

When Less Isn't More: Swiss Managers' Gendered Perceptions of Part-Time Work

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Research for People in Organizations, 2026, Vol. 2, Article e20443, <https://doi.org/10.5964/rpio.20443>

Received: 2025-10-21 • **Accepted:** 2026-04-17 • **Published (VoR):** 2026-09-22

Handling Editor: Vera Hagemann, University of Bremen, Bremen, Germany

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Abstract

Aims of the Study: This study investigates how Swiss managers and HR professionals, referred to as organizational decision-makers, perceive part-time work at the intersection of traditional gender norms and increasing work-life balance emphasis. Specifically, it examines whether part-time work is viewed as a signal of lacking career commitment and how these perceptions differ depending on the gender of both the employee and the organizational decision-maker.

Method: We conducted an exploratory mixed-methods study, combining qualitative interviews with twelve participants and an online quantitative survey of 119 organizational decision-makers. The survey measured whether part-time work is perceived as a sign of lacking career commitment. Regression analyses examined the effects of both decision-makers' and part-time employees' gender on these evaluations.

Results: The majority of decision-makers did not interpret part-time work as a sign of low career commitment, and work-life balance discourses have increasingly entered organizational talk. Nonetheless, evaluations of part-time work remain gendered: Male part-time work is significantly more likely than female part-time work to be perceived as a signal of low career commitment, a pattern particularly pronounced among male decision-makers and in male-dominated fields.

Conclusion: These findings highlight that gendered assumptions about part-timers' career commitment continue to shape organizational decision-makers' evaluations, particularly disadvantaging male part-time employees. Notably, decision-makers appear aware of this gendered reality, yet rarely acknowledge their own role in changing it, allowing gendered power relations to be reproduced. This underscores that simply offering flexible work policies is insufficient to improve work-life balance without simultaneously addressing underlying gendered discourses.



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Keywords

part-time, career commitment, gender bias, work-life balance, work hours

Contribution for People

Background

Part-time work is steadily increasing in Switzerland, with nearly 40% of employees working reduced hours. Research shows that the consequences for part-time workers largely depend on organizational decision-makers' attitudes: if they perceive part-time work as a sign of lacking career commitment, it can lead to unintended career disadvantages.

Why was this study done?

Despite Switzerland's high rate of part-time employment, little is known about the factors shaping its perception. In a context where the traditional breadwinner model remains strong, a pronounced gendered part-time gap persists. At the same time, work-life balance discourses for all have increasingly entered societal and organizational contexts. This study examines how organizational decision-makers view part-time work within this landscape.

What did the researchers do and find?

We found that discourses promoting flexible work for all are used by decision-makers to position themselves and their organizations as modern and equal. Nevertheless, male part-time employees continue to face biased assumptions about their career commitment. Decision-makers recognize these gendered realities but rarely acknowledge their own agency. This awareness without reflexive engagement risks reproducing gendered power relations and reinforcing traditional gender roles.

What do these findings mean?

These results highlight that promoting part-time work alone is not enough. Gendered discourses framing part-time work as suitable mainly for women and female-dominated fields, combined with beliefs that real men must be full-time breadwinners, must be addressed to ensure equal career opportunities. The study offers practical recommendations for organizations to foster flexible work cultures and counter traditional gender role expectations.

Highlights

- Work–life balance discourse and part-time work for all have entered organizational practice.
- But organizational decision-makers' views of part-time workers' career commitment remain gendered.
- Male part-time workers face stronger career stigma, especially from male decision-makers.
- Decision-makers see the gendered reality but rarely acknowledge their role in addressing it.
- Cultural change is essential alongside flexible policies to ensure equal career opportunities.

Part-time employment is a common strategy to achieve a more satisfactory work-life balance (Beham et al., 2020). According to the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (2025a), 58.7% of women and 20.5% of men in Switzerland currently work part-time. This gender disparity can be attributed, in part, to women's greater tendency to choose part-time work in order to accommodate childcare and other family responsibilities (Krone-Germann, 2011). Using Esping-Andersen's (1990) typology of welfare states, Switzerland can be characterized as a country with a pronounced breadwinner model, in which men fulfil financial roles and women manage domestic and childcare responsibilities (Liebig et al., 2018). These patterns are reinforced by structural disincentives for dual-income households with children, including high childcare costs – up to CHF 3,000 per child per month – and a tax system that penalizes second earners, thereby supporting a model of full-time employment for men and part-time or non-employment for women (Balthasar & Müller, 2018; Makarova & Herzog, 2015).

Although part-time work enables employees – particularly women – to remain in the labor market, it often carries unfavorable consequences due to the so-called “flexibility stigma” (Williams et al., 2013). This stigma refers to the belief that employees who utilize flexible work arrangements are perceived as less productive or committed, which may consequently lead to discrimination and negative career outcomes for those working flexibly (Chung, 2020). In this regard, organizational decision-makers play a crucial role in either reinforcing or mitigating these effects, as they are responsible for implementing and interpreting work-life policies in practice (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; McCarthy et al., 2010). In this study, we focus on two groups of decision-makers: managers, who hold formal leadership roles, and HR professionals, who may or may not hold leadership positions (the latter are referred to as HR managers). If these organizational decision-makers view part-time work as a signal of reduced career commitment, it may adversely impact part-time employees' evaluations and opportunities.

At the same time, traditional gendered life-course models are increasingly being challenged. Over the past 15 years, women's part-time rates have remained stable, while

men's have risen by over 50% and continue to grow (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2025a). Public attitudes reflect this shift: 90% of Swiss respondents believe men should be actively involved in childcare and household work, and only 22% still regard men as primary breadwinners (Frisch et al., 2025). Life-domain balance, including part-time work for all genders, has thus become a dominant societal discourse. It remains unclear, however, whether organizational evaluations of part-time work have at least partially adapted accordingly or continue to reflect traditional gendered assumptions. If work-life balance for all genders is normalized and part-time employment ceases to function as a signal of reduced commitment, its negative consequences may be mitigated.

Despite the high prevalence of part-time employment — both in Switzerland and other Western European countries — little is known about how organizational decision-makers evaluate part-time work in a context shaped by competing norms of traditional gender roles and the growing emphasis on life-domain balance. Of particular interest is how organizational actors navigate and potentially reproduce gendered perceptions of part-time employment, given that they themselves are situated within gendered realities and carry their own gendered experiences. This study addresses this gap by examining how evaluations of part-time work vary according to the gender of both the decision-maker and the part-time employee. Using a mixed-methods design, we qualitatively analyze how Swiss managers and HR professionals assess part-time work and quantitatively test whether it is interpreted as a signal of reduced career commitment across different gender constellations. Understanding these perceptions is crucial because decisions about part-time work not only affect individual career trajectories but also shape the distribution of opportunities and the persistence of gendered inequalities in paid employment. To better contextualize and interpret our findings, we first draw on theoretical and historical discourses on part-time work.

Gendered Discourses of Part-Time Work as an Organizational Phenomenon

Part-time work is a comparatively recent concept that emerged alongside the spatial and functional separation of work and home during the Industrial Revolution. Historically, due to a combination of physical demands in many occupations and concerns about health, men were designated as workers in the labor market while women were responsible for domestic work — a division that gradually became entrenched and institutionally reinforced (Davies & Frink, 2014). This historical arrangement laid the foundation for organizational norms and expectations regarding availability, commitment, and career trajectories.

Acker's (1990) concept of the idealized, disembodied male worker captures how these historical norms continue to structure contemporary organizations. Organizational hierarchies and career models are built around assumptions of unrestricted temporal availability, privileging workers who can devote their time entirely to paid work. Conse-

quently, part-time workers — often women — are automatically assigned to lower ranks, leading to the marginalization of part-time work within organizations (Dick & Hyde, 2006; Nentwich & Hoyer, 2013).

These structural inequalities are sustained through organizational discourses, particularly those surrounding professionalism and ambition. Part-time work is often framed as an individual choice and as evidence of lower ambition, despite empirical evidence refuting such claims (Dick & Hyde, 2006). Importantly, ambition itself is socially constructed and closely tied to norms of temporal availability rather than objective performance (Benschop et al., 2013). By framing inequality as a consequence of individual preferences, organizations obscure the cultural and historical foundations of these norms.

From a Foucauldian perspective, such discourses function as mechanisms of power that produce subjectivities and legitimize hierarchical distinctions between workers (Foucault, 1977; Nentwich & Hoyer, 2013). As these norms primarily benefit traditional full-time male workers, it is not surprising that alternative discourses — such as work-life balance — trouble the work identities of some of these full-time professional groups (Meriläinen et al., 2004). This is particularly evident in traditionally male-dominated, high-status professional contexts, such as senior management, law, engineering, and medicine (Cha & Grady, 2024). Conversely, pressures to introduce family-friendly working arrangements are more likely to arise in organizations with higher proportions of women in professional and managerial roles (Dick & Hyde, 2006).

Critical is not only the context though, but how individuals position themselves in it (Dick & Hyde, 2006). Establishing and preserving a professional identity is an ongoing struggle for part-time employees (Hyde, 2008). These negotiations are inherently gendered, as men and women face different expectations and evaluations within gendered societal and organizational structures.

From Discourses to Practice: Gendered Negotiations and Evaluations of Part-Time Work

In contexts where ambition and professionalism are defined by expectations of unrestricted temporal availability, part-time workers must negotiate their professional identities. These negotiations are inherently gendered. While women do have to give up certain aspects of their professional identity, such as constant presence, they can align with the socially sanctioned discourse of motherhood, which frames women as the most competent and natural caregivers (Dick & Hyde, 2006). In fact, women may risk appearing to “sell their families short” if they display excessive ambition at work (Benschop et al., 2013). By positioning part-time work as a way to prioritize family responsibilities, women can maintain a socially accepted professional identity. Indeed, Swiss surveys show that women most frequently cite family responsibilities as their primary reason for working part-time (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2025b), highlighting how positioning

within the discourse of motherhood may help explain the persistent gender gap in part-time employment.

Men, by contrast, have less freedom to adopt subject positions within parenting discourses, which are primarily targeted at women (Dick & Hyde, 2006). The ability and willingness to work full-time has become a marker of masculinity (Meriläinen et al., 2004). Swiss surveys indicate that men who work part-time perceive themselves as significantly more “feminine” than full-time men, particularly when working less than 50 percent. Among women, by contrast, there is no systematic relationship between work participation and perceptions of femininity (Hermann et al., 2021). To maintain professional legitimacy, men often frame part-time work in terms of career development or financial reasons (Smithson, 2005). Indeed, data from Switzerland indicate that, for men, reasons other than family – such as pursuing further education – are the most common reasons for working part-time (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2025b).

These gendered patterns of positioning are also reflected in organizational evaluations. As male part-time work more strongly deviates from normative expectations, it may more readily be seen as a signal of low career commitment, potentially resulting in stronger negative consequences (Kopp, 2022). Studies have shown that men working part-time are perceived as less committed or motivated and therefore less likely to receive favorable performance appraisals or be recommended for a job compared to full-time employees and women working part-time (Beham et al., 2020; Pedulla, 2016). Similarly, managers may be less inclined to approve requests for part-time work from men (Klein et al., 2000). On the other hand, a more recent French study by Coron and Garbe (2023), finds no gender differences in career success expectations due to part-time work. Given Switzerland’s dominant breadwinner model, we nevertheless hypothesize:

H1: Managers and HR professionals are more likely to interpret part-time work in men as a lack of career commitment compared to part-time work in women.

Less is known about how decision-makers’ own gender may shape evaluations of part-time work. Since men have traditionally benefited from the hegemonic full-time norm, they may be more likely to enforce it (Meriläinen et al., 2004). Indeed, research has shown that female managers are generally more supportive of family-related requests from employees like part-time work (Devicienti et al., 2019) and are less likely to discriminate against flexible workers (Chung, 2020).

H2: Male managers and HR professionals are more likely than female managers and HR professionals to interpret part-time work as a sign of lacking career commitment.

We further assume an interaction effect: Swiss men tend to hold more traditional gender role attitudes than women (Bornatici et al., 2020). As a result, male managers and HR

professionals may see part-time work as more acceptable for women, consistent with traditional caregiving roles, leading to greater gendered differences in their assessments. Female decision-makers may assess part-time work more consistently across genders.

H3: The difference in perceived career commitment between male and female part-time workers is greater among male decision-makers than among female decision-makers.

Method

Study Design

To address the research objective, a convergent mixed-methods approach was used, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative approach provides in-depth insights into organizational decision-makers' attitudes and experiences with part-time employment, while the quantitative approach tests if part-time work is seen as a lack of career commitment.

This manuscript is based on a broader research project conducted as part of a supervised student seminar in the Master of Science in Psychology program at the School of Applied Psychology FHNW. As part of the seminar, students collaborated with the authors to develop a semi-structured interview guide. The quantitative items used in this analysis were proposed by the manuscript authors. Students conducted the qualitative interviews, transcribed the material, and collected the quantitative data under the guidance of the authors. All analyses (qualitative and quantitative) as well as the writing of the manuscript were carried out by the authors.

Qualitative Interviews

Participants were recruited via email inquiries conducted by students, with the aim of identifying HR professionals and managers from companies of varying sizes and across different industries. Only individuals who held formal leadership positions were included. All participants provided written informed consent for both participation and data usage. Interviews were conducted either in person or online via Microsoft Teams. In total, 12 managers from 12 different organizations were interviewed. An overview of participants' industry affiliation, gender, role, and company size (small and medium-sized enterprises employ less than 250 employees, large enterprises 250 employees and more) is provided in [Table 1](#).

Table 1
Sample Characteristics of Interviewed Managers

Nr	Industry	Gender	Function	Company size
1	Facility Management	Male	HR Manager	Large enterprise
2	Electrical Engineering	Female	HR Manager	Large enterprise
3	Healthcare (Nursing)	Female	Manager	Large enterprise
4	Banking	Female	HR Manager	Small and medium-sized enterprise
5	E-commerce	Female	HR Manager	Large enterprise
6	Insurance	Female	HR Manager	Large enterprise
7	Grocery Retail	Female	HR Manager	Large enterprise
8	Brewing	Male	HR Manager	Small and medium-sized enterprise
9	IT Services	Female	HR Manager	Small and medium-sized enterprise
10	Bakery	Male	Manager	Small and medium-sized enterprise
11	Telecommunications	Male	HR Manager	Large enterprise
12	Real Estate	Male	Manager	Small and medium-sized enterprise

The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide that addressed, among other topics, the current significance of part-time work within the organization, participants’ experiences with part-time arrangements, perceived opportunities and risks associated with part-time work and the perceived relationship between part-time work and gender. Participants were approached via broader network channels. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, were either held in the participants company or per Microsoft Teams and were recorded using either a digital recording device or Microsoft Teams.

For this study, we analyzed interview segments that related to gender using inductive reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). Analysis proceeded iteratively, beginning with data familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts, followed by systematic inductive coding of meaningful data segments and the collection of potential themes using MAXQDA software. Furthermore, the codes were reviewed and refined in relation to the coded data and the dataset as a whole. This process was led by the first author. The second author critically reviewed and refined the themes, contributing to the final analysis.

Quantitative Survey

An online questionnaire was distributed via email to 300 managers and HR professionals using a multi-channel recruitment approach. This included personal and extended professional networks, postings on LinkedIn, as well as direct contact with companies from various industry sectors using publicly available email addresses identified through a Google search. The final sample consisted of 119 participants (72 women, 60.5%; 47 men, 39.5%). The average age of participants was 39.9 years (*SD* = 10.7; range = 22–72

years). Of the total sample, 76 participants (63.9%) were managers not employed in human resources (HR), 31 (26.0%) were HR professionals without a leadership role, and 12 (10.1%) were HR managers with leadership responsibility. Regarding company size, 51 participants (42.9%) worked in small or medium-sized enterprises (fewer than 250 employees), while 68 participants (57.1%) were employed in larger organizations (250 employees or more).

Perceptions of part-time work were assessed using two key items: “Men who work part-time are less committed to their careers” and “Women who work part-time are less committed to their careers.” Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree). The item concerning men was presented at the beginning of the survey, and the item concerning women at the end. The full survey included 40 items.

Data cleaning and analysis were conducted using R Version 4.5.0. Descriptive statistics were employed to illustrate the findings. Hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted to test *Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3*. To test for effects related to the gender of the evaluated person, the data were transformed from wide to long format, allowing each participant’s ratings of male and female part-time employees to be analyzed as separate observations. To account for the fact that each participant provided multiple related ratings (i.e., ratings for both male and female part-time employees), we used linear mixed-effects models (multi-level models) including a random intercept for participant ID. This approach controls for individual differences in rating tendencies.

Results

Qualitative Results

The interview data is structured in three thematic categories. First, we present the official stances that interviewees expressed regarding part-time work in their organizations, typically articulated early in the interviews. Second, we examine the lived realities surrounding part-time work, which often reveal gendered patterns. Third, we explore interviewees’ reflections on why part-time work continues to be predominantly taken up by women, despite formal policies portraying it as a gender-neutral option.

Official Stance: Part-Time Employment as a Gender-Neutral Choice

When discussing the company’s HR policies on part-time work, executives expressed that part-time employment opportunities are equally available to all employees, regardless of gender. Executives highlighted the increasing normalization of part-time work across genders, emphasizing its importance as a strategy for attracting a diverse workforce, for example:

Gender doesn't matter here; it's almost normal by now. Because, logically, we also want to retain women, therefore we need to enable that a father can also take care of things at home (Interviewee 4).

Thus, officially, part-time work is regarded as a gender-neutral choice. None of the interviewees mentioned any policies that contradict this stance.

Practical Realities: The Gendered Nature of Part-Time Work

Despite the company's official stance on gender-neutral part-time employment, the interview data indicates that the practical reality of part-time work arrangements displays a gendered pattern. Part-time work, particularly at very low working hours, is predominantly common among women and occurs particularly within female-dominated occupations and industries. In contrast, for male employees, part-time work is only enabled in special circumstances.

Women's Part-Time Work: A Necessity Driven by Family Responsibilities — The interviewed executives noted that significantly more women than men work part-time, a trend largely driven by family obligations. As the primary caregivers, women often significantly reduce their working hours. Many interviewees viewed the notion that women substantially decrease their working hours as logical, as they perceived raising a family to be women's primary responsibility.

A young mother with two or three children needs to spend more time at home. I mean, they don't start a family to work more [...]; they do it to be there for the family (Interviewee 1).

Female part-time work was often portrayed as a supplement to the primary responsibility of managing the household, something a woman engages in as a pleasant diversion.

There are moms who work 40% and their everyday life consists of changing diapers, cooking for children and husband and cleaning the house. This person will be happy if they can use a phone in the customer service department (Interviewee 5).

The data indicates that organizations are generally accommodating in providing part-time options for mothers. Even in companies where part-time arrangements are typically limited to 80% workloads or more, mothers are given special consideration when requesting reduced schedules.

If someone becomes a mother and wants to work part-time, we can definitely look into options [to work less than 80%] (Interviewee 9).

The Nature of Male Part-Time Work: Job Remains Central — While women's part-time work is often driven by family responsibilities, respondents report that men

tend to work part-time primarily for professional reasons, such as running a side business or pursuing further education or training. According to the executives, such part-time employment options are usually supported because organizations benefit from the knowledge and skills acquired and the part-time status is temporary.

Although parenthood was also identified as a factor influencing the decision of men to work part-time, this rationale appears to be less prevalent and often met with stigma:

We're probably not quite at the point where a man can do this without any issues. There will certainly be some raised eyebrows if he says he wants to reduce his hours (Interviewee 5).

If fathers seek a flexible working arrangement due to childcare it is usually the so called "Daddy day", where fathers work 80% or 90% and take a day off every week or two. Despite the growing popularity of the concept of a "Daddy day", it has not yet become a widely adopted practice.

While mothers' part-time work is often seen as complementing their primary family responsibilities, for fathers, their work remains central and fatherhood is perceived as a secondary task. The interviewees suggest that male role models who work part-time could play a significant role in normalizing reduced working hours for men.

I think it would be a good icebreaker if there were a part-time father. It would bring the topic into a new light and show that this is the new reality, that a man can do it just as well (Interviewee 8).

In conclusion, male part-time work is still viewed with skepticism and is largely limited to only small reductions in working hours.

More Part-Time Opportunities in Female-Dominated Fields — Part-time employment is gendered not only by its higher prevalence among women but also through its greater acceptance and availability in female-dominated fields, compared to its limited presence in male-dominated industries. The interviewees provided several examples of female-dominated industries and roles where part-time work arrangements are accepted. For example, in the cleaning sector, work hours can range from 20% to 100%, as indicated by Interviewee 1. Similarly, Interviewee 3 stated that part-time opportunities in the nursing field begin at 10% and even offer part-time leadership positions at 40% workloads. In contrast, part-time work is uncommon in male-dominated industries such as construction or production, for example:

We are in the electrical industry, and I would say we are still relatively conservative with these types of working hour models. This is partly because we have many technicians and installers who work outside on construction sites (Interviewee 2).

Although the tight schedules and the need to maintain continuous workflows at construction sites are often perceived as obstacles to accommodating part-time employment, an executive in this field posits that it may also be a matter of attitude, as part-time work is feasible in similarly demanding, yet female-dominated, industries.

I think it's easier [to accommodate part-time] in the office, but working outside on construction sites requires a different kind of organization. However, if it's possible to manage shifts in healthcare, including night shifts, then it should also be feasible on construction sites (Interviewee 2).

Interviewees further noted that, especially in male-dominated fields, part-time work arrangements are less feasible in leadership roles. Executives articulated the pervasive perception within organizational contexts that managerial roles necessitate a full-time dedication and commitment.

Understanding the Gendered Nature of Part-Time Work: Executive Perspectives

Throughout the interviews, executives shared their perspectives on why part-time work remains predominantly female, despite official policies presenting it as a gender-neutral option. The interviewees primarily attributed the gendered nature of part-time work to the underlying societal stereotypes regarding the roles of men and women. The notion that men should serve as full-time breadwinners while women, being responsible for domestic duties, work part-time, continues to persist among many individuals in the workplace.

Interviewees argued that men who wish to be present for their children face adverse consequences and societal stereotypes when they do so. Interviewee 8 observed that men are typically expected to “*be performance-oriented and push ourselves hard*”. Another executive highlighted the dearth of alternative role models, where men's self-worth and societal appreciation is not contingent upon their work achievements alone.

Let's be honest, what role models do men have? The successful men you see are those who wake up at four in the morning and work late into the night, throwing money around and driving Ferraris. These extreme images are ingrained in people's minds. And now, he's sitting on his yacht with a 40-year-younger wife, enjoying everything because he worked 24-hour days. Now, try introducing a part-time model into that. If we can move away from the idea [...] that you can only be successful if you work 130%, then I believe it will achieve relevance and become socially acceptable. This image needs to change in people's minds — not just among women, but among men (Interviewee 5).

In this regard, one of the main identified barriers to part-time work for men, particularly less than 80%, is the perceived lack of a socially acceptable reason for doing so. While women, especially mothers, are often seen as having a clear and socially sanctioned justification for opting for reduced hours, their male counterparts do not, as Interviewee 5 notes:

I believe it's still not socially acceptable enough. Concepts like 'New Work,' 'New Life,' and 'Work-Life Balance' need a solid justification, and mothers always have that justification, whereas it is different for men (Interviewee 5).

Consequently, although part-time work is objectively feasible for both men and women, socialization processes linked to traditional gender roles result in part-time arrangements being less accepted and potentially stigmatized for men.

Quantitative Results

The analysis revealed notable gender differences in decision-makers' perceptions of part-time employment. Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations for the full sample as well as separately for male and female decision-makers. In addition, we report the percentage of participants who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that part-time work reflects a lack of career commitment. Among male decision-makers, 51.1% agreed that part-time working men are less committed, compared to only 15.3% of female decision-makers. When asked about part-time working women, the perceived lack of commitment was lower overall: 29.8% of male decision-makers and 6.9% of female decision-makers expressed agreement.

We tested our hypotheses using hierarchical linear regression analyses (see Table 3). Among the control variables, company size had no effect, whereas older decision-makers were more likely to interpret part-time work as a sign of low career commitment. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, part-time work in men was interpreted more likely as a signal of low career commitment than part-time work in women ($B = 0.74, p < .001$). Adding the gender of the evaluating decision-maker revealed that male decision-makers were more likely than female decision-makers to perceive part-time work as indicative of low commitment ($B = 0.45, p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 2. The interaction between decision-maker gender and employee gender was marginally significant ($B = 0.35, p = .052$), suggesting a trend but providing no conclusive support for Hypothesis 3. The random intercept for participants had a variance of 0.57 ($SD = 0.76$), indicating that participants differed substantially in their overall evaluation tendencies.

Table 2

Decision-Makers' Agreement That Part-Time Workers Are Less Committed

Sample	n	Male Part-Timers Rated as Less Committed			Female Part-Timers Rated as Less Committed		
		M	SD	Participants agreeing (n, %)	M	SD	Participants agreeing (n, %)
Total sample	119	2.55	2.55	35 (29.4%)	2.11	1.06	19 (16.0%)
Male decision-makers	47	3.21	3.21	24 (51.1%)	2.55	1.16	14 (29.8%)
Female decision-makers	72	2.12	2.12	11 (15.3%)	1.82	0.88	5 (6.9%)

Note. n = number of respondents; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; % = percentage of total respondents reporting this workload distribution.

Table 3
Moderator Analysis: Types of Measurement and Study Year

Step	Predictor	B	SE	95% CI		p	R ²	Overall Model Significance	
				LL	UL			$\chi^2(df)$	p
1	Age	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.04	0.004**	0.192	$\chi^2(3) = 33.99$	< 0.001***
	Company size ^a	-0.03	0.17	-0.35	0.30	0.875			
	Gender of evaluated part-time worker: Male	0.74	0.18	0.40	1.09	< 0.001***			
2	Age	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.04	0.004**	0.228	$\chi^2(1) = 22.87$	< 0.001***
	Company size ^a	-0.03	0.17	-0.35	0.30	0.875			
	Gender of evaluated part-time worker: Male	0.74	0.18	0.40	1.09	< 0.001***			
	Gender of evaluating decision-maker: Male	0.45	0.09	0.27	0.62	< 0.001***			
3	Age	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.04	0.004**	0.234	$\chi^2(1) = 3.87$	0.049
	Company size ^a	-0.03	0.17	-0.35	0.30	0.875			
	Gender of evaluated part-time worker: Male	0.57	0.20	0.18	0.96	0.005**			
	Gender of evaluating decision-maker: Male	0.31	0.11	0.08	0.53	0.008**			
	Interaction: Gender of decision-maker x gender of part-time worker	0.35	0.18	0.00	0.71	0.052			

Note. N = 238 observations (119 participants). B = unstandardized regression weights; SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit. Overall model significance is based on likelihood-ratio tests comparing nested models. Step 1 is compared to a null model with only a random intercept. Steps 2 and 3 are compared to the previous step. Significant values indicate improved model fit.

^a 0 = Small and medium-sized enterprises (< 250 employees), 1 = Large enterprises (≥ 250 employees).

Discussion

This mixed-methods study examines Swiss managers’ and HR professionals’ attitudes toward part-time employees, focusing on how these attitudes vary by the gender of both employees and decision-makers. Switzerland provides an interesting context, characterized by a persistent tension between traditional gender role norms and a growing emphasis on work–life balance and gender equality.

At first glance, the findings suggest a partial normalization of part-time work. The majority of decision-makers did not interpret part-time employment as a signal of low career commitment, indicating that the assumption that part-time workers are inherently less motivated is no longer a universally shared organizational norm. This reflects a gradual cultural shift in organizational perceptions of part-time work. However, this apparent normalization masks substantial gendered differences. Nearly 30% of organiza-

tional decision-makers perceive part-time work by men as a sign of low career commitment, compared to 16% who hold the same view about part-time work by women. While part-time work may have gained legitimacy in general, its evaluation remains deeply embedded in traditional gender role expectations.

The qualitative findings illuminate how this discrepancy is produced in everyday organizational practice. Although most decision-makers presented part-time work as a viable option for both genders in their company, stating that no differences are made in the treatment of male and female employees, underlying accounts revealed persistent gendered patterns in its practical implementation. Part-time employment is predominantly associated with women, who reduce their working hours for caregiving and domestic responsibilities — a process often framed as natural. Several interviewees explicitly noted that exceptions are made for working mothers, allowing for reduced workloads; however, no comparable accommodations were mentioned for men.

The quantitative findings reinforce these qualitative insights. Male part-time work is significantly more likely to be interpreted as a lack of career commitment than female part-time work, therefore confirming *H1*. Furthermore, male decision-makers are more likely to view part-time work as a sign of lacking career commitment than female decision-makers, supporting *H2*. However, the interaction *Hypothesis H3* could not be confirmed: both male and female decision-makers were similarly inclined to view male part-time employees as less committed to their careers than female part-time workers.

Together, these findings indicate that while part-time work as such has become more normalized, its acceptance remains deeply embedded in traditional gender role frameworks. Male part-time work deviates from the breadwinner norm and is therefore more readily interpreted as a signal of insufficient commitment, a pattern consistent with prior research (Beham et al., 2020; Pedulla, 2016). What distinguishes the present findings, however, is not merely the persistence of gendered evaluations, but the way in which they coexist with an explicit, seemingly internalized discourse of gender equality and work–life balance.

Across interviews, decision-makers repeatedly articulate gender-equal access to part-time work as an important organizational value. Contemporary equality and work–life balance discourses have clearly entered organizational talk and are competently mobilized by organizational actors. Yet in concrete evaluations, gendered patterns in the assessment of the commitment of part-time workers persist. Crucially, the data reveals a striking absence of acknowledged agency among decision-makers. Although interviewees frequently recognized that traditional gender norms embedded in organizational cultures shape the acceptance and evaluation of part-time work, responsibility for these patterns was consistently externalized. Agency was either naturalized — by framing women’s caregiving as biologically or psychologically inherent — or displaced, rendering gendered inequalities to be dealt with by unnamed others. From a Foucauldian perspective (1977), this combination of awareness without reflexive engagement is particularly

consequential, as it allows gendered power relations to be reproduced while appearing both inevitable and/or already resolved. These findings closely align with Joan Acker's (1990) concept of gendered organizations, which posits that gender inequality persists precisely because organizations present themselves as neutral and egalitarian while everyday practices remain gendered.

Notably, the lack of agency was not confined to male decision-makers. Although women expressed fewer overtly discriminatory views overall, female decision-makers did not shield male part-time workers from negative evaluations. This finding aligns with research showing that women are not less likely than men to engage in stereotype-consistent judgments, particularly when evaluating norm-deviating men (Rudman & Mescher, 2013). It underscores how deeply embedded gender norms are and how they are reproduced even by those who are themselves disadvantaged by them. Looking ahead, the increasing presence of younger generations who value work–life balance might be expected to erode these differences. However, research suggests that in Switzerland, younger cohorts — despite being socialized in more egalitarian contexts — often exhibit more traditional gender attitudes than their predecessors (Bornatici et al., 2020). Thus, assumptions that generational turnover alone will resolve the issue appear overly optimistic.

Crucially, the qualitative findings show that the gendering of part-time work and career commitment varies across organizational contexts. It is particularly pronounced in male-dominated fields, where masculine organizational cultures and breadwinner norms remain deeply embedded in everyday practices, as described by Cha and Grady (2024). In female-dominated, lower-paid sectors such as nursing and cleaning, part-time work is widely accepted, including in leadership roles. As a result, work–life balance discourses have reduced vertical segregation of part-time work — that is, differences in status or leadership opportunities — within feminized fields. However, as flexibility remains concentrated mainly in feminized, socially less-valued sectors, masculine ideals of availability and career commitment persist in higher-status male-dominated domains. Consequently, part-time work continues to reinforce horizontal segregation — that is, the division of work across sectors — risking the maintenance rather than the reduction of existing gendered divisions of labor and opportunity. This aligns with prior research suggesting that simply offering part-time options is insufficient; without addressing cultural assumptions about commitment and career progression, part-time work remains marginalized in contexts anchored in full-time ideals (Kelly et al., 2010).

Practical Implications

Simply offering part-time arrangements without addressing the dominant discourse equating physical presence with commitment and performance is likely to reach its limits quickly (Kelly et al., 2010). Core assumptions embedded in this discourse — such as the belief that time spent at work signals performance, that jobs can only be organized

in full-time positions, or that tasks must be assigned to single individuals — need to be actively challenged and destabilized by introducing new understandings of legitimate work (Nentwich & Hoyer, 2013). While such discursive change is shaped at the societal level, organizations can play a key role by fostering cultures that prioritize outcomes and effective coordination over visible availability (Poelmans & Beham, 2008).

Some companies have successfully initiated such cultural change through programs like the “Results-Only Work Environment” (ROWE), which evaluates employees solely on their results, regardless of when, where, or how they work (Kelly et al., 2011). Another initiative, “Predictability, Teaming, and Open Communication” (PTO), encourages teams, whether part-timers or full-timers, to define agreed-upon times when they are unavailable (e.g., full-timers for focused work) (Perlow & Kelly, 2014). Both initiatives showed promising results in terms of team effectiveness and work-life balance. Crucially, HR systems should support a results-oriented culture by rewarding outcomes rather than visible presence, for example through performance metrics, bonuses, and promotion criteria (Kossek et al., 2015). In addition, interventions at the individual level, such as targeted change initiatives to reduce managerial biases toward flexible work arrangements, have been shown to be effective (Sweet et al., 2017). Supervisors who receive work-life policy training tend to make more favorable decisions regarding policy allowance (Poelmans & Beham, 2008).

Furthermore, this research suggests that work–life balance discourses alone are insufficient to erode gendered differences in how flexible workers are assessed. As long as long hours and the financial rewards they bring remain central to male identity, men will continue to face pressure to prioritize work above all else (Williams et al., 2013). A new ideal of masculinity — one not tied to full-time breadwinner status — needs to gain societal traction. Interestingly, surveys reveal a discrepancy between societal expectations and personal values: when asked what traits are valued in men in general, respondents cite agentic characteristics such as resilience and assertiveness, whereas when asked about traits they personally value, both men and women emphasize humor, friendliness, and caring (Frisch et al., 2025). This suggests that the foundation for a new ideal of masculinity already exists but has yet to be widely reflected in societal norms. Structural supports, as seen in Nordic countries — such as well-paid childcare and longer paternity leave — can facilitate this shift and reduce the gender gap in working hours (Riekhoff et al., 2019). Organizational initiatives can further reinforce a new masculine ideal. For instance, Balan et al. (2023) describe dedicated “fatherhood representatives” within organizations who provide information, organize events, and facilitate networks for fathers.

Limitations

This exploratory study has several limitations. First, the relatively small sample size and the regional focus on the German-speaking part of Switzerland limit the generalizability

of the findings. Differences between occupational fields and regions may be substantial, and future research should explore part-time work, its implementation, and effects across diverse sectors, particularly in male-dominated fields. It would also be valuable to investigate how perceptions of presence and performance evolve in contexts with increasing home-office practices post-COVID. Second, the questionnaire design could be improved by alternating the order of questions about male and female employees, rather than always asking about men first. Third, the study relies on self-reported data from decision-makers, which may not accurately reflect actual outcomes. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how decision-makers' attitudes influence the experiences and career trajectories of part-time employees. Finally, future research should focus on developing and testing targeted interventions aimed at reducing biases against part-time workers.

Conclusion

This study investigates decision-makers' attitudes toward part-time work in Switzerland on the verge between traditional gender role norms and a growing emphasis on work-life balance for both genders. The findings indicate a gradual normalization of part-time work, as most decision-makers did not interpret reduced hours as a signal of low career commitment. Work-life balance discourses have clearly entered organizational talk and are mobilized by actors to signal modernity and equality. Yet this normalization remains strongly gendered: Male part-time workers benefit less from this shift, as they are significantly more likely to be perceived as non-committed to their jobs. This effect is especially pronounced in male-dominated fields and among male decision-makers, with over 50% of them equating male part-time work with reduced commitment. These perceptions reflect the persistence of the traditional male "ideal worker" who is a full-time breadwinner.

Although decision-makers recognize the gendered reality of part-time work, they frequently externalize responsibility for it. This combination of awareness without reflexive engagement is especially problematic, as it allows gendered power relations to be reproduced while appearing inevitable or already resolved. The paper highlights the need for initiatives that address gendered discourses at both societal and organizational levels. Crucially, it demonstrates that simply offering flexible work policies is unlikely to improve work-life balance for all employees unless underlying cultural attitudes are simultaneously addressed.

Funding: The authors have no funding to report.

Acknowledgments: We would like to thank Samira Baumann, Angela Funk, Tamara Meier, and Flavio Wick for their valuable support in this study, especially for their efforts in conducting the data collection. Their dedication and hard work were essential to the successful completion of this research.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Data Availability: No data has been made available for this article.

Supplementary Materials

Type of supplementary material	Availability/Access
Data	
No data provided	—
Code	
No code available	—
Material	
No material provided	—
Study/Analysis preregistration	
No preregistration	—
Other	
No other material has been made available	—

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