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Flexible work arrangements and gender differences in research during the COVID-19 period in Zimbabwean higher learning institutions

Abstract

This study sought to investigate the impact of COVID-19-induced flexible work arrangements (FWAs) on gender differences in research outputs during COVID-19. A mixed research methodology was used, focusing on higher learning institutions in Zimbabwe. Purposive sampling was applied to select 250 researchers from the 21 registered universities in Zimbabwe. The study's findings revealed that institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe did not provide the necessary affordances to enable both male and female academics to work from home effectively. The study also established that FWAs were preferred and appreciated by both male and female academics. However, whilst both male and female academics performed their teaching responsibilities without incident, unlike males, females struggled to find time for research, thus affecting professional growth and development negatively for female academics. Cultural traditions were found to subordinate females to domestic and caregiving responsibilities unrelated to their professions. The findings raise questions on the feasibility of the much-recommended FWAs for future work on female academics' research careers. Thus, without the necessary systems and processes to support female researchers, FWAs can only widen the gender gap in research outputs. This study contributes to the Zimbabwean higher learning institutions' perspective on how FWAs' policies and practices could be re-configured to assist female researchers in enhancing their research outputs as well as their career growth.

Keywords: Gender, COVID-19, flexible work arrangements, higher education institutions, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

Flexible work arrangements (FWAs) are currently a dominant subject during conversations by human resources practitioners, policymakers, and researchers globally because of COVID-19 and other pandemics (Bieńkowska et al., 2022). This unprecedented catastrophe has threatened the survival of higher learning institutions across the globe.

To combat the effects of COVID-19, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Belgium successfully migrated to flexible work arrangements (Johanson, 2021; Mendez & Carvalho, 2021). In Europe, flexible work is regarded as a standard employment entitlement and employees are not required to give reasons when requesting a flexible work arrangement (Glaude, O'Hearn & Erickson, 2020). In line with FWAs, employers are expected to respect the wishes of their employees (Mendez & Carvalho, 2021). Although the discourse on FWAs continues to dominate conversations as organisations strive to create modern ways of managing the workplace, there is a dearth of literature that focuses on the impact of FWAs on gender differences in research outputs in institutions of higher learning in Africa in general, and Zimbabwe in particular (Conradie & De Klerk, 2019). This is because cultural values and norms exert a mediating influence on the roles played by men and women in society and workplaces (Hunter, 2019; Zvavahera et al., 2021). Gender differences in the effectiveness of FWAs are impacted by traditions and the framing of gender roles. In the spirit of advancing female researchers' interests, Slaughter (2012) advises women to discontinue tolerating male attitudes, behaviours, and choices as the ideal and default for shaping their careers. Women are encouraged to create a society that works for them.

The study's main objective was to investigate the impact of COVID-19-related flexible work arrangements on gender differences in research outputs. The specific objectives of the study were to:

- Assess the desirability of FWAs by male and female academics;
- Investigate the effect of FWAs on research outputs by gender;
- Explore support systems aimed at enhancing research outputs by gender; and
- In the light of the study's findings, make recommendations on how female researchers can exploit FWAs to enhance research outputs.

2. Conceptual framework

The theoretical framework of this study draws from two schools of thought: the hybrid work model and structural functionalism. **The hybrid work model** (see Figure 1) provides staff with more flexibility and the option to work from home or any location as long as productivity is maintained (Gratton, 2021). The model does not confine the workspace to physical offices, but considers the workspace an ecosystem of professionals using the cloud-based system to conduct business. It further assists in understanding and appreciating the experiences of working from home or any suitable location using ICT affordances, whilst the latter assists in appreciating gender roles and how they affect female academics' research outputs in higher learning institutions (Shirmohammadi, Au & Beigi, 2022).

The hybrid model is analysed based on two axes: time and place. Due to the physical work area constraints arising from COVID-19, attention has dramatically shifted to the place axis, moving from the traditional office to the anywhere quadrant. Progressively, there is also a shift along the time axis to the unconstrained zone resulting in most institutions of higher learning moving towards the anywhere-anytime zone. Academics are no longer bound to work in physical spaces, but can work from anywhere within the confines of ICT affordances (Shirmohammadi et al., 2022). Institutions of higher learning are embracing the hybrid work model by moving towards the upper-right quadrant, which represents an anywhere, anytime model of teaching and learning. Those that may decide to remain in the lower left quadrant will

remain in the traditional ways of doing business, which is no longer compatible with managing modern organisations in the prevailing environment (Leighton, 2011).

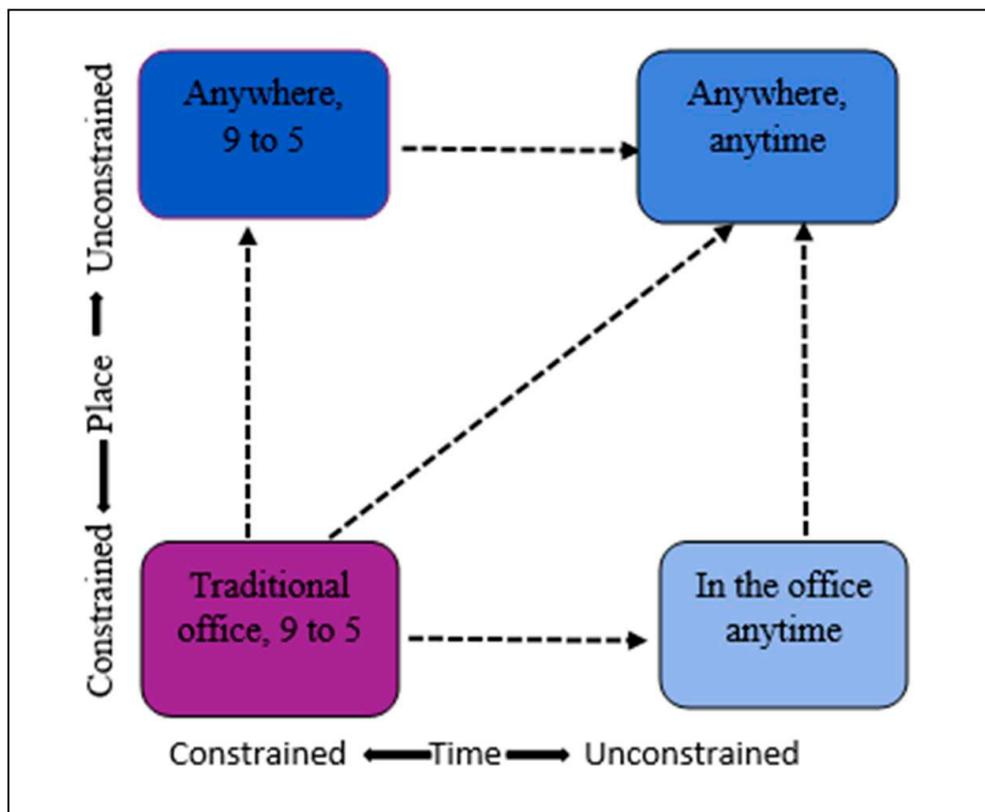


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the hybrid work model

Structural functionalism views the family as a fundamental part of society, where norms and values on gender presuppose the role of women and men (Vineeta, 2022; Airini et al., 2011; Davidson & Burke, 2004). The role of women in society is regarded as superior to any other role, including those assumed in the workplace (Oláh, Kotowska & Richter, 2018; O'Connor et al., 2015; Ellemers, 2014; Starnski & Hing, 2015;). Functionalists claim that gender roles have roots in the tradition where men used to be responsible for activities outside the home (providing for the family) whilst women were responsible for domestic roles (primarily looking after the family) (O'Connor et al., 2015). These patriarchal norms and values are transferred from one generation to another and are still persistent in today's society, including institutions of higher learning (Hawke, 2007; Zvavahera et al., 2021). This has affected how women transition into the world of work and contribute meaningfully to research (Oláh et al., 2018). Farrington and Ely (1993) note that men create rules that influence opportunities and benchmark success in society, resulting in a severe impediment to fulfilling female researchers' desires. However, contemporary conflict theories assume that when women are educated, employed, and empowered, they can also have the power to influence equal domestic responsibilities (Zvavahera et al., 2021).

2.1 A global perspective

FWAs have their origins in Germany around the 1970s, and they rapidly spread across Northern Europe, the United States of America, and the West (Kossek & Mitchel, 2011; Mutahaba, 2013; Swanberg, Watson & Eastman, 2014; Timus et al., 2014). FWAs are currently trending in the developed world because it is the modern way of managing work environments. In Canada, codes exist for employees with six months or more of service that enable them to request flexible entitlements. However, the employer should approve such arrangements (Atiku, Jeremiah & Boateng, 2020; Conradie & De Klerk, 2019; Hunter, 2019). In most parts of Africa, particularly Zimbabwe, FWAs are less successful (Chirenda, 2018).

Hoobler et al. (2018) emphasise the greater responsibility women bear in African social systems compared to their male counterparts: noting that FWAs should be considered in African countries, taking cognisance of sociocultural factors, especially gender norms, values, and shifts in work environments. These traditional societal norms and values have led to undesirable outcomes for female academics at institutions of higher learning in some parts of the world, though the environment is somewhat flexible (Prozesky & Mouton, 2019). These unintended and unrecognised consequences affect values, morals, religious beliefs, customs, fashions, rituals, and the cultural rules that govern work and social life. The lack of adopting FWAs in higher learning institutions may also be attributed to the exerted mediating traditional influences across countries (Peretz, Fried & Levi, 2017).

2.2 The Zimbabwean context

Between 2010 and 2013, the food-processing industry in Zimbabwe tried to implement FWAs, driven by the need to reduce labour costs and circumvent challenges related to worker protection and customers' needs (Mudzi, 2013). The initiative was abandoned, because there was a lack of policies to guide its implementation. This shows a desire for FWAs, but inadequate institutional and home support systems were lacking. The same is supported by Chirenda (2018), who notes that FWAs are problematic in Zimbabwe, since this practice has not been applied effectively and constantly across various sectors. No institution of higher learning has been identified as having established adequate support systems in the country. Mudzi's (2018) research corroborates findings by Nkala (2020) based on a study carried out in Zimbabwe at the Parirenyatwa Group of Hospitals, where it was noted that flexible working hours for nursing staff remained an effective tool in helping staff to handle and cope with demands from critical stakeholders, especially patients, at the peak of COVID-19. The major setback was the lack of guidelines on its implementation, reflecting the identified need for FWAs. Of interest was that female nurses were more prone to work-related mistakes compared to their male counterparts. These mistakes were attributed to gender roles and inequalities, where female nurses had to continue with domestic care work because of a lack of home support systems from their partners. In a similar study by Shenje and Wushe (2019), it was found that there was a positive relationship between a decrease in flexible work hours and job performance, especially concerning female employees, who attributed this to competing work and home responsibilities. These findings also concur with those by Zvavahera et al. (2021), who found that African traditions perpetuated male superiority above women.

Mapedzahama (2014: 5) conducted a comparative study on working mothers in Adelaide-Australia and Harare-Zimbabwe on their experiences in the two diverse environments. Based on the comparison, the study concluded that Zimbabwean women faced a "complex work-family interface", which affected their response to different work situations. The study

revealed a lack of home support systems for working women due to culture, traditions, and beliefs in Zimbabwe. Zaranyika (2019) also noted that employers perceived requests to change work patterns negatively by employees preferring the traditional physical eight-hour-based conditions that give management greater perceived control. Atiku et al. (2020) found employers' support to be a significant factor in the effective implementation of FWAs.

FWAs require stringent time management to balance work and home responsibilities (Khairunesa & Palpanadan, 2020). There is no clear dividing line between home and working-from-home circumstances, as workers may switch roles. Multi-tasking, to take care of domestic responsibilities, mostly on the part of the females, may mislead loved ones about their availability. Since it is difficult to work from home, some employees may not work efficiently without supervision. Some feelings of unfairness may creep in when some employees feel only certain employees have work that can be done remotely. It may also become difficult for office-based staff to work effectively with telecommuting staff (Madziwanyika, 2021). Thus, although desirable, most of the literature available shows a lack of support systems in Zimbabwean higher learning institutions. There is also limited literature on academic institutions and knowledge generation concerning FWAs, particularly in Zimbabwe. Therefore, this contributes to the Zimbabwean higher learning institutions' perspective on how FWAs' policies and practices could be reconfigured to assist female researchers in enhancing their research outputs as well as their career growth.

3. Methodology

This study covered the period from November 2021 to July 2022. In this study, institutions of higher learning are contextualised to mean universities. The study used the mixed-method approach strengthening the results from one method with the other, thus enhancing the credibility of the findings and expanding the evidence (Hafsa, 2017; Bryman, 2006). Even though the study was conducted when COVID-19 conditions were relaxed, most participants were reluctant to engage in physical interactions. A cross-sectional online survey using Google Forms was employed. The electronic questionnaire comprised open-ended and close-ended questions. The close-ended questions required participants to choose one response, whilst open-ended questions required them to insert responses in the spaces provided. Follow-up interviews were conducted to validate responses from the questionnaires.

A survey link was sent to a network of 250 researchers across universities in Zimbabwe. The network was a voluntary group with interests in research across various disciplines. The group consisted of ten Research Directors, six of whom were female, and 240 academics. To ensure anonymity of all the participants, a link for the survey was provided, and anonymised data were collected in Excel format. No information that disclosed the respondents' or their institutions' identity was collected. 150 forms were completed, representing a 60% response rate.

Data were analysed using the convergent design, where qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently. The two data sets were analysed separately and merged during interpretation (and sometimes during analysis). A convergent parallel design allowed the researchers to concurrently include the qualitative and quantitative fundamentals in the same part of the study process, weighing the methods equally, analysing the two components independently, and interpreting the results together.

4. Findings and discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study by addressing the first three objectives of the study, namely:

- Assess the desirability of FWAs by male and female academics;
- Investigate the effect of FWAs on research outputs by gender; and
- Explore support systems aimed at enhancing research outputs by gender.

4.1 Gender distribution and work experience

Background information showed that most respondents were male (65%), compared to 35% of females. 55% of the participants were PhD holders, whilst 45% were holders of a Master's degree. 12% of the PhD holders were female, whilst 43% were male academics. Of interest was that none of the respondents were holders of a bachelor's degree as their highest qualification, meaning that all the respondents could carry out independent research in their areas of expertise. Due to the high number of male respondents, the findings could be skewed towards male academics.

Levels of experience for both male and female academics stretched from zero to over 11 years. The majority of the respondents (65%) had more than 11 years of academic experience, 25% had between 6 and 10 years of work experience, and 10% had between 0–5 years of experience. More male academics (55%) had more than 11 years as academics compared to 45% of female respondents. Of those with less than five years of experience, 67% were female, whilst 33% were male.

The statistics revealed that the respondents were a mixture of novice and seasoned researchers. In such circumstances, mentorship and support from peers and institutions become critical. This was more important for novice academics, who represented 10% of the respondents, of which most were women.

4.2 Desirability of FWAs by gender

Figure 2 shows the levels of desirability to embrace FWAs by gender. The majority of the respondents, 35% male and 32% female (67% of the sample), favoured FWAs. 14% of male and 13% of female respondents indicated that they did not support FWAs. 4% of male and 2% of female respondents indicated that FWAs did not affect their work and were indifferent. Interviews with Directors of Research revealed that FWAs were the most ideal in the COVID-19 environment, and that it was the best way of managing modern organisations. However, interviews with some respondents revealed that they were not even aware that such arrangements existed in Zimbabwean universities. One of the female participants, FP1, responded, *"I do not desire such arrangements because the competing work and home responsibilities are taking a toll on me."*

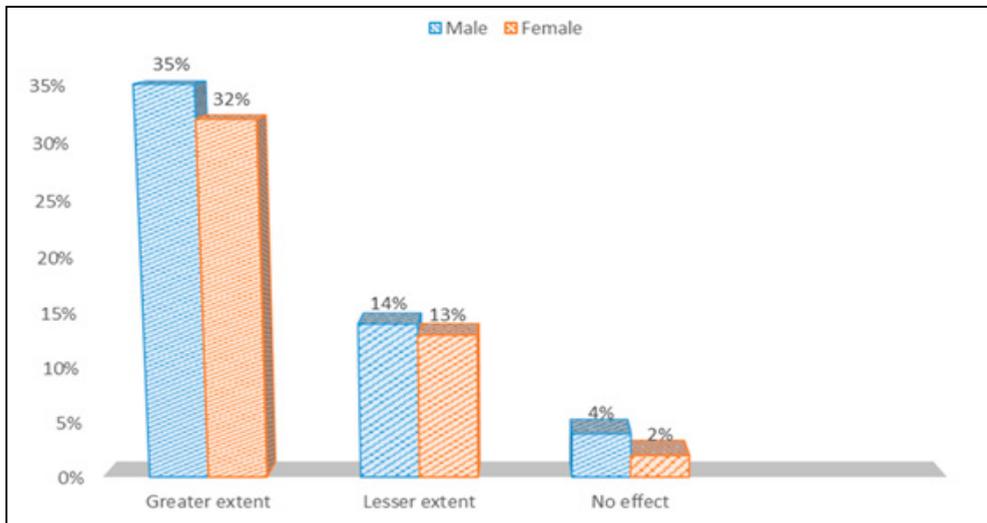


Figure 2: The level of desirability to FWAs by gender

Another respondent, FP3, said:

I do not have the prerequisite tools from my employer to enable me to work from home. Even though my husband is unemployed, he does not care much about assisting me with home responsibilities. I now feel drained to the extent that I cannot even think of engaging in research

Further interviews with other female academics revealed that it was not her (FP3), experience alone; most female academics were in a similar predicament. MP1 commented:

Women should understand that they are there to complement men's efforts. This, of course, can be given an impetus if men are convinced that they will not lose their partners to some of the women's male colleagues at the workplace

One male participant, MP5, weighed in by saying:

Power outages are also affecting our workflow since we have to look for alternative sources of power. The cost of data for the internet is also beyond the reach of many

It was a good sign that both female and male academics supported FWAs. However, it was worrisome to note that gender-related challenges were not only limited to home set-ups, but even at the workplace. Female respondents aired that home responsibilities demanded more of them than of men. The findings of this study corroborate the findings by Nkala (2020), who noted that female nurses' mistakes at work were attributed to gender roles and inequalities whereby they had to continue with domestic care work because of a lack of home support systems. In the case of power outages, women indicated that they had to look for alternative energy sources, such as firewood or gas. It was also noted by the respondents that when one is in a romantic relationship, some male partners might demand a lot of attention, resulting in less time reserved for research and related activities. The fact that some academics did not have the affordances to work from home is a sign that most higher learning institutions were still operating in the lower left quadrant, which means they were not approaching adopting hybrid work environments (Gratton, 2021; Leighton, 2011).

The responses by both male and female participants were mostly favourable towards the adoption of FWAs. This finding confirms previous findings by Mudzi (2018), who found that the initiative was abandoned because there was a lack of policies to guide its implementation, not the support of employees. FWAs portray modern organisations' readiness to embrace change that motivates staff and improves productivity. If proper systems and structures were in place, more time to attend to family and work-related needs could be created. When COVID-19 struck, everyone was required to work from home without proper planning and supporting tools, and the status quo remained. It was also sad to note that some academics were unaware of FWAs, especially how they could improve their productivity and motivation. This could mean that when FWAs were introduced, no explicit information was provided on what it meant and entailed to work from home. The environment was not flexible enough to deal with the dynamics prevailing in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. Thus, Mapedzahama (2014) concludes that Zimbabwean women face a complex work-family interface that, in turn, affect their efforts towards research. Institutions of higher learning with greater gender equality are more connected and thus easily meet their expected outcomes. This leads to the elimination of barriers leading to an increased appetite for research by female academics. Nkala (2020) concurs with the findings of this study that FWAs in Zimbabwe lack consistency, purpose, and policy guidelines, despite employees' readiness to embrace FWAs. Leadership in institutions of higher learning preferred the traditional work arrangements where they had better-perceived control over their employees. It is also important to note that employees no longer believe in rigid traditional work environments.

The cost of data and power cuts also affected the effective implementation of FWAs. In some cases, female respondents explained that they had to look for alternative energy sources, such as firewood or gas. At the same time, men used the same time for research and career development by attending online webinars/conferences. It is crucial to address gender challenges in societies so that everyone is given an equal opportunity to contribute to the socio-economic development of their respective countries. Addressing flexible work arrangements without addressing the gender gaps would be uninformed (Zvavahera et al., 2021). Women are vulnerable and are likely to continue engaging in domestic work at home. The disadvantages associated with working from home counter-balanced those of the fixed workplace, as indicated in Figure 2 above.

4.3 Impact of FWAs on research outputs by gender

Figure 3 refers to the levels of engagement in research by gender: 40% of female and 30% of male respondents (70% of the sample) indicated that research was moderate; 15% of female and 10% of male respondents indicated that research was very low; 40% of males and 30% of females indicated high research engagement; and 20% of females and 5% of males indicated that no research was conducted.

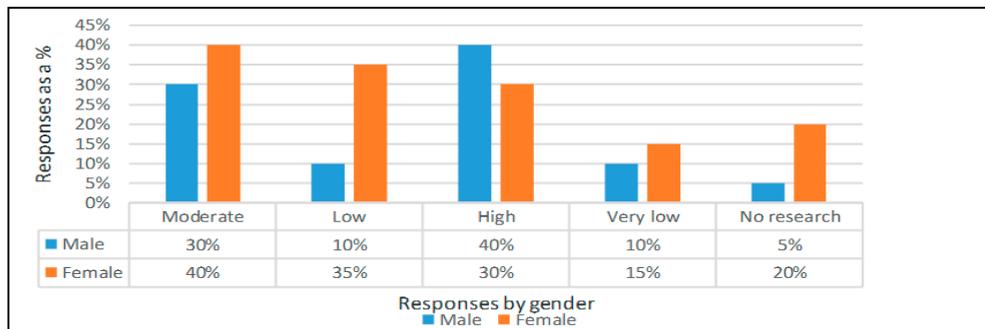


Figure 3: Level of engagement in research by gender

35% of female and 10% of male academics indicated low research outputs. Follow-up interviews with Directors of Research revealed that female academics produced fewer research outputs during this period owing to conflicting work and family commitments and movement restrictions posed by COVID-19. Female academics concurred that even though they were working from home at their convenience, they still did not have time for research due to competing home and work needs. They further revealed that the work environment was not flexible enough owing to a lack of ICT affordances, internet, and backup power. Both male and female respondents complained about heavy workloads, which they felt compromised their research efforts.

Inasmuch as work continued during the COVID-19 period, female researchers found it more difficult than males to engage in research due to home and work commitments. The findings of this study concur with O'Connor *et al.* (2015), who found that the gender roles of women in society are regarded as superior to any other roles they may hold, including those roles assumed at the workplace. The problem is rooted in African tradition, where men used to fend for the family whilst women were responsible for domestic chores, primarily looking after the family. The same belief is supported by Hoobler *et al.* (2021), who emphasise the greater responsibility women bear in African social systems compared to their male counterparts. The findings also revealed that academics did not regard research as one of their key deliverables and their heavy workloads mainly involved teaching. It was also sad to note that this weighed more on female academics. Another reason for this finding could be the lack of mentorship by senior researchers/academics who, in most cases, were burdened with administrative and academic responsibilities. Institutions of higher learning must give their staff reasonable workloads so that senior academics have more time for research and mentoring upcoming researchers. Institutions of higher learning should put in place systems that support research, especially by female academics, since their role is undermined, making it difficult for women to achieve a sustainable future. Denying women equal and equitable access to resources denies half of the world’s population a chance to contribute to the socio-economic development of the global economy. Hawke (2007) echoes that patriarchal norms and beliefs are transferred from one generation to another and are still persistent in today’s society, including institutions of higher learning. This also means that the academics were constrained in terms of time and place of work (see Figure 1). The following section discusses institutional and home support systems in enhancing knowledge generation by gender during COVID-19.

4.4 Institutional and home support systems in enhancing knowledge generation by gender

Figure 4 below shows institutional and home support systems in enhancing knowledge generation by gender. 40% of male and 50% of female respondents (90% of the sample) indicated that they got moral support from either home or colleagues; 25% of male and 15% of female respondents indicated that they received professional guidance. Very few males (5%), and 3% of female respondents indicated that they got data and access to the internet from their institutions. Male respondent, MP4, had this to say: *“I managed to collaborate with my peers at the peak of the pandemic and we published two papers.”* Interviews with three Directors of Research revealed that collaborative research was helpful during the COVID-19 period

FP10 had this to say:

What I mostly got was emotional support from my colleagues and family, as we had to talk about the different challenges we were facing. This kept us going. My colleagues also pointed out my potential research areas and whom to collaborate with

MP5 said:

I got data to work from home. I was also trained to conduct online lectures. We also got training on how to upload materials on Moodle and conduct examinations online. However, we did not get COVID-19 allowances. At one point we were requested to come to campus, and this was like sacrificing our lives

Both male and female respondents indicated that lack of internet connectivity, cost of data, and power outages made it very difficult for them to embrace FWAs. Only 8% of the academics managed to get support in the form of data and training for online teaching from their institutions. Resources were limited, since everyone worked from home, including school-going children. Thus, parents and children shared scarce resources like data, laptops, and study space. It was sad to note that 45% of the respondents did not get any form of support. Interestingly, 20% of the respondents who indicated that they did not conduct research during the period were female academics. They further revealed that they had disruptions from children and neighbours. Most female academics revealed that they did not get support from their husbands in performing domestic responsibilities, such as parenting and house chores. Research Directors highlighted moral, psychological, academic, and intellectual support as critical in times of uncertainty.

It was evident that male academics did not assist much with home responsibilities during the pandemic. This corroborates the findings by Zvavahera et al. (2021) that African traditions perpetuate male dominance against women, and this is further entrenched in roles played by women and men in society, leading to patriarchy. These attitudes, norms, and values are evident in institutions of higher learning where female researchers lag behind in research outputs (refer to Figure 3). Housework and childcare work tend to be more of the mother's responsibility leading to unbalanced gender roles. Multi-tasking of domestic chores and work, as well as the delicate balance between the two, can make the situation of female academics even worse. It was challenging to create a favourable work environment at home due to distractions and limited space, power cuts, and limited ICT affordances.

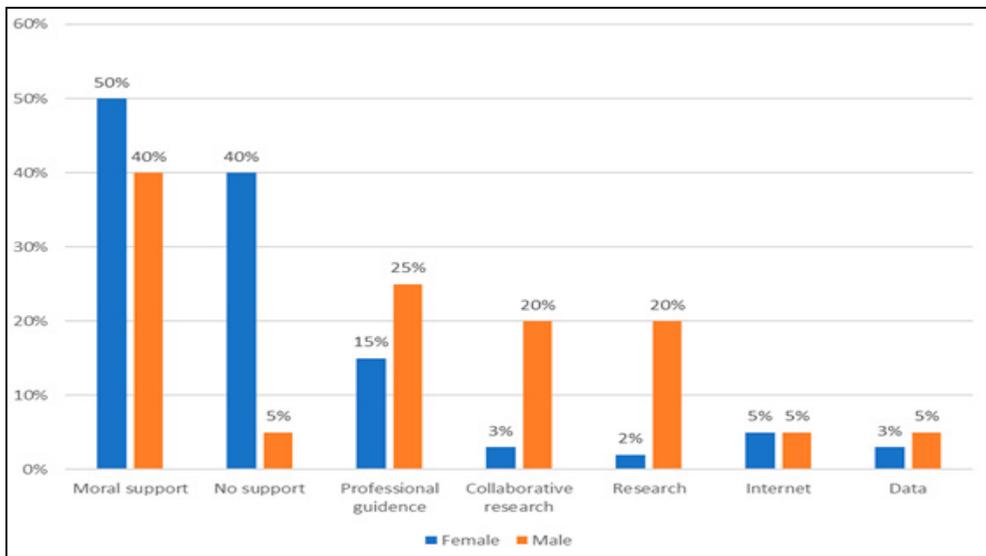


Figure 4: Institutional and home support systems

The playing field between male and female academics was not level. Therefore, leadership in higher learning institutions and families must shift their focus towards giving women more space to grow and contribute meaningfully to the national and global economies. It was worrisome that male researchers deliberately chose not to support their female counterparts because of stereotypes. With reference to the hybrid work model, academics operated on constrained time and places where the home office was not easy to create and operate from. Female academics struggled to balance home and work responsibilities.

5. Conclusions

Structural functionalism thus enabled this study to identify the embedded gender differences that result in different perceptions of flexible work arrangements and their impact on research outputs in higher education institutions. This study contributes to the shortage of literature on FWAs in Zimbabwe and the developing world, especially during pandemics and disasters where people cannot access traditional offices. The provision of empirical evidence on how FWAs can improve the levels of research by gender in developing economies through engendering the research agenda supported by ICT affordances is more critical now than before. Even though institutions of higher learning in the global north adopted FWAs, this was found to be different from the Zimbabwean higher education institutions, which continued to operate in the lower left quadrant of the hybrid work model (see Figure 1). This is because the Government and other key stakeholders were not up to speed in putting proper systems and structures in place, including the legal framework to regulate the workplace. FWAs are the most ideal, especially in times of uncertainties such as the one presented by COVID-19. Therefore, it can be concluded that both male and female academics view FWAs as desirable. Furthermore, institutions of higher learning should engender all their programmes and projects so that FWAs can influence research outputs by both men and women positively, provided adequate institutional and home support systems are in place.

Recommendations

This section addresses the last objective of the study, which is to proffer recommendations to leadership in institutions of higher learning and key stakeholders on how male and female researchers can exploit FWAs to enhance research outputs.

To address challenges hindering the adoption of FWAs highlighted in Zimbabwe and beyond, institutions of higher learning should embrace the hybrid work environments by moving towards the upper-right quadrant, which represents an anywhere, anytime work environment. Such arrangements allow academics to work from anywhere at any time, provided electricity and the internet are easily accessible. This is only possible when supporting mechanisms are in place.

There is a need to draw attention to traditional values and norms which perpetuate the dominance of males in society, specifically in higher learning institutions, and deal with them. Both male and female academics need to be educated on the importance of supporting each other through the academic journey. This will assist male academics to understand the importance of giving female researchers the space to grow professionally. However, female researchers need to support one another, since they are in a better position to understand the demands they face regarding the roles they are expected to play at home and work. Female academics also need to adopt non-belligerent ways of engaging men so that they get on board and understand their position and the professional agenda. Both male and female researchers need more exposure to the changing societal roles and extend these to the workplace. Organising workshops and conferences on gender equality and equity will go a long way towards reducing the research gaps between male and female academics in higher education institutions. This study's literature and findings concur that FWAs are a new concept in Zimbabwe and other developing countries, especially in higher education institutions. Carrying out extensive research on the impact of FWAs on research outputs in higher education institutions is critical in informing policy, which is currently the primary missing link.

Embracing the digital wave is fundamental in advancing FWAs in institutions of higher education in the pertaining environment, considering what is happening in the developed world. Key stakeholders such as internet providers and mobile phones dealers should assist by providing subsidised data and mobile phones and related gadgets to students and academic staff. Availing resources to support flexible work arrangements will go a long way in promoting FWAs in higher education institutions. Providing academics with data and alternative power sources, such as generators and solar, will go a long way towards ensuring that FWAs are embraced.

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