobs is a woman, particularly a woman who, employers believe, is compliant, who will accept orders and low wages” (Acker 2006, p. 450).

The findings of this study seem to support Acker’s argument further. Women knowledge workers who strive to adapt to their productive and reproductive responsibilities reified in the adaptive woman discourse (Lewis and Simpson 2017) have the structural support to become flexible to reconcile these competing demands.

As flexible work is deemed inferior to the organisational norms of full-time presence and performance, commitment and availability, women knowledge workers' practices to *(un)become flexible* will never be fully successful in averting the damage that flexible working brings upon their status. Flexible working is accepted as sub-standard by the women themselves, and they even believe in the logicity of their career stagnation during the most intensive periods of parental responsibilities.

These women, therefore, expect to have significantly lower chances for any employer concessions, and they are thus less likely to claim any career nurturing or professional development from their organisations. Yet, at the same time they serve the organisation by reproducing the IWN and strengthening the behaviours that ultimately benefit the employer.

This would suggest that we are not experiencing an epochal change (Crompton 2002) in relation to gender equality, but perhaps only an intensification of exploitation of pure capitalism, whereby the gendered division of labour still persists:

“[The] emphasis on the ‘positive’ aspect of employment flexibility is in some contrast to recent research that has revealed its more negative aspects – particularly for women. [Thus] despite widespread assertions as to the coming of ‘epochal change’, there has in fact been ‘no real change’ in the underlying division of labour between the sexes” (Crompton 2002, p. 546).

Consequently, the combination of the women employees' reduced claims to employer concessions, and their simultaneous attempts to be dedicated, productive and efficient make these women the *new ideal women knowledge workers*.

The current study suggests that the utilisation of FWA is contributing to the effect mentioned by McRobbie (2007). Flexible working supports the new social compromise of women's dual burden (Crompton 2002, Hochschild and Machung 2003) which plays a key role in biopolitical strategies of gaining social and political power over life, aiming to “subvert the possibilities of renewed feminist challenges to patriarchal authority” (McRobbie 2007, p. 730). As such, it could be especially difficult to trigger a social change benefitting flexible women knowledge workers in relation to career success, and work and family sphere amelioration. The political opportunity structure in the U.K. skewed by the populous baby-boomer generation no longer in work, and thus unconcerned about WLB agenda may also limit the possible options available to gender equality campaigners (O'Connor et al. 1999).

Additionally, the election of the conservative government, coupled with a sustained movement towards free market and self-regulation in the U.K., and more recently Brexit potentially undermining the EU protection rights of workers, could further deteriorate opportunities for change.

The right to request, rather than to obtain FWA, reinforces individual-based flexi deals (Rousseau 2005), thus weakens the possibilities of reflexive enlightenment and a collective power of professional women to emancipation. There are some similarities between the marxist notion of working class “in itself” and “for itself”, and women knowledge workers on flexible arrangements. This group of women is weakened and split through individual flexibility deals and their relative inability to perceive a shared experience of inequality and oppression at workplace. They continue to be a group “in itself”, whereby they are only united by the shared status of being a flexible women knowledge worker. However, they are still unable to become a “group for itself” owing to their lack of unity through mutual recognition of shared exploitative experience. Therefore, the challenge of emancipation through enlightenment and working collectively for their flexibility rights is even more difficult to achieve.

The suggested solution here would centre on introducing the right to obtain FWA regardless of the business case, or introducing legislation that would see all jobs advertised on a flexible-basis, unless there is a strong case against it. This would challenge the status quo of humans working for institutions, through establishing an alternative paradigm of institutions working for humans.

## **7.2. Implications for Future Research**

This study is not making claims as to the generalisability of the findings, however the theoretical contribution presented in this project can offer transferability to other contexts, in which tensions from the expected modes of behaviour can arise. This could include professionalised knowledge work contexts, such as law, accountancy and management consultancy, but also academia, engineering, science, pharmaceutical occupations, medicine, to name a few.

It could also encompass men who do not wish, or simply do not live up to the IWN in similar work contexts, and who prioritise family commitments, thus deviate from the traditional gender role stereotypes. Future research on how such adaptive men

grapple with organisational expectations of performance, availability and full-time commitment while utilising flexible work, could help us understand what needs to be done to encourage more men to break away from the breadwinner trap and assume more care responsibilities, thus consequently relieving women of same.

The *(un)becoming flexible* practices conceptualised in this study also widen our understanding of how these techniques are enacted and how they may be used in different contexts. The *(un)becoming theory* could be applied to other environments, work or study, where people deviate from the commonly accepted norms. A question could be posed how students cope with educational expectations of what it entails to be an ideal student. For instance, how female students experience pregnancy and motherhood during their studies, with a focus on their potential *(un)becoming(s)*?

It might also be possible to develop a measurement scale which would capture the *(Un)becoming Flexible Strategies* to illuminate whether there is a cultural lag behind often superficial lip-service WLB policies and practices present in a rhetorical sense in work organisations.

One area which has emerged, yet could not be fully explored in this study relates to the women knowledge workers' discourse on flexible working and their sense-making of how flexibility is negotiated and their career trajectories impacted. Future research could focus on how the IWN and managerial control are internalised and then become self-disciplining devices.

A further study could also be conducted to explore how women knowledge workers who utilise FWA for reasons other than familial responsibilities experience flexible working. For instance, do they still strive to realign with the IWN if they use FWA for self-development, volunteering, studying, training, secondments, entrepreneurship, or being employed in more than one organisation? Or is this tension only emerging in conjunction with motherhood and care responsibilities?

By highlighting the pressures exerted by organisational normativities, this study points to the need to identify how these ideals are reproduced not only by the women, but also by the co-workers, managers, and other stakeholders such as clients, and HR bodies. Moreover, how are these ideals reinforced by the media, and by the images of a successful woman who "has it all"?



Moreover, the effects of the tension generated from the IWN and the *(Un)becoming Strategies* need to be investigated in relation to the women's psychological states and how they impact their self-esteem. If these practices are enacted strategically and consciously, arguably much energy must be sacrificed to maintain the awareness of how to manage these impressions, how to avert being seen as uncommitted, and how to repeal the ambiguity of performance and competence of knowledge work (Alvesson 2001).

### **7.3. Implications for Practitioners**

Business schools have been focusing on how to marry theory with practice in order to become more involved in collaborative partnerships with the industry, and to offer engaged scholarship to practitioners. Such attempts to bridge the relevance gap and create knowledge that is important, that can be applied, and that is relevant to business, are more often conceptualised with the manager as the ultimate beneficiary of the production of knowledge (King and Learmonth 2015). Thus, for business schools, the generation of critical research can be perceived as useless, since it does not furnish managers with answers how to get the most out of employees and systems, and how to maximise the efficiency and efficacy of production, since:

“the primary goals of engaged scholarship [are] to be achieving the sorts of objectives top managers are likely to welcome” (2015, p. 354).

So, how should the business practitioners benefit from this study? The expectation to include such a section in a PhD thesis or an academic journal implies on surface that it is the managerial interests that should be served by the research. This is highly problematic given the methodological stance of this study, as

“[a] fundamental assumption of critical theory is that every form of social order entails some forms of domination and that the critical-emancipatory interest underlies the struggles to change those relations of domination-subordination” (Morrow and Brown 1994, p. 149).

The employer-employee relationship has long been seen as inherently founded in the conflict of domination versus subordination (at least in critical management studies), since the ultimate goal of the organisation is often contradictory to the goals of its workers. Therefore, I would like to adhere to the spirit of Critical Theory and will

instead consider the implications for the participants and women knowledge workers. I will also define practitioners as policy-makers, charities and activists involved in bringing about gender equality, and WLB in modern work organisations. This is in accordance with Willmott (2008) who suggests that critical management studies should serve such agents as activists, but also engage with

“the managed, with trade unionists, with women’s groups [...] who might arguably be a more obvious constituency for such an endeavour” (Fournier and Grey 2000, p. 26).

Firstly, in relation to structural issues at a macro-level, a change to the current legislation from the right to request to the right to obtain flexible working should be considered. This could work well if it resembled a similar legislation structure enrolled for the disabled, that is, framed on a reasonable adjustment basis. Such policy could benefit anyone seeking flexibility for any reason, not only parents and carers of children, the disabled or elderly.

Secondly, maternity should be reassessed in relation to how this characteristic could benefit from further protection, and moreover, how paternity could mirror this. Currently, according to the Equality Act 2010 when maternity leave ends, the special protection also ends. This almost implies that when a woman returns from her maternity leave, her childcare duties disappear which could not be further from truth in most cases. The provision of quality affordable childcare has been widely criticised in the U.K., so has been an inadequate treatment of fathers and downplaying of the fathers’ role in the upbringing of children.

Recent legislation entitling parents to share 52 weeks of parental leave and up to 39 weeks of statutory shared parental pay is one step towards greater equality. However, it has been shown that few fathers can afford to benefit from this option. This is due to fathers being more likely to be the main breadwinners, thus utilising this right does not make a financial sense to most families. This reflects the persisting gender pay gap, but also the stereotypes of gender roles, since fathers are also concerned that taking shared parental leave is negatively perceived at work and would jeopardise their careers.

Thirdly, in order to promote a cultural change within organisations towards legitimising flexible modes of working and removing the attached stigma, it should be legislated that all jobs are to be advertised on a flexible basis, unless there is a good

operational reason not to. This would help to normalise flexible working and challenge the ideal of how work should be conducted and thus destabilise the IWN. Further, by elevating the right to request into the right to obtain flexible working, those women employees, who do not enjoy significant human and social capital like knowledge workers, may also be able to benefit from FWA. This would ensure that flexible working does not have to be negotiated, bargained for, or its benefits “sold” to the employer through legitimising and rationalising by the women themselves. The legitimacy and rationale of FWA should be embedded by default in the nationwide legislation that applies to all employers, public and private.

Fourthly, at a meso-level, organisations should consider introducing results-only work and decoupling flexibility from performance appraisals and opportunities for development and promotion (Putnam et al. 2014). The use of the ICT should also be reconsidered and new ways found to utilise virtual capabilities of communication systems to aid lessening of work pressure, rather than its intensification as seen in this study. For instance, face time and meetings could be conducted online to minimise the need to come to the office, as the participants of this study have raised concerns of the prevailing meetings culture in organisations.

In relation to the recommendations at a micro-level that cannot be captured by structural solutions, it would not be reasonable to advise women to stop realigning with the ideal worker behaviours. This would not be a responsible piece of advice, as it could jeopardise these individual women’s career prospects, since

“[l]aws, of course, are among the most strongly sanctioned types of social rules [...] However, it would be a serious mistake to underestimate the strength of informally applied sanctions in respect of a variety of mundane daily practices” (Giddens 1986, p. 23).

However, a collective sense of shared experience of flexible working, inequality and oppression in workplace needs to be developed. This could occur through setting up an establishment resembling a trade union, which would focus on providing protection and advice to those working flexibly.

## 7.4. Goodness and Quality of the Inquiry

*Reliability, validity* and *generalisability* are terms owned by positivism and post-positivism and they are invalid criteria for qualitative research. Thus, the research's goodness and quality are assessed through different principles.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) have proposed a set of criteria appropriate for judging the goodness and quality of a Critical Theory inquiry, namely historical situatedness, eroding of ignorance and misapprehensions, stimulus to action (catalytic authenticity) and tactical authenticity (empowering action). These criteria will be discussed in turn.

*Historical situatedness* refers to taking into account the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender antecedents of the studied situation. Researchers must

“understand the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender history and structure that serve as the surround for their inquiries” (1994, p. 115).

In this study, in order to take the full account of values and historical situatedness in the inquiry process, I have located my participants in the problematic context of women in work organisations, the legislative and political landscape of flexible working, and the economic background of the ascension of knowledge work.

*Eroding of ignorance and misapprehensions* refers to how knowledge is constituted. Rather than knowledge accumulating in an absolute sense, it is developed and is constantly updated, which over time “enlarges more informed insights” (1994, p. 114). To assume that feminism is outdated, as the battles have been won, is now a common stance which is reinforced by postfeminist discourses present in the society and championed in the media. Many observers believe that parity with men has been achieved and feminism is no longer needed. This study challenges this stance and contributes to the eroding of the postfeminist discourse. The study has shown that the relatively privileged group of women who are largely white, middle-class, well-educated and employed in a seemingly female-friendly industry and hold a “strong set of cards” are not exempt from gender inequality regimes located in work organisations. This study, thus, helps to broaden our insights into the experiences of “the missing middle” women knowledge workers who grapple with the dual burden of home

responsibilities and careers, unable to purchase domestic labour and childcare in order to commit themselves fully to their employers.

*Stimulus to action* refers to catalytic authenticity and a motivation to the transforming the existing structure. In other words, it involves seeing how the structures might be altered and realising the actions necessary to effect change. It has been recommended in this study that the right to request legislation needs to be reconsidered by the policymakers. The study also offers insights for activists, pressure groups and feminists needed to justify change. I can achieve this stimulus through public engagements, publications, teaching, charity work, but also being an advocate for change and a role model myself to female students and colleagues. My sharing of the research findings with Bournemouth University's Women's Academic Network is an example of how I can engage my female colleagues, students and other stakeholders in promoting a change. I have also been volunteering for Working Families charity in their "Happy to Talk Flexible Working" campaign.

*Fairness* refers to the claim that Critical Theory makes in relation to developing a scientific research program which combines empirical and normative theorising (what ought to be). It is concerned with questions about justice, freedom, and equality (Morrow and Brown 1994). Women constitute half of the population of the workforce and despite the overtones of gender equality, motherhood and career continue to be seen as incompatible, and consequently, women are still being discriminated. This study is grounded in social justice goals as it attempts to address the questions of the traditionally skewed power imbalance in the employer-employee relationship. It also addresses the questions of how organisations are the structures and locations of inequality regimes and exploring if the seemingly gender egalitarian contexts are as unrestricted as we are led to believe.

*Tactical authenticity* is concerned with empowering action. Researchers should

“[...] incorporate the values of altruism and empowerment in their work”  
(Guba and Lincoln 1994, p. 115).

Adding to the collective efforts of the academic research community is one way of building a strong body of knowledge needed for empowering action. This knowledge can be used to inform policy and educate practitioners on the consequences of flexible working in organisational contexts that lag in adaptation to fully embracing WLB

policies and practices. At a micro-level, I do believe that for some of my participants the interview process was catalytic as they were able to *voice* their experiences not only to an outsider like me, but also verbalise these experiences in a reflexive sense. By answering my questions they were effectively sense-making as they spoke for themselves and this “venting” was in itself catalytic, as much as it was cathartic.

## **7.5. Reflexivity**

When I started my postgraduate journey in 2014 I was full of enthusiasm and admiration for the progressive and egalitarian human resource management (HRM) agenda only just learnt during my masters’ degree, replacing the mere “personnel” function. When I decided to pursue academia further and conduct research into women knowledge workers I wanted to demonstrate that work organisations should fight for female talent with reformist HRM policies, such as flexible working, because women are productive, committed and loyal employees.

However, during my literature review, I realised I was rather unwittingly trying to frame my research purely in a business-case agenda, and neglecting women as individuals who grapple with gender inequality and organisational pressures on a daily basis. Reading relevant empirical and conceptual work was an eye opener, as I realised that my understanding of women’s experiences was vastly inadequate, despite my own experiences both as employee and manager in KIS. Some literature has helped to grasp what I have always felt but could not make sense of or verbalise myself. Other literature has changed my outlook on the issues of gender altogether, and has made me understand why each woman should be a feminist without a shame. This is when I comprehended that I must not solely prioritise managerial interests by exploring how to best “manage” women knowledge workers. Instead, I felt I should prioritise agentic and critical interests by illuminating how women may be burdened in work organisations, and whether we as researchers can help to enlighten and empower them, so that they can be emancipated.

During my postgraduate journey I also became a mother myself which has deepened my understanding of the experiences of my participants further. I can now literally put myself in their shoes and almost feel the dissonance between the two competing devotions and the expectations to always excel and “have it all”. I have not

been so much grappling with the IWN, but rather the ideal of a PhD student and the deviance from the norm which pregnancy, maternity and motherhood bring.

Critical Theory has been the framework of my methodology and I do understand that it comes with many caveats attached. I fully appreciate that I may never be able to emancipate my participants. Indeed this even sounds preposterous and arrogant and implies that I believe I am the one with power over my “subjects” who need emancipating. The ideal worker norm and the adaptive woman predicament that my participants grappled with were two internal taken-for-granted structures that dictated how they should behave at work, but also that they should still pitch in at home, embodying both the ideal mother and ideal worker norms. This ability to speak was cathartic for some, as they thanked me afterwards. Throughout the interviews I felt that the participants appreciated the opportunity to vent their feelings and to discuss their experiences of work and home responsibilities. This is when ST helped to make sense of these experiences again, as Stones has suggested, habitus (structure) does not have to remain undiscussed and undisputed, but it can be

“subverted and unsettled, making one suddenly conscious of that which previously was pre-reflective [...] the line that does exist between the unquestioned habitus of doxa and the universe of discourse and argument [...], is a contingent and shifting line between an unquestioned habitus, on the one hand, and the part of habitus that is open to critical reflection and discussion, on the other” (2005, p. 88).

Thus, it is my hope that some of the participants have partially enlightened themselves through this opportunistic self-reflection, which perhaps would not have been otherwise possible.

I appreciate that it may be also argued that all that CT does is what it says on the tin: it criticises; and that not much progress or change is achieved just from complaining or highlighting difficulties. However, I do strongly believe that even if I cannot single-handedly enlighten, empower and emancipate my participants, I can at least contribute to the collective effort that other researchers have expended to highlight and avert gender inequality. I do think that we can, as a collective, build a strong body of knowledge that will help shape social policy for the better. We, as researchers, need to continue contributing to productive contestations in order to raise consciousness and also to continue creating counter-movements:

“[a]lthough, doubtless, there is still a long way to go (and there is, admittedly, limited evidence of such work reaching much outside an audience wider than university academics), arguably the influence of [...] engaged feminist work on policy and practice is starting to make a difference to women’s rights and status as employees” (King and Learmonth 2015, p. 357).

The most rewarding part of this project was meeting and speaking to these very hard working and caring women and listening to their experiences. At the same time, I have become a different person in that I see social phenomena more critically and I have learnt to treat seemingly good things with healthy and inquisitive suspicion. I would like to thank Bournemouth University for enabling me to complete this journey and acquire an academic mind. I am very lucky and very grateful.



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# Appendices

## Consent Form

**Full title of project:** Female Talents in the Knowledge Economy.

**Researchers:** Ola Biernat, PhD Student, [i7262913@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:i7262913@bournemouth.ac.uk), 07963 402 463.

**Supervisors:** Dr Lois Farquharson, [lfarquharson@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:lfarquharson@bournemouth.ac.uk); Dr Sachiko Takeda [stakeda@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:stakeda@bournemouth.ac.uk) at Bournemouth University, Business School, HR and OB department.

Please Initial Here

<p>I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the above research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.</p>	
<p>I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question(s), complete a test or give a sample, I am free to decline.</p>	
<p>I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.</p>	

<p>I consent to the recording of interviews with during interview(s) and these being stored digitally.</p> <p>I understand that this recording will be used for the purposes of data analysis.</p> <p>I understand that I may ask for the recording to stop at any time. I may also ask for a copy the digital recording.</p> <p>My name will not be associated with the digital recording and I will not be identified in the recording at any time. Strict confidentiality will always be observed.</p>	
<p>I agree to take part in the above research project.</p>	

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

# **Participant Information Sheet**

## **Female Talents in the Knowledge Economy.**

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

### **What is the purpose of the project?**

This project focuses on the careers of female knowledge workers who have been utilising flexible work arrangements in their organisations. The aim of this project is to explore how female knowledge workers perceive and experience such arrangements and how they reflect on their careers. The project will explore these issues through semi-structured interviews involving 30-35 participants. The duration of the data collection is anticipated to last between 6-9 months.

### **Why have I been chosen?**

Participants are chosen through an email invitation and it is anticipated that 30-35 participants will be interviewed. There is number of criteria that each participant needs to fulfil in order to be invited to partake in the research. For example, all participants need to be female knowledge workers, such as researchers, lecturers, consultants, or analysts. All participants need to be utilising flexible or alternative work arrangements, such as part-time, flexitime, telecommuting, telework, home-work, remote-work, compressed work, annualised hours, term-time work, or reduced hours.

### **Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time without it affecting any benefits that you are entitled to in any way. You do not have to give a reason.

### **What do I have to do? What will happen to me if I take part?**

Although the study will take about 6-9 months, you will only be required to be actively involved for the duration of the interview which should last between 60 – 90 minutes.



You will only be interviewed once, however if there are any queries or additional questions, you may be asked to answer some additional questions face-to-face or via email or telephone. You can refuse to answer these questions if you wish.

You will be asked to answer a series of semi-structured questions about how you use flexible work arrangements in your workplace and about your perceptions of your career. You will be able to discuss these questions in-depth. There will also be short questions regarding your age, career length, occupation, marital status, and if you have any children to enable me to describe the participants. Please remember that anonymity is ensured at all times and if you wish I can change some information to ensure this anonymity.

I expect that you give us an honest account of your experiences and perceptions of using flexible work arrangements and how this may have shaped your career.

I intend to use semi-structured interview method of gathering data, and then analyse them using Nvivo software.

You will be interviewed by Ola who is second year PhD student and a part-time lecturer at BU.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

There are no reasonably foreseeable discomforts, disadvantages and risks of taking part in this study apart from dedicating your time to this research.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will allow us to better understand how female knowledge workers utilise flexible work arrangements and how they shape their career paths, so that they can be guided in their future career planning.

**Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential? What will happen to the results of the research project?**

All the information that I collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications.

The results of the research may be published in academic journals and my PhD thesis in the next 2-4 years. The data collected during the course of the project might be used for

additional or subsequent research, for example analysing different aspects of this project, not originally covered in my PhD thesis or journal publications.

**What type of information will be sought from me and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research project's objectives?**

I will be seeking to gather information about how female knowledge workers use flexible work arrangements in their organisations, and if they think there are any barriers or facilitators to using such arrangements. I will also be interested in your opinion about how such arrangements might have shaped your professional career. We might also discuss other aspects of your career and flexible working should these arise during the interview.

**Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?**

I will need to obtain your permission to record the interview on audio media. I will record the interview in order to capture everything that has been discussed to ensure that haven't omitted anything. Next, I will transcribe the recordings and analyse the data using specialist software (Nvivo).

The audio recordings of your activities made during this research will be used only for analysis and for illustration in conference presentations, journal publications and lectures. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

**Who is organising/funding the research?**

This research project is fully funded by Bournemouth University.

Contact for further information

**Principal Investigator:** Ola Biernat PhD Student, PT lecturer, [i7262913@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:i7262913@bournemouth.ac.uk), tel. 07963 402 463.

**Supervisors:** Dr Lois Farquharson, [lfarquharson@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:lfarquharson@bournemouth.ac.uk); Dr Sachiko Takeda [stakeda@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:stakeda@bournemouth.ac.uk) at Bournemouth University, Business School, HR and OB department.

Complaints can be made to Ola Biernat, Lois Farquharson or Sachiko Takeda.

You will be given a copy of the information sheet and a signed consent form to keep if you decide to participate in the study.

Thank you for taking the time to read through the above information. Ola Biernat

## Interview Plan

Age:

Highest Level of Education:

Profession:

Marital status:

Children (number and age):

Employment status of partner (employed, self-employed, PT, FT):

Flexible work arrangement type (PT, Flexitime, Teleworking, Homeworking, etc):

Current working hours:

Number of years in employment:

Number of years in current employment:

1. Tell me how your career has developed from the start.

- Promotions, demotions
- Transitions in and out of work

2. Have you seen a clear career path for yourself?

- Have you pursued it?
- Are you satisfied with your career?

3. Which FWA do you use?

- Why do you use them? (childcare, eldercare, volunteering, etc.)
- How do you use FWA? How do you manage them?
- Do you feel that you have a choice? (husband/partner, childcare provisions, childcare costs, etc) Would you have any other options apart from FWA?

4. How did you negotiate FWA with your manager/HR?

- How difficult/easy was it?
- How comfortable were you requesting them?

6. What are the advantages of using FWA? Why?

7. What are the disadvantages of using FWA? Why?

- How do you deal with those disadvantages?
- Do you do anything specific to manage FWA? (visibility, working harder, 'giving back', business need)

8. What do you think makes it difficult for employees to use FWA?

- Is there anything that could help employees use FWA?

9. How do you think FWA have shaped your career?

- What about in the future?

10. How line managers and co-workers perceive those who work flexibly?

- Why?
- Can you give me some examples?

11. If your friend were to ask you for your advice on how to have good career prospects in your department, what advice would you give them?

- Why would you focus on these things?
- How do you know they are useful, can you give me examples?

12. Are there things you would advise your friend not to do; things which would be career limiting?

- What would be the consequences for career prospects if your friend did these things?

13. Can you describe someone/their behaviours in this organisation that would be seen as a good performer?

- Can you give me examples?

14. Do you think FWA help people to achieve these characteristics of a good performer?

15. To what degree do you think that working FT is necessary for being seen as serious and committed?

- What do you personally do to ensure people think you are serious and committed?

16. How is your WLB?

- Do FWA help you?

17. How do you think being a woman makes a difference in developing a career?

18. Are there any other issues in relation to FWA we haven't discussed?