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Beyond the Ideal Worker Norm: A Narrative Review of Flexible Work Policies, Work-Life Integration and Women's Advancement into Leadership

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Abstract: Flexible work policies are increasingly positioned as mechanisms for improving work-life integration and supporting women's participation in professional careers. However, their capacity to facilitate advancement into leadership remains uncertain where organizations continue to operate according to the ideal worker norm, which associates commitment with availability, visibility, and intensive work involvement. This narrative review critically examines how flexible work policies and work-life integration interact with the ideal worker norm to shape women's advancement into leadership. The review synthesizes the selected literature thematically around three interconnected areas: the gendered implications of the ideal worker norm, flexible work and work-life integration, and the relationship between flexibility and women's leadership advancement. The review finds that flexibility can increase autonomy and support sustained professional participation, but policy availability alone does not ensure equitable career outcomes. Organizational support, inclusion, boundary control, managerial practices, and equitable access to recognition and development opportunities substantially shape how flexibility is experienced and its potential career consequences. The review further identifies a flexibility paradox: flexible arrangements may challenge conventional work expectations, yet can reproduce inequality when their use is stigmatized or interpreted as reduced commitment. The review concludes that flexible work may be more likely to contribute to gender-equitable leadership advancement when organizations also address the norms and practices that shape whose work is considered committed, visible, and leadership-worthy. The findings highlight the need to integrate flexibility with broader organizational reforms in performance evaluation, career development, and leadership pathways.

Keywords: *Ideal Worker Norm, Flexible Work Policies, Work-Life Integration, Women's Leadership Advancement.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary organizations are increasingly adopting flexible work arrangements that allow employees greater discretion over when, where, and how work is performed. Flexible scheduling, remote and hybrid work, workload flexibility, and related work-life policies have consequently become important organizational mechanisms for responding to employees' changing work and non-work responsibilities (Kossek, Lautsch, et al., 2023; Kumar et al., 2023). However, the expansion of flexibility does not necessarily mean that organizations have moved beyond traditional expectations of professional commitment. The ideal worker norm continues to associate commitment with high work involvement, continuous availability, visibility, and the prioritization of work over competing life responsibilities (Howell et al., 2017; Nartey, 2025; Padavic et al., 2020).

This norm has important implications for gender equality because expectations of uninterrupted work commitment can intersect with gendered responsibilities for family and caregiving. Padavic et al. (2020) demonstrate how work-family narratives can contribute to the persistence of gender inequality within organizational cultures characterized by intensive work expectations. Howell et al. (2017) similarly demonstrate the relevance of ideal-worker expectations to professional identity and career flexibility. The issue, therefore, extends beyond individual women's ability to balance competing responsibilities, it also concerns the organizational assumptions that determine how commitment, performance, and career potential are evaluated.

Flexible work policies may provide one mechanism for challenging these assumptions. Greater control over work arrangements can facilitate the management of work and non-

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work responsibilities and support employees' ability to remain professionally engaged across different circumstances (Kossek, Lautsch, et al., 2023; Kumar et al., 2023). For women, such flexibility may be particularly consequential where conventional work arrangements create tensions between professional responsibilities and other life roles. Blake-Beard et al. (2010) situate flexible work arrangements within broader questions of organizational sustainability and the experiences of diverse women, while Fritz and van Knippenberg (2018) demonstrate the relevance of work-life initiatives to gender and leadership aspiration.

Nevertheless, flexibility should not be assumed to produce gender equality automatically. Its effects depend partly on organizational implementation, inclusion, managerial support, and employees' ability to use available arrangements without adverse consequences (Casper et al., 2025; Kossek, Perrigino, & Lautsch, 2023; Kossek & Lee, 2022). Johnston et al. (2022) and Nartey & Aryee. (2026), for example, highlight the interaction between flexibility, organizational support, gender, and blurred work-life boundaries in academia. Thus, a formal policy may exist while organizational expectations continue to reward conventional patterns of availability and visibility. This distinction is particularly important for women's advancement into leadership. Improving work-life outcomes or retaining women in employment does not necessarily translate into greater representation in leadership. Leadership advancement involves access to career opportunities, professional visibility, and organizational recognition. Research examining leadership aspiration and work-life initiatives (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018), as well as the work-life integration experiences of women leaders (McGill-O'Rourke & Allan, 2025; Nartey & Aryee, 2026), indicates the importance of examining the relationship between flexible work and leadership beyond employee well-being alone.

The concept of work-life integration provides a broader framework for this analysis. Rather than viewing work and non-work as completely separate domains that must simply be balanced, work-life integration recognizes their interaction and the need for organizational arrangements that accommodate different life circumstances (DeSimone, 2020; Kumar et al., 2023). From this perspective, the central issue is whether flexibility changes organizational expectations concerning professional commitment or merely allows employees to depart temporarily from a norm that remains dominant.

Existing reviews have established important but relatively distinct understandings of flexible work, work-life integration, policy implementation, and inclusion. Kumar et al. (2023) synthesize the relationship between work-life integration and flexible work arrangements, showing how flexibility helps employees manage work and non-work domains. Kossek and Lee (2022) extend this by emphasizing boundary control, policy implementation, and the conditions under which formal flexibility becomes employees' actual work experiences. Casper et al. (2025) demonstrate that work-life policy effectiveness depends on inclusion, shifting attention from policy availability to whether employees can legitimately use such policies. Kossek, Perrigino, and Lautsch (2023) connect work-life inclusion with women's career equality. These reviews together establish that flexibility is shaped by implementation, inclusion, and organizational context, not merely policy availability.

What remains unresolved is how these insights collectively relate to the ideal worker norm and women's advancement into leadership. Existing reviews examine flexibility in relation to work-life outcomes, boundary management, employee experiences, or policy effectiveness, while leadership studies address aspiration or women's experiences after entering leadership (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018; McGill-O'Rourke & Allan, 2025). Consequently, the literature offers less integrated explanation of how expectations concerning availability, visibility, and commitment condition whether flexible work translates into career recognition and leadership opportunities. This review addresses that gap by examining flexibility not simply as a work-life mechanism but as an organizational practice whose career consequences depend on whether the ideal worker norm remains embedded in evaluation, visibility, and advancement processes. It also distinguishes three analytically related issues: whether flexibility is available, whether employees can use it without stigma or career disadvantage, and whether its use is associated with meaningful advancement into leadership. Examining these together explains why flexible work may improve work–life integration without producing equivalent gains in leadership representation.

This narrative review examines how flexible work policies and work-life integration interacts with the ideal worker norm and influence women's advancement into leadership. Leadership advancement is defined broadly as movement toward, entry into, and progression within formal organizational leadership roles, rather than a single managerial level. It therefore encompasses leadership aspiration and readiness before appointment, entry into supervisory or managerial roles, progression through middle-level leadership, and continued advancement toward senior positions were represented in the literature. This definition distinguishes entry into leadership movement from non-leadership into a formal leadership role from progression within leadership, which concerns career development and advancement after entry.

The reviewed studies represent different points along this pathway. Fritz and van Knippenberg (2018) address the pre-entry stage by examining leadership aspiration and work-life initiatives. McGill-O'Rourke and Allan (2025) provide evidence on women already in mid-level leadership, informing work-life integration during leadership participation and progression. Tushabe et al. (2025) examine gender diversity in public university leadership, contributing to understanding organizational conditions linked to women's leadership representation. These studies are therefore not treated as evidence of one identical outcome but as sources examining different points along the broader pathway.

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The review synthesizes the literature to examine: (1) how ideal-worker expectations shape gendered career experiences; (2) how flexible work policies influence work-life integration; and (3) the organizational conditions under which flexibility may facilitate or constrain women's entry into and progression within leadership. It is guided by the overarching question: To what extent can flexible work policies and work-life integration practices enable women's advancement into leadership when organizational systems continue to operate around the ideal worker norm? Rather than assuming flexibility is inherently beneficial, the review critically considers the mechanisms and conditions determining its consequences. It frames meaningful progress not simply as expanding access to flexible work, but as reconsidering organizational assumptions concerning availability, visibility, commitment, and career potential that shape pathways to leadership.

II. METHODOLOGY

➢ *Review Approach and Evidence Base*

This study adopts a focused narrative review approach to critically synthesize literature on the ideal worker norm, flexible work policies, work-life integration, and women's advancement into leadership. The purpose is interpretive rather than to estimate an aggregate effect or provide a statistically exhaustive account. The review emphasizes conceptual relationships, converging findings, tensions, and organizational conditions across the selected literature.

The review used a defined corpus of 26 sources identified as directly relevant to the study scope. The evidence base comprises peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly book chapters, a doctoral dissertation, a conference paper, an encyclopedia contribution, and a preprint. Sources were considered relevant when they addressed one or more of the following: (1) the ideal worker norm and organizational expectations; (2) flexible work arrangements and policies; (3) work-life balance or integration; (4) gender and women's career experiences; and (5) leadership aspiration, participation, or advancement.

Non-journal sources were deliberately included where they offered relevant conceptual, contextual, or emerging evidence complementing peer-reviewed literature. These sources are not treated as equivalent in evidentiary status to peer-reviewed empirical articles but are used selectively to inform conceptual interpretation or identify emerging perspectives. The review distinguishes evidence derived primarily from peer-reviewed research from supplementary scholarly sources.

➢ *Source Selection and Eligibility*

The corpus was organized thematically rather than screened through a systematic-review protocol. Studies were retained where their substantive focus contributed directly to the review question or provided conceptual evidence necessary to interpret relationships among flexibility, work-life integration, organizational expectations, and women's leadership. Sources addressing only peripheral aspects were excluded. Because the review was designed as a narrative synthesis, no attempt was made to calculate a pooled effect or claim exhaustive retrieval.

No formal standardized risk-of-bias or methodological quality score was assigned across the heterogeneous source types because the corpus includes empirical studies, reviews, conceptual contributions, and non-journal sources that cannot be meaningfully evaluated using a single instrument. Instead, source type, conceptual relevance, and evidentiary limitations were considered during interpretation, with stronger claims reserved for findings supported by peer-reviewed literature. The synthesis should therefore be understood as a critical narrative interpretation rather than an exhaustive or systematically reproducible evidence review.

➢ *Thematic Synthesis and Methodological Analytical Framework*

The literature was synthesized under three interconnected themes: (1) the ideal worker norm and its gendered implications; (2) flexible work policies and work-life integration; and (3) flexible work and women's advancement into leadership. Within these themes, attention was given to organizational inclusion, managerial support, boundary control, professional visibility, recognition, leadership aspiration, and access to career opportunities.

The synthesis uses an analytical framework rather than a causal pathway. The framework in figure 1 organizes the reviewed literature around theoretically connected relationships: the ideal worker norm represents broader organizational expectations concerning availability, visibility, and commitment; flexible work policies represent formal mechanisms through which work arrangements may be modified; work-life integration represents an employee-level experience or process; and career experiences and leadership outcomes represent potential consequences shaped by organizational recognition, inclusion, support, and access to opportunities. These relationships are not assumed to occur in a fixed sequence or to operate causally in every context. Rather, the framework examines how constructs may interact and where organizational conditions can strengthen, weaken, or redirect their relationships.

The framework is therefore interpretive and heuristic, not a tested causal model. The reviewed evidence is heterogeneous in design, population, occupational setting, and outcome, and does not justify claiming that flexible work directly causes leadership advancement. The analysis consequently focuses on associations, mechanisms proposed in the literature, areas of convergence and tension, and conditions under which flexibility may support or constrain career outcomes.

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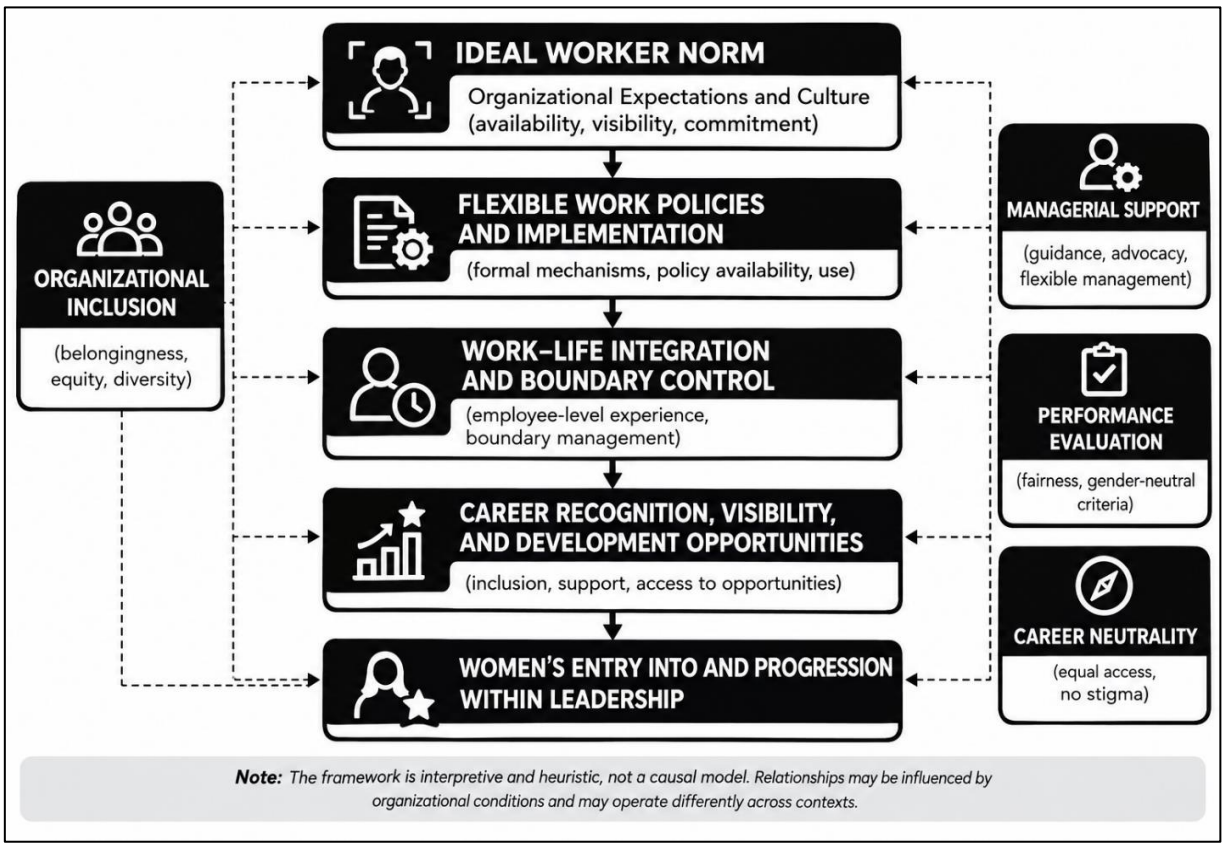


Fig 1 Methodological Analytical Framework for the Study
Source: Author's Construct, 2026

III. RESULTS: THEMATIC REVIEW

This section presents a thematic synthesis of the literature examining the relationship between the ideal worker norm, flexible work policies, work-life integration, and women's advancement into leadership. Rather than treating the reviewed studies as isolated findings, the analysis brings them together to identify converging arguments, tensions, and conditions that shape the effectiveness of flexible work. The review is organized around three interconnected themes: the gendered implications of the ideal worker norm; flexible work policies and work-life integration; and the relationship between flexible work and women's advancement into leadership. Across these themes, particular attention is given to how organizational expectations, support, inclusion, and recognition influence whether flexibility functions as a mechanism for career equality or reproduces existing inequalities.

➢ *The Ideal Worker Norm and its Gendered Implications*

The review finds that the ideal worker norm provides an important foundation for understanding why flexible work policies do not automatically produce gender-equitable career outcomes. The norm is associated with expectations of continuous availability, strong work identification, professional visibility, and the prioritization of employment over competing life responsibilities (Howell et al., 2017; Nartey, 2025). These expectations are particularly consequential where professional advancement depends on workers demonstrating sustained availability and commitment. The persistence of this norm is closely connected to broader patterns of gender inequality. Padavic et al. (2020) argue that the work-family narrative can function as a social defense of intensive work cultures, allowing gender inequality to persist even when organizational practices appear formally gender-neutral. From this perspective, work-family difficulties can be interpreted as individual problems rather than consequences of organizational arrangements that privilege workers able to conform to demanding work expectations. Howell et al. (2017) similarly demonstrate the continuing relevance of the ideal-worker identity within professional careers, highlighting the tension between career flexibility and established expectations concerning professional commitment.

Nartey (2025) further illustrates the negotiation of the ideal worker norm through representations of work and life, emphasizing how traditional workplace expectations shape understandings of professional commitment and work-life relationships. Earlier research similarly framed flexibility around the challenge of balancing organizational and employee needs (O'Brien & Hayden, 2008; Nartey & Aryee, 2026), suggesting that contemporary emphases on flexibility represent an evolution of a longstanding organizational concern rather than an entirely new phenomenon. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the ideal worker norm operates not merely as an explicit organizational policy but as an underlying expectation against which employees may be evaluated.

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The review finds that the implications for women are significant because work and family responsibilities can intersect with organizational expectations in ways that influence career experiences. Blake-Beard et al. (2010) position flexible work arrangements within the broader context of social sustainability and the experiences of diverse women, suggesting that workplace arrangements must be considered alongside the different circumstances within which women pursue professional careers. A collaborative inquiry by Ibiwoye et al. (2024) further emphasizes the work-life needs of women in academia, reinforcing the importance of considering women's own experiences of work-life demands when evaluating organizational flexibility. Recent evidence concerning women's work–life integration and career advancement also extends the discussion beyond general employee well-being. Triviño et al. (2026), for example, specifically consider flexible work policies in relation to work–life balance and career advancement among long-tenured female managers, thereby connecting flexibility with advancement among women who have already achieved managerial positions. Mentoring may also represent an important complementary mechanism because flexibility alone does not guarantee access to the relationships and developmental resources through which leadership opportunities emerge (Riforgiate et al., 2025).

A central finding emerging from this literature is that flexibility cannot be evaluated independently of the norm it is intended to modify. Where organizations continue to associate commitment with unrestricted availability, flexible work may accommodate deviations from the ideal worker model without fundamentally changing the model itself. This provides an important basis for examining whether flexible work policies represent structural change or simply an adjustment to existing organizational expectations.

- *Flexible Work Policies and Work-Life Integration*

Flexible work policies are increasingly positioned as mechanisms for improving employees' capacity to manage work alongside other life dimensions. The literature identifies flexibility as encompassing arrangements giving employees greater control over the timing, location, or organization of work (Kossek, Lautsch, et al., 2023; Kumar et al., 2023). Earlier literature similarly framed flexibility as a mechanism for reconciling work and life demands, though its effectiveness depends on how arrangements are structured and experienced (O'Brien & Hayden, 2008; Vasumathi, 2018). More recent contributions emphasize organizational support and flexible arrangements as conditions relevant to women professionals' work–life integration (Nafiu et al., 2026).

Kumar et al. (2023) emphasize the relationship between flexibility and employees' ability to integrate life domains, while Kossek, Lautsch, et al. (2023) focus on boundary control and policy implementation, demonstrating why effectiveness cannot be understood solely from formal policy existence. Employees require meaningful control over work boundaries for flexibility to contribute effectively to work-life integration. Casper et al. (2025) argue that policy effectiveness depends substantially on inclusion, shifting attention from whether policies exist to whether employees perceive them as accessible, legitimate, and usable. Kossek, Perrigino, and Lautsch (2023) similarly conceptualize work-life inclusion as important to women's career equality.

Work-life integration also requires moving beyond simple conceptions of "balance." DeSimone (2020) challenges conventional understandings among high-potential professionals, while Kumar et al. (2023) position integration as a broader framework for understanding interaction between work and non-work domains. Rosa (2022) further questions treating "work–life balance" as a straightforward organizational objective, particularly within neoliberal academic environments where work demands remain structurally intensive. This reinforces the distinction between formal flexibility and substantive changes in how work is organized.

However, flexibility can blur boundaries rather than simply improve them. Johnston et al. (2022) demonstrate that flexibility, organizational support, gender, and unbounded work interact complexly within academic employment. Gause (2024) illustrates the importance of social meaning attached to flexible work by examining flexibility stigma among employees without childcare responsibilities, broadening discussion beyond assumptions that flexibility is relevant only to caregivers.

The literature indicates that work–life integration should be considered across different occupational and career contexts rather than treated uniformly. Mongia et al. (2025) emphasize work-life integration among women entrepreneurs, while Kashive and Roy (2025) examine benefits and challenges of flexible work policies for women's job satisfaction. Although these outcomes differ from leadership advancement, they provide contextual evidence concerning broader consequences through which flexibility may influence women's continued participation in professional work.

The literature generally points to an important distinction between flexibility as policy and flexibility as lived organizational practice. A formal policy may provide entitlement to flexible work, but its contribution to work–life integration depends on implementation, organizational support, and the extent to which employees can exercise flexibility without compromising professional standing (Casper et al., 2025; Kossek, Lautsch, et al., 2023).

- *Flexible Work and Women's Advancement into Leadership*

The ultimate significance of flexible work for gender equality lies not only in improved work-life experiences but also in its potential implications for women's career advancement. Leadership advancement requires sustained access to career opportunities, professional development, organizational recognition, and pathways through which leadership potential is identified and supported. Consequently, flexible work should be assessed according to whether it contributes to these outcomes rather than solely

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whether it improves employee satisfaction or work-life experiences.

Fritz and van Knippenberg (2018) provide a direct connection between work-life initiatives and gender differences in leadership aspiration. Their work demonstrates that organizational initiatives concerning work and life can have implications for how employees approach leadership, thereby linking workplace arrangements to a broader career-development process. This connection is important because leadership advancement begins before formal promotion, through employees' aspirations and perceptions of whether leadership is compatible with their broader lives.

Evidence concerning women already occupying leadership positions further demonstrates the importance of work-life integration. McGill-O'Rourke and Allan (2025) examine the work-life integration experiences of mid-level women leaders, highlighting that integration remains relevant even after women have entered leadership. Leadership therefore does not eliminate work-life challenges, rather, the demands associated with leadership can create additional tensions concerning time, responsibilities, and professional expectations.

The relationship between work-life arrangements and leadership is also evident in institutional contexts. Tushabe et al. (2025) connect work-life balance and gender participation with gender diversity in leadership within Ugandan public universities. This suggests that work-life conditions should be considered as part of the organizational environment within which women's leadership participation develops.

At the same time, the literature cautions against assuming that flexibility automatically produces advancement. Organizational cultures may continue to reward visibility and intensive work involvement, potentially limiting the career value of flexible arrangements (Johnston et al., 2022; Kossek, Lautsch, et al., 2023). The critical issue is therefore whether flexible work changes the criteria through which commitment and leadership potential are recognized. The synthesis presents the relationship in Table 1.

Table 1 Organizational Conditions Linking Flexible Work to Women's Leadership Advancement

Organizational condition	Potential consequence
Flexible work availability	Greater opportunity to accommodate work–life demands
Work-life integration	Greater capacity to sustain professional participation
Organizational inclusion and support	Greater ability to use flexibility without adverse consequences
Equitable recognition of flexible workers	Greater potential for continued career progression
Access to leadership opportunities	Greater potential for advancement into leadership

Sources: Johnston et al., 2022; Kossek, Lautsch, et al., 2023.

Thus, flexible work appears most consequential when it is embedded within broader organizational practices that recognize different ways of working while maintaining equitable access to career opportunities. The central challenge is not simply expanding flexibility but ensuring that flexibility does not become a secondary career pathway in which employees receive accommodation at the expense of visibility, recognition, or advancement.

Overall, the literature suggests that moving beyond the ideal worker norm requires a shift from viewing flexibility as an individual accommodation toward treating it as part of an inclusive organizational approach to career development. Such a shift would require organizations to reconsider how professional commitment, performance, and leadership potential are assessed across different work arrangements.

IV. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

➢ *Discussion*

The combined literature suggests that the central issue is not whether flexible work exists, but what happens to career evaluation when flexibility is introduced into organizations that continue to value the ideal worker model. Across the reviewed literature, flexibility is associated with greater capacity to manage work and non-work demands, yet the potential career consequences of using flexible arrangements remain dependent on organizational interpretation and implementation. This helps answer the review question by indicating that flexibility may create conditions for women to sustain professional participation and pursue leadership, but the relationship is contingent rather than automatic.

The synthesis also reveals an important distinction between work-life outcomes and career outcomes. Evidence concerning integration, boundary control, and policy inclusion indicates that flexibility can alter employees' work experiences, while studies addressing leadership aspiration and women already in leadership suggest that career consequences involve additional processes of recognition, visibility, development, and access to leadership opportunities. Thus, improved work-life integration should not be treated as evidence of leadership advancement. A policy may be effective in helping employees manage competing demands while producing limited change in the organizational processes through which leadership potential is recognized.

A further tension concerns whether flexibility weakens or reproduces the ideal worker norm. On one interpretation, flexibility can reduce the need for continuous physical presence and provide greater control over when and where work is performed. On another, organizations may preserve conventional expectations of availability and commitment, allowing flexible arrangements to operate alongside rather than replace the dominant model of career success. The literature on blurred boundaries and unbounded work suggests that flexibility may also redistribute work across

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time and space rather than reduce work demands themselves (Johnston et al., 2022; Kossek & Lee, 2022). These competing possibilities indicate that flexibility should not be understood as inherently emancipatory or inherently disadvantageous; its implications depend on how organizational norms and career systems respond to its use.

The review therefore identifies a conditional relationship rather than a direct pathway between flexible work and women's leadership advancement. Inclusion, managerial support, boundary control, and career-neutral evaluation appear to be important contextual conditions, but the reviewed literature does not establish that these conditions operate uniformly across organizations or leadership levels. The evidence also remains less developed regarding whether the use of flexible arrangements affects promotion, succession, or progression into senior leadership over extended career periods. These unresolved issues limit strong causal conclusions and point to the need for longitudinal research that follows women across different stages of leadership development.

Taken together, the findings answer the review question by suggesting that flexible work may contribute to women's leadership pathways when it is implemented in organizational environments where alternative patterns of working remain compatible with recognition, development, and advancement. The significance of the ideal worker norm is therefore that it provides a mechanism for understanding why the same formal flexibility policy may have different career implications across organizational contexts.

➢ *Limitations of the Existing Literature*

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the reviewed literature. First, the studies differ considerably in their research designs, populations, occupational settings, and conceptual approaches, making direct comparison difficult. The literature includes studies of academic professionals, women leaders, diverse women, and broader employee populations, and therefore the findings cannot necessarily be generalized across all organizational contexts (Blake-Beard et al., 2010; Johnston et al., 2022; McGill-O'Rourke & Allan, 2025).

Second, the literature does not consistently distinguish between the availability, utilization, and consequences of flexible work. An organization may formally offer flexible arrangements without employees perceiving them as genuinely accessible or career-neutral (Casper et al., 2025; Kossek, Lautsch, et al., 2023). This limits the ability to determine whether positive outcomes arise from the policy itself or from the organizational conditions surrounding its implementation.

Third, much of the literature emphasizes work-life balance, integration, employee experiences, or organizational participation, whereas direct evidence concerning long-term leadership progression is comparatively less developed. This distinction is important because retention or improved work-life experiences do not necessarily demonstrate advancement into senior leadership.

➢ *Unanswered Questions and Future Research*

The literature raises several questions requiring further investigation. Future research should examine whether flexible work produces measurable differences in promotion, leadership-track participation, succession opportunities, and progression into senior leadership, rather than focusing primarily on satisfaction or work-life outcomes. Longitudinal research would also help establish whether the benefits of flexibility persist across different career stages. Further attention is needed to determine whether employees who consistently use flexible arrangements experience different career trajectories from those who work primarily through conventional arrangements. Another important question concerns the flexibility paradox: under what organizational conditions does flexibility challenge the ideal worker norm, and when does it merely create an alternative work arrangement within a system that continues to reward conventional availability? Research should also examine how managerial support, organizational inclusion, boundary control, and performance evaluation interact to shape these outcomes (Casper et al., 2025; Kossek, Perrigino, & Lautsch, 2023; Kossek, Lautsch, et al., 2023).

Finally, greater attention should be given to the experiences of women at different leadership levels and across different organizational environments. Evidence concerning mid-level women leaders (McGill-O'Rourke & Allan, 2025; Nartey & Aryee, 2026) suggests that entering leadership does not eliminate work–life integration challenges. Understanding how these challenges evolve as women progress toward more senior positions remains an important research priority.

➢ *Practical and Policy Implications*

The findings have important implications for organizations seeking to improve gender equality in leadership. First, organizations should move beyond measuring the availability of flexible work policies and assess whether employees can use them without experiencing career disadvantage. Flexibility should be incorporated into broader work-life inclusion strategies rather than treated as an isolated employee benefit (Casper et al., 2025; Kossek, Perrigino, & Lautsch, 2023).

Second, organizations should ensure that performance and advancement decisions do not implicitly privilege physical presence, excessive availability, or conventional work patterns. Flexible workers should retain equitable access to professional development and leadership opportunities. This is particularly important if organizations seek to transform flexibility from an accommodation mechanism into a genuine component of career equality.

Third, managerial practices require particular attention. Organizational support can influence whether flexibility becomes a meaningful resource for work-life integration or an arrangement accompanied by professional costs (Johnston et al., 2022; Kossek, Lautsch, et al., 2023). Managers therefore have an important role in normalizing flexible work and ensuring that its use does not signal reduced commitment.

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Ultimately, the practical implication is that organizations should seek to redesign the conditions of career advancement rather than simply provide flexibility within existing conditions. Moving beyond the ideal worker norm requires recognition that effective leadership can be demonstrated through outcomes, contribution, and capability rather than through unrestricted availability alone.

➢ *Integrative Interpretation*

The reviewed literature supports the following conceptual interpretation:



Fig 2 Pathway to Women's Leadership Advancement
Source: Author's Construct, 2026.

The relationship is not necessarily linear. The ideal worker norm and organizational culture can influence how flexible work is implemented and interpreted at each stage. Where flexibility is inclusive and career-neutral, it may help women sustain professional participation and pursue leadership. Where flexibility is stigmatized or associated with lower commitment, it may reproduce rather than dismantle existing inequalities. The central contribution of this review is therefore the proposition that flexible work may be more likely to support gender-equitable leadership advancement when organizations simultaneously address the norms and practices that shape whose work is considered committed, visible, and leadership-worthy.

V. CONCLUSION

This narrative review examined how flexible work policies and work-life integration interact with the ideal worker norm to shape women's advancement into leadership. The reviewed literature indicates that flexible work can improve autonomy and support sustained professional participation, but its availability alone does not guarantee career advancement. Its effectiveness depends on organizational inclusion, managerial support, boundary control, and whether flexible workers receive equitable recognition and access to development and leadership opportunities. Importantly, flexibility may challenge the ideal worker norm, but it can also reproduce inequality when commitment continues to be associated with constant availability, visibility, and intensive work involvement. Therefore, meaningful progress requires organizations to move beyond simply offering flexible arrangements toward creating career systems in which flexibility does not carry professional penalties. Future efforts should focus on aligning flexible work policies with equitable performance evaluation, promotion, mentoring, and leadership development. Ultimately, the reviewed literature suggests that flexible work may be more likely to support women's advancement into leadership when organizations also address the cultural norms and structural practices that shape perceptions of commitment, visibility, and leadership potential.

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