



## FEATURED SCHOLAR

Each month the Work and Family Researchers Network spotlights the contributions of a scholar who is making significant advances in understanding work-family concerns. We are delighted to present the following interview with Heejung Chung.



**Heejung Chung, Ph.D.**

Professor of Sociology and Social Policy  
School of Social Policy and Social Research  
Division of Law, Society and Social Justice  
University of Kent  
United Kingdom

Experts Panel Link:

<https://wfrn.org/expert/heejung-chung/>

**WFRN - *How did you first get introduced to work-family issues and become a researcher in this field?***

**Heejung** - I think I was always interested in work-family issues, especially in a cross-national comparative way. I was born in Seoul, Korea but spent my childhood in Austin Texas. At age 11 I moved back to Korea with my family. Then in graduate school I lived in Scotland to do my MSc Research, and subsequently went to the Netherlands to do my PhD. My journeys continued as I spent time in Berlin as a researcher, and spent quite a bit of time in Denmark, before I moved to the England in 2011.

Even at a young age, I was fascinated by the different ways people lived in these societies, the ways people worked, how they thought about work, the centrality work had in their lives, and how work relates to social justice concerns.

One thing that became stunningly apparent to me is that work-life balance norms vary remarkably across countries. This especially evident when you compare countries like the US and Korea to countries like the Netherlands, and Demark. Korea exemplifies hyper-competitive capitalism that embraces a “you-snooze-you-lose” mentality. In that society, workers are expected to work all hours of their waking lives. These norms coincide with traditional gender roles, as it was mostly men who work very long hours, which in turn relies female partners (in heterosexual relationships) and female family members to take care of family concerns. However, despite the long hours, many workers are incredibly unproductive, in part because they were working all the time!

When I was in the Netherlands, I saw that people - including the academics - who worked shorter yet more productive hours. That society emphasized family time (e.g., dinner with family) and time for sports. And, of course, the Dutch are much more gender egalitarian. Comparing the way people balance work-family is in fact exploring the different modes of capitalism across countries and how those modes impact the structure of work and how people orient themselves towards work....which is so fascinating.

**WFRN - *How did you first get involved with the WFRN? What do you value most about the organization?***

**Heejung** -I first found out about WFRN in 2012 as many of my friends and colleagues attended its conference in New York City. However, it was too late for me to apply to go, but heard so many great things about it. But I was able to attend in 2014. Having been involved with the WFRN for 10 years now, and having served on its Executive Board, I

can say that this is one of my most favorite conferences to attend. There are a number of reasons why I love WFRN conferences.

First of all, everyone who is anyone in work-family research is here. I really feel like we are able to bring together the international academic community together who are working in the field of work-family regardless of the region or the discipline you are from. I really appreciate that attendees are not only sociology or social policy scholars, but researchers from business, psychology, legal studies folks etc. that come. It is incredibly valuable to hear these different approaches to issues such as overwork, care provision, and the life course. Although we should probably have more representations from outside of Europe, North America and Australia, compared to other conferences, it is very international with good representation from across the globe.

Secondly, the papers are absolutely fantastic. The themes that are touched upon, the presentations and discussions ... I think I have never been disappointed by attending a session at WFRN. The only problem is that there is only one of me and too many sessions that interest me.

Finally, and I hope the early career researchers also agree with me here, I think WFRN is a very approachable community. There is a mix of people from very junior colleagues who have just started their PhDs to what we can consider academic superstars. However, I think everyone is just happy to talk and discuss without barriers and prejudices around who you are and who they are. We're just one happy community!

**WFRN - *Tell us about your current research, what are you studying?***

**Heejung** - My most recent book - *The Flexibility Paradox* (2022, Policy Press) - examined why workers working from home and with flexible schedules end up working harder and longer. I believe one explanation can be found in neo-liberalistic tendencies that shape the way we think about work, as well as the centrality of work in our lives in many countries. I also link this up with the decline of the welfare state, exemplified by labor market and social security risk being transferred over from the state to the individuals, leaving individuals with no choice but to work harder and longer when they have freedom over when and where to work. I also speak of how a different pattern emerges when you look across gender - where women 'exploit' themselves both at home and in the labor market with flexible working - where they end up using all hours of their day to flexibly fit in both family and work demands.

When writing this book, I touched upon the issue of flexibility stigma of the biases flexible workers experience when working flexibly, which again is another key issue why

workers labor harder and longer. I am currently gathering more evidence around how homeworking is met with biased assumptions about workers' commitment, motivation and productivity - and how this may vary depending on the workers' gender/parental status/race. What is more, I am interested in how contexts can shift these biases against flexible working. This is done through a series of (cross-national) experimental vignette studies. These issues are important as we see a growth in homeworking practices post-pandemic -- especially with more women working from home. Yet we see growth in calls from managers for workers to return to the office - with men returning back to the office more often than women.

**WFRN - *What are your big findings? Did you make any unexpected discoveries?***

**Heejung** - Firstly, flexible work arrangements can really help women take better part in the labor market by allowing them to work and work longer hours as compared to traditional 9 to 6 schedules and onsite work. Similarly, we find that (through digital diary data and other methods) black and ethnic minority workers are better able to engage at work due to homeworking. Consider, for example, how remote work can shield minority workers from micro-aggressions common in white-dominated office spaces. Also consider how minority workers might be better situated to take part in discussions via online meeting systems. Having said that, flexible working can result in entrenching gender inequalities at home and in the labor market. Because flexible work options put pressure on women to do more housework/childcare, men can end up doing more paid work. What is more, despite the growth of homeworking during the pandemic, biases against homeworkers still exists. Our vignette studies (with Senhu Wang and from research performed by others) show that managers generally believe that homeworkers are less productive, less motivated, and less apt to be team players. Those beliefs, in turn, lead to home workers being less likely to be promoted. Although fathers' homeworking can be more penalizing compared to that of mothers, this is only because employers generally perceive mother's levels of work commitment, motivation, chances for promotions so badly. Therefore, mothers' homeworking isn't as penalizing. If both mothers and fathers work from home, we may see a reduction of inequality patterns across the labor market, as both experience similar levels of bias when homeworking whereas when both work in the office, the gap in perceived productivity is much larger.

Having said that, we see that it is especially workers without children and fathers that are returning back to the office quicker than mothers. This may result in the exacerbation of inequalities in the labor market in the future, not only because homeworking mother's will be the ones doing most of the unpaid domestic work at home, while men spend more time away from the home, but also because it will be women who will experience career penalties due to homeworking.

## WFRN - *Can your research guide the formulation of social policy?*

**Heejung** - We need to make flexible working more of a right/norm for all workers. When flexible working policies are only geared towards parents/mothers, it is more likely to be considered an 'family-friendly' policy only and is more likely to result in bias against flexible workers' productivity. On the other hand, when the policy is framed as something for all workers emphasizing the productivity outcomes of flexible working, its use is less likely to be met with bias. It will also result in workers better able to use flexible working practices to meet both family demands and to enhance their work productivity.

To tackle the gendered paradox - where women end up doing more housework and childcare when working flexibly while men do not - we need social policies that change gender normative views around whose role it is to care. This can be done by providing parents with ear-marked well-paid parental leaves that are non-transferable and needs to be spent within the first year of a child's life. By non-transferrable, I mean that specific proportion of the leave is reserved for a parent (e.g. father), where if they (fathers) do not take it up, the family loses it, such as in Iceland where mothers get 3 months leave and fathers get 3 months leave. Such policies have been seen to change whose role it is to care and do other domestic work, by shifting the norm about who is the primary carer, both at home and in organizations/societies.

We also need a right to disconnect to ensure that boundary blurring between work and family (that happens with flexible working) does not end up with workers needing to work all the time and everywhere. We need to provide workers ample time and space to rest, not only as a part of workers' rights and social justice issue, but also to ensure that companies and workers' themselves understand how best to use their labor in the most effective manner. Rest is crucial for productivity. Here is a place where the United States (which provides no rights to vacation time) can learn from the European Union countries, that commonly provide a full month (or more) vacation to all workers.

Finally, we need to tackle the long-hours ideal worker norm. Many of our labor markets are still based on the notion that the standard worker is someone who has no responsibilities outside of work and can devote themselves to work intensely and for long periods of time. The standard worker norm needs to change to someone who has responsibilities outside of work, may it be childcare, elderly care, self care or care of pets! Without such a change, we are allowing an incredibly exclusionary labor market to persist.

**WFRN - *What directions hold the greatest promise for discovery in the work-family field? I am thinking here of theory, methods, or research questions that might be posed.***

**Heejung** - The changes we see through the increased use of homeworking - on the labor market, on the division of household labor, its impact on inequalities - is an burgeoning area of research which we already see a lot of people working on.

More research around the four-day week would be useful. We know from research that it is immensely popular, especially in countries where long-hours work is prevalent - such as the US, UK and Korea. Evidence from trials show that companies that moved to a 4-day week has shown increased productivity, lower sickness absenteeism, better recruitment levels and better at retaining staff, with workers showing better outcomes with regards to work-life balance, well-being etc. We also see evidence of links between shorter working and reduction in carbon emissions and other environmentally friendly outcomes. My interest would be to see how shorter working can radically change the way we think about work, the centrality of work, the way we think about work-life balance and the value of non-paid work. In other words, if we introduced a four-day week especially at a national level, or larger societal level, can we eliminate the long-hours based ideal worker norm? Also, as we spend more time on non-paid work - may it be care work or voluntary activities, would we as a society value such activities more (and as it should)?

More research is needed on tackling the global care crisis, as care work is poorly remunerated and is not given the value it deserves in our societies. How can we tackle that? Can we allow people more time to carry out care? OR do we need to ensure that care is paid better, valued more?

Final question, in light of automation, rise of artificial intelligence which may make up to half of our jobs obsolete, how can we change the notion of work or how people's labor are remunerated -? Do we need a new full-employment model where we see work as a social right? These questions are all interlinked! I would love to see more on these questions.

**WFRN - *What advice would you give to graduate students or those early in their professional careers?***

**Heejung** - Academia is a hard place, it can be very lonely, and the competition within it is fiercer than ever before. I think there has been research showing that with every 10 year that passes, an assistant professor candidate needs approximately double that of previous generations (double publications, double grants etc.). Academics, including

graduate students also suffer from a lot of mental health issues, such as stress, anxiety, burn out etc.

With that in mind, I would also encourage people to have a meaningful purpose. Why are you doing this? Your goal should not necessarily be to become a professor in an elite university or have 100,000 citations. It could be to support new generation of thinkers through teaching, or perhaps to address a social justice issue. Whatever it is, such sense of purpose can help us move away from the hyper-competitiveness of academia of comparing citation counts.

Also, I think we need to redefine our own work culture from that of long-hours work devotion model to a more kinder one with better work-life balance. I think really good research cannot be produced when you are working 70-80 hours a week. There is [a lot of evidence](#) of this if you look at some of the key thinkers of our society who worked short hours. Research is a creative endeavor and scholars need the rest and time away from work to be able to be creative problem solvers. I always encourage my graduate students to have a serious hobby, have at least one sport activity that will take their mind away from their work, and try to work 35-40 productive hours a week no longer. Otherwise, it will hard to survive in academia especially in the longer run.

Finally, I think graduate students and academics alike need to have friends and network of people to help them survive! This is why you should all come to the next WFRN conference to help build our community. I hope to see you all there!

## ABOUT THE WFRN

The Work and Family Researchers Network's mission is to facilitate virtual and face-to-face interaction among academic work and family researchers from a broad range of fields as well as engage the next generation of work and family scholars. The WFRN welcomes the participation of policy makers and workplace practitioners as it seeks to promote knowledge and understanding of work and family issues among the community of global stakeholders.

To learn more about the WFRN, please visit our website [WFRN.ORG](https://wfrn.org). To become a member, please click on this link <https://wfrn.org/become-a-member/>.