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Work Setting and the Experience of Bias

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Abstract

COVID-19 created an unplanned shift in where work took place. As women in Israeli high-tech moved across on-site, hybrid, and remote arrangements, it became possible to compare how strongly bias-related workplace experiences were reported across settings. Using survey data from 219 women and an adapted version of the Gender Bias Scale for Women Leaders (Diehl *et al.*, 2020), this study examines whether work setting is associated with differences in everyday experiences of visibility, participation, and recognition. The clearest differences appear in on-site work. Women working on-site report stronger pressure around speaking up, greater caution in self-promotion, and sharper awareness that leadership and decision spaces are male dominated. Flexible work offers partial relief from some daily pressures, but it does not remove broader inequality and may weaken informal access to sponsorship and influence. The findings suggest that work arrangement matters for how bias is experienced. For organizations, the implication is direct: choices about presence, flexibility, and office time shape culture, inclusion, and the conditions under which women are seen, heard, and advanced.

Keywords: work arrangements; gender bias; hybrid work; Israeli high-tech; workplace culture.

Introduction

Women's work has always been shaped by large economic and social shifts. COVID-19 created one more such shift, but in a form that was unusually visible inside contemporary organizations. Within a short period, millions of employees moved between office, home, and hybrid arrangements (McKinsey and Company, 2024; Israel Innovation Authority, 2025). In technology, where work had long been associated with long hours, high visibility, and dense informal interaction, this change was widely presented as a possible gain for women and parents. Flexible work seemed to offer relief from rigid presence norms that had often disadvantaged those with caregiving responsibilities (Bailyn, 2006).

The post-pandemic period did not settle into a single new model. Instead, organizations moved into a mixed reality in which on-site, hybrid, and remote

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work coexisted (McKinsey and Company, 2024). That mixed landscape matters analytically. It creates a rare opportunity to compare work settings directly rather than treating office work as the unquestioned default. If women report different workplace experiences across these settings, then work arrangement cannot be treated as a neutral backdrop. It becomes part of the social and organizational context in which evaluation happens.

This question is especially important in Israeli high-tech. The sector is compact, fast moving, and strongly shaped by informal reputation, dense professional networks, and relationship-based access (Start-up Nation Central, 2024). Post-pandemic data from the Israel Innovation Authority (2025) show that hybrid work is now common, yet women still hold fewer than 12% of CTO positions in high-growth domains. The context is useful because it makes the interaction between work setting, visibility, and organizational culture especially visible.

Existing research offers mixed expectations. Flexible work can ease some scheduling pressures, but it can also raise concerns about visibility, sponsorship, and advancement (Bailyn, 2006; Leslie *et al.*, 2012; McKinsey and Company, 2024). What remains less clear is whether women experience bias-related workplace dynamics with different intensity across on-site, hybrid, and remote settings.

This paper addresses that question using survey data from 219 women in the Israeli high-tech sector and open-ended responses that illustrate how work settings are experienced. The analysis compares on-site, hybrid, and remote arrangements descriptively, while the main interpretation centers on the broader contrast between on-site and flexible work because the fully remote group is small. The aim is straightforward: to examine whether some everyday experiences of bias are reported more strongly in some settings than in others.

The contribution is deliberately bounded. This paper shows that work arrangement is associated with how strongly women report workplace bias. The pandemic created a rare opportunity to compare on-site, hybrid, and remote settings directly. The findings suggest that bias is shaped in part by the organizational environment in which work is performed, including the conditions under which people are seen, heard, evaluated, and included.

Section 2 reviews the literature on work arrangements and gender inequality. Section 3 describes the data and methods. Section 4 presents the findings. Section 5 discusses the implications. Section 6 covers practical recommendations, and Section 7 concludes.

Literature review

Gendered Work before the Modern Workplace

Work was never historically gender neutral. Across very different social settings, productive and reproductive labor was distributed through assumptions about caregiving, mobility, bodily risk, and authority. Later organizational forms did not begin from a neutral starting point. They inherited older assumptions about who should be available, visible, and recognized as serious workers (Acker, 1990; Kanter, 1977). Kanter's (1977) account of token dynamics showed that women entering male-dominated settings became disproportionately visible in terms of social scrutiny while remaining weakly represented in formal authority structures. Their performance was observed more closely, their mistakes were more salient, and their competence was subject to ongoing implicit testing in ways that did not apply to majority-group colleagues. These dynamics were not produced by individual hostility but by the structural conditions created when one group is numerically marginal: the social and evaluative intensification of presence that Kanter described remains a theoretical anchor for understanding why physically co-located work may generate heightened awareness of gender asymmetries.

Ridgeway (2011) extends this account by arguing that gender operates as a primary background identity framing all workplace interactions. People use gender as a cognitive shortcut to assess competence, and that framing is activated more readily in face-to-face settings where physical cues, voice, and body language are continuously available. Ibarra (1992) documents the network dimension of this dynamic: men form stronger homophilous ties across multiple organizational networks, while women rely on differentiated network patterns in which social support comes from women but instrumental access depends on ties to men. That differentiated pattern means that women's network investment does not convert into the same organizational returns, especially when informal interaction is the primary channel through which influence is brokered.

The Gendered Organization and the Ideal Worker Norm

Industrialization sharpened the separation between paid work and domestic life. As work moved out of the household and into factories, offices, and cities, paid labor became more strongly associated with the public sphere, while unpaid care remained tied to the private sphere (Bailyn, 2006). This shift helped institutionalize the idea that serious work happened in a fixed location, away from home, and that full commitment required freedom from domestic interruption. Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations makes the structural mechanism precise: organizational roles are designed around an abstract worker who is always available, weakly constrained by caregiving, and assessed through norms of temporal and spatial presence. Even when these norms are not stated in explicitly male terms, they align

more easily with male life patterns than with the everyday realities many women face. Acker (2006) extended this framework to show that organizational inequality is reproduced not only through formal exclusion but through everyday routines, interaction patterns, and informal evaluation practices that are rarely examined because they appear to be neutral features of organizational life.

Heilman's (2001) lack-of-fit model provides a complementary mechanism: when female role occupancy is perceived as incongruent with the attributes associated with technical leadership, evaluation processes apply higher evidentiary standards before crediting women's contributions, and professional praise is filtered through communal expectations that do not apply equally to male colleagues. Eagly and Karau (2002) formalize this as role congruity theory: perceived incongruity between the female gender role and leadership roles produces two forms of prejudice, one that perceives women less favorably as potential leaders and another that evaluates leader-like behavior less favorably when enacted by a woman. Williams (2014) documents the practical result through four patterns of bias: women must provide more evidence of competence to be judged equally qualified, they navigate a behavioral tightrope between appearing too soft and too assertive, motherhood triggers further penalties, and competitive dynamics among women are structurally induced rather than naturally occurring. Together, these accounts establish that gendered evaluation is embedded in how organizations assess, reward, and promote, not only in whom enters the pipeline.

Flexibility, Stigma, and the Post-Pandemic Shift

Long before the pandemic, flexibility was presented as a possible response to the tension between work and care. In principle, telework and flexible scheduling could reduce commuting burdens and make it easier to coordinate professional and family responsibilities (Bailyn, 2006). In practice, the picture was mixed. Leslie *et al.* (2012) showed that flexible work could carry career penalties when it was associated with personal or family needs rather than with high-commitment professional judgment, creating what they termed a flexibility stigma. Workers who used flexible arrangements for demonstrably personal reasons were perceived as less committed than those who used them for organizational purposes, even when actual output was equivalent. Correll, Benard, & Paik (2007) documented a related mechanism through the motherhood penalty: mothers were rated as less competent and less committed than non-mothers, and they received lower salary recommendations and fewer callbacks in matched resume studies, even when qualifications were identical. These findings suggest that flexibility and caregiving carry evaluative costs that are gendered rather than purely rational.

The behavioral consequences of these dynamics reach into everyday interaction. Brescoll and Uhlmann (2008) showed experimentally that women who express anger in the workplace are penalized with lower status and salary recommendations, while men who express the same anger are rewarded with higher perceived

status. The penalty for women is driven by attributing their anger to dispositional rather than situational causes. In work settings where face-to-face interaction is continuous, these evaluative asymmetries may operate more frequently and more visibly.

COVID disrupted these long-standing assumptions at scale. Large parts of professional work moved quickly from office settings into home-based and mixed arrangements (McKinsey and Company, 2024; Israel Innovation Authority, 2025). What had often been treated as a marginal accommodation became a mainstream operating model. The post-pandemic period did not restore one stable configuration: instead, organizations moved into mixed constellations of on-site, hybrid, and flexible work. In technology, hybrid arrangements became especially common by 2023 (Israel Innovation Authority, 2025), making the comparison of work settings empirically possible in a way that was not available before the pandemic.

Work Setting as a Condition of Bias: Theoretical Grounding

If women report different bias-related experiences across work settings, then inequality cannot be understood only through individual attitudes, formal performance criteria, or pipeline entry conditions. It must also be understood as contextually situated: shaped by the physical and social conditions under which work is performed, contributions are observed, and evaluations are formed. Castilla (2008) and Castilla and Benard (2010) show that meritocratic evaluation procedures do not automatically produce meritocratic reward allocation; bias concentrates in the discretionary judgment moments that formal systems leave unstructured. Dovidio and Gaertner (2000) show that implicit bias intensifies in the ambiguous middle of assessment, where neither strong positive nor clearly negative evidence constrains evaluator behavior. Both accounts point toward an important implication for work setting: on-site work creates more frequent informal contact, more visible presence, more opportunities for real-time social evaluation, and more exposure to the dense interaction patterns through which informal reputation is built and informal exclusion is enacted.

Ely *et al.* (2011) identify a related structural barrier: standard leadership development programs fail women because they do not address what the authors call second-generation gender bias, the subtle and largely invisible practices embedded in organizational culture that systematically disadvantage women without explicit intent. When leadership development occurs primarily in co-located settings through informal mentoring and sponsorship, women who work flexibly may be excluded from the developmental interactions that shape leadership identity. Glass and Cook (2016) show that even women who break through to senior positions face precarious appointments and heightened scrutiny, a dynamic that intensifies in settings where physical visibility amplifies evaluative attention. Correll (2004) adds that cultural beliefs about gender lead individuals to use different standards when evaluating their own competence: in settings where comparison with male

colleagues is continuous, women may internalize lower assessments of their own performance even when objective indicators are equivalent.

Flexible work reduces some of that exposure but also reduces the informal access through which sponsorship, visibility, and advancement are brokered. The present study examines where these trade-offs register in women's everyday reported experiences. The research gap is specific: the literature offers substantial evidence on flexibility, productivity, and work-family tension, but says considerably less about whether bias-related workplace dynamics are reported with different intensity across on-site, hybrid, and flexible arrangements, especially in concentrated technology sectors where informal network density and fast promotion cycles make those dynamics especially consequential (Start-up Nation Central, 2024).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods cross-sectional design combining quantitative group comparison with qualitative analysis of open-ended survey responses. The quantitative component examines whether reported workplace experiences differ across on-site and flexible work arrangements. The qualitative material is used illustratively to show how respondents describe the settings in which those experiences occur.

Sample and Data Collection

The sample comprises 219 women currently employed in or having recently departed from the Israeli high-tech sector. Participants were recruited through professional networks, LinkedIn outreach, and snowball sampling during late 2023 through early 2024. The survey was administered online, and participation was voluntary. Inclusion criteria required that respondents be women working in or having recently left core high-tech roles (software engineering, hardware engineering, data science, product management, and research and development).

The sample divides across two work models for the purposes of analysis: on-site ($n = 25$, 11.4%) and flexible ($n = 194$, 88.6%), where the flexible group includes hybrid workers ($n = 186$, 84.9%) and the small number of predominantly remote workers ($n = 8$, 3.7%) who were merged into this category given the group's limited size. The dominance of the flexible model reflects the post-pandemic norm in the Israeli technology sector, where the majority of firms adopted hybrid arrangements by 2023. The on-site group comprises women working full-time in office settings. The flexible group comprises women with some form of remote or partial-office arrangement. The unequal group sizes reflect the actual distribution of work models in the sector rather than a sampling limitation.

The sample exhibits demographic diversity relevant to the study's analytical framework. The median age of respondents was 41 years. Among work model groups, remote workers were youngest (mean age 37.5), hybrid workers were in the middle (mean age 40.8), and on-site workers were oldest (mean age 43.4). Management rates differed by work model: 60.0% of on-site workers held management roles compared to 46.8% of hybrid and 50.0% of remote workers. Motherhood rates also varied: 88.0% of on-site workers were mothers, compared to 82.3% of hybrid and 75.0% of remote workers. These demographic differences are addressed as potential confounds in the analytical strategy.

Instrument

The survey instrument is an adapted version of the Gender Bias Scale for Women Leaders (Diehl *et al.*, 2020), modified for the Israeli high-tech context. The adapted instrument comprises 47 items measured on five-point Likert scales. These items cover everyday workplace experiences such as pay fairness, recognition, access to influential conversations, leadership stereotypes, self-presentation, caregiving-related strain, and the experience of speaking up in professional settings.

The reporting strategy in this paper stays close to those item-level experiences. The purpose is to examine whether women report some of these experiences more strongly in some work settings than in others, rather than to present a larger article-level model.

Outcome variables include relative career advancement, advancement expectancy, professional safety perceptions, job satisfaction, and exit intention, each measured on five-point scales.

Analytical Strategy

The analysis proceeds in four stages. First, descriptive statistics are used to compare work settings across the survey as a whole. Second, one-way ANOVA is used as a screening tool to identify where reported experiences differ across on-site and flexible arrangements. Third, item-level analysis is used to show how that broader pattern appears in daily work, with particular attention to speaking, self-presentation, informal access, and perceptions of male-dominated decision spaces. This item-level step is exploratory and descriptive. Its purpose is to identify the most salient everyday experiences associated with work setting rather than to claim a separate confirmatory model. The items emphasized in the Findings section are the strongest and most substantively relevant examples from that broader screening. Fourth, open-ended responses are read through a directed qualitative analysis in order to illustrate how respondents describe on-site and flexible work in practice.

Methodological Considerations

Several methodological considerations warrant acknowledgment. The unequal group sizes reduce statistical power and make group-specific interpretation cautious. The on-site group (n = 25) is small relative to the flexible group (n = 194), which limits the effect sizes detectable at conventional significance thresholds. The merging of hybrid and predominantly remote workers into a single flexible category reflects both the small size of the remote-only group and the conceptual overlap between these arrangements in terms of reduced daily office presence. Selection effects may also operate: women in different work settings may differ in seniority, organizational type, caregiving responsibilities, or personal preferences. The study is therefore designed to identify associations and patterns of experience, not to establish causality.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the university ethics committee. All participants provided informed consent, and data were anonymized at the point of collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw without consequence.

Results

The Broad Pattern of Stronger Bias-Related Experiences

The broad pattern is straightforward. Women working on-site report stronger bias-related experiences on several parts of the survey than women working flexibly. The strongest differences cluster around how women speak, present themselves, and perceive access to male-dominated decision spaces. The analysis compares the on-site group (n = 25) against the flexible group (n = 194, combining hybrid and predominantly remote workers).

This matters because it keeps the argument bounded. The paper does not claim that every aspect of gender inequality varies by work setting. It shows that some workplace experiences are reported more strongly in some settings than in others, and that the clearest contrast is between on-site and flexible work.

Item-Level Differences and Areas of Similarity

The item-level review was exploratory and was used to identify which everyday experiences appeared most strongly associated with work setting across the 47-item survey. All 47 items were reviewed in the screening step. The purpose was not to elevate a few items into a new framework, but to show more systematically where the contrast between on-site and flexible work was strongest and where it

was limited. The items highlighted below are the clearest and most substantively relevant examples for the paper’s question.

Table 1 summarizes the item-level pattern at a broad level. The clearest differences appear in speaking, self-presentation, informal exclusion, and awareness of male-dominated decision spaces. By contrast, many items related to pay, recognition, and general career outcomes did not show equally strong differences across settings.

Table 1. Broad item-level pattern across the survey

Experience area	Pattern across settings
Speaking and participation	Clearer on-site elevation
Self-promotion and self-presentation	Clearer on-site elevation
Male-dominated decision spaces	Clearer on-site elevation
Informal social access	Moderate on-site elevation
Pay, recognition, and broader outcomes	Little or no clear setting difference in this analysis

Women working on-site are more likely to report that top leaders are assumed to be men (on-site $Z = +0.493$) and that decisions are made by a group of men (on-site $Z = +0.452$). The same pattern appears in informal access. The item “Male colleagues socialize without me” shows a significant on-site effect ($d = 0.49$, $p = 0.046$), suggesting that office-based work may expose women more directly to informal exclusion. This more systematic view helps show why the paper highlights the items it does.

Item-Level Contrasts in Daily Work

The clearest contrasts appear in concrete day-to-day experiences rather than in abstract summaries. Table 2 presents the notable item-level differences between on-site and flexible work.

Table 2. Notable item-level differences between on-site and flexible work (N = 219)

Survey item	On-site pattern	Evidence
“I wait to be acknowledged before speaking”	Higher on-site	$M = 3.080$ vs. 2.392 , $d = 0.717$, $p = 0.002$
“I am cautious when it comes to self-promotion”	Higher on-site	$M = 3.800$ vs. 3.211 , $d = 0.587$, $p = 0.001$
“Male colleagues socialize without me”	Higher on-site	$d = 0.49$, $p = 0.046$

“People assume top leaders will be men”	Higher on-site	Z = +0.493
“Decisions are made by a group of men”	Higher on-site	Z = +0.452

The first two items are especially important because they capture how bias is experienced in ordinary interaction. Women working on-site are substantially more likely to wait before speaking and to be more cautious about self-promotion. These are not distant outcomes. They are everyday behavioral pressures, and they are felt more strongly in the office.

Lived Experience of the Two Settings

The qualitative responses illustrate how respondents describe the two settings in practice. Women working on-site describe the office as an amplifier. One respondent wrote: “In the office, you see it every day. The management meetings behind glass doors, all men. The lunch tables, all men. You cannot unsee it.” Another explained the interactional pressure more directly: “In a room full of men, I have to think about every word before I say it. In a Zoom call, I can just type my comment in the chat.” These responses match the quantitative finding that on-site work is associated with more pressure around speaking and self-presentation.

Women working flexibly described a different experience. The flexible setting often felt less intense in everyday interaction, but it also created trade-offs. One respondent wrote: “On my two office days, I feel like I have to prove everything. I have to be visible, be present in every conversation, make sure my manager sees me.” Another described the remote side of that arrangement: “On my remote days, I am productive. But I also miss the conversations. I find out later what was decided.” A third summarized the trade-off plainly: “I do not deal with the men’s club at lunch. But I also do not get the opportunities.” Taken together, these comments suggest that flexible work may reduce some daily exposure while leaving women more dependent on formal channels for influence and advancement.

Supplementary Outcome Check

The outcome variables did not differ significantly across work models. Relative career advancement, advancement expectancy, professional safety perceptions, job satisfaction, and exit intention all showed non-significant group differences. This result keeps the paper’s contribution narrow. The main finding is about differences in reported workplace experiences, not a full account of downstream outcomes.

Discussion

The main point of this paper is simple. Women do not report bias-related workplace experiences with the same intensity across work settings. The post-COVID coexistence of on-site and flexible work makes that comparison visible.

On-Site Work, Visibility, and Evaluative Pressure

The clearest finding is that on-site work is associated with stronger bias-related workplace experiences. Women working on-site reported stronger pressure around speaking up, more caution in self-promotion, and sharper awareness of male-dominated decision environments than women working flexibly. These are not distant or abstract experiences. They are ordinary moments of working life: when to speak, how to present oneself, and whether the spaces where decisions are made feel open or closed.

This comparison matters because it became possible only after the pandemic disrupted the assumption that professional work had to happen in one shared physical place.

Bias Patterns in On-Site Work

The clearest differences appear in experiences that depend on immediate interaction. Waiting to be acknowledged before speaking and being more cautious about self-promotion were both reported more strongly by women working on-site. The same was true for items that captured the sense that leadership or decision spaces are male dominated. These findings are consistent with the possibility that on-site work exposes women more continuously to gendered expectations around confidence, authority, and belonging.

The paper does not need to decide fully whether this pattern reflects gendered organizational culture, more intensive face-to-face interaction, or both. The important point is empirical: in this sample, the office appears to be a place where some bias-related experiences are felt more strongly.

Flexible Work as Reduced Exposure, Not Full Protection

Flexible work looks different, but it does not erase inequality. The qualitative responses suggest that flexibility may reduce some daily pressures by lowering the intensity of face-to-face scrutiny. At the same time, flexible work may weaken informal access to influence, sponsorship, and timely information. Several respondents described this as a trade-off: less daily friction, but less proximity to the conversations in which opportunities are shaped.

That is why the paper does not present flexibility as a solution in itself. The findings indicate partial relief from some everyday pressures, not a general removal of bias.

The Role of Organizational Setting

The conceptual contribution of the paper is modest but important. Gender inequality at work is shaped in part by organizational setting. Merit, performance, and individual attitudes remain relevant, but work also happens in settings that organize visibility, interaction, and evaluation differently. Ridgeway (2011) argues that gender functions as a primary background identity framing all workplace interactions, suggesting that the physical conditions of work, whether co-located or distributed, shape when and how that framing is activated. Correll (2004) adds that cultural beliefs about gender lead individuals to use different standards to evaluate their own competence, a process that may intensify in settings where face-to-face comparison is continuous. Together, these accounts suggest that organizational setting is a condition worth studying in its own right, alongside the individual and structural factors that are already well established in the literature.

Boundaries of the Claim

The paper's claim remains bounded. The data are cross-sectional, so the findings show association rather than causality. The remote group is small, which is why the main interpretation relies on the broader contrast between on-site and flexible work. The study is also located in Israeli high-tech, a sector where informal evaluation and dense professional networks may sharpen the consequences of work setting. Within those limits, the analysis suggests that organizational setting deserves closer attention as a condition under which some forms of bias are experienced.

Practical implications

Culture, Gender, and Work Setting

The practical implication of this study is that work-model decisions should be treated as part of culture design. Expectations around presence, visibility, participation, commitment, and flexibility do not operate in the same way across all work settings. When organizations decide how much work should happen on-site, how much flexibility is acceptable, and when people need to be physically present, they are also shaping the conditions under which people are seen, heard, included, and advanced.

This means that culture should not be designed in the abstract. It should be designed with explicit attention to gender and work setting together. In this sample, on-site work was associated with stronger pressure around speaking, self-promotion, and male-dominated decision spaces. That pattern suggests that presence requirements can carry inclusion consequences even when they are introduced for operational reasons.

Organizations can respond by paying closer attention to the moments where work setting and evaluation meet. If key conversations, staffing decisions, mentoring opportunities, and reputational assessments happen mainly in office-based informal settings, then employees who spend less time there may be disadvantaged. A practical response is to distribute important conversations more deliberately across settings, document advancement-related decisions more clearly, and reduce reliance on informal access as the main route to influence.

Flexible work should also be approached realistically. It may soften some daily pressures, but it can also reduce informal access to sponsorship, visibility, and timely information. Organizations should therefore ask not only what supports performance, but also how their chosen work model shapes access, visibility, and participation.

Conclusion

The post-COVID coexistence of on-site and flexible work made direct comparison possible. Within this sample, the findings suggest that several bias-related workplace experiences are felt more intensely in on-site settings than in flexible arrangements, especially those related to speaking up, self-presentation, and male-dominated decision spaces. Gender inequality at work is shaped in part by organizational setting. Merit, performance, and individual attitudes remain relevant, but the conditions under which work is seen, discussed, and evaluated matter as well.

For organizations, work-model choices are also culture choices. Decisions about presence, flexibility, and office time help shape visibility, inclusion, and the everyday conditions under which women are recognized or overlooked. The findings do not suggest that flexible work removes inequality, nor that on-site work is inherently biased in all contexts. They indicate that the conditions of work are associated with how bias is experienced. Cross-sectional data limit causal claims. Future research could examine these associations longitudinally and across sectors where informal evaluation density varies.

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