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Flexible Working Arrangements and Social Sustainability: Study on Women Academics Post-COVID-19

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Abstract: One of the main challenges faced by companies, scholars, and governments nowadays is achieving economic, environmental, and social sustainability. Remote working, reduced work weeks, and other types of flexible working time arrangements (FWAs) are the new characteristics that will shape the future of work to ensure social sustainability. In changing work patterns, working styles are changed to possibly improve women employees' mental health and life–work balance. However, recently, very few firms have succeeded in adopting these new FWA trends. The purpose of this paper is to investigate women's preferences towards FWAs in the academic sector as a social sustainability source. We investigate the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on female faculty members' future job preferences. The data used in the research are collected from a survey given to female faculty members who work in a Saudi women's university and have already experienced FWAs during the COVID-19 period. The study uses mixed methods of research, combining a choice modeling (CM) method, one sample *t*-test, a paired sample *t*-test, cluster analysis, and probit models. Our results show that flexible working arrangements improve the wellbeing of women employees, which ensures sustainable social development. The findings also show that flexibility in location plays a significant role in the decision made by female faculty members when revealing their flexibility preferences. However, flexibility in time did not play a significant role in the decisions made by respondents. This study adds to the empirical evidence in the current literature on female academic staff preferences for FWAs in Saudi Arabia, using choice modeling conjoint analysis and mixed approaches.

Keywords: choice modeling; clustering; probit models; job preferences and life–work balance; higher education sector; social sustainability; flexible working arrangements; women academics' preferences



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1. Introduction

“Man has always dreamt of a world without suffering, injustice, and above all, without work” [1]. Work and one's related wellbeing are one of the main human concerns for social sustainability. Work is almost a chore for some people: they work to support their families, but their income does not always satisfy their needs. For others, working is a source of personal fulfillment. They work in a field that they are truly passionate about. Work brings passion to their lives. Social sustainability refers to a balance between working life and wellbeing, health, and safety for both organizations and employees [2].

Recently, to achieve social sustainability, flexibility at work has become a central concern of many governments, scholars, and employers. By advocating flexible working arrangements (FWAs), governments and employers aim to make work more agreeable and allow all workers to enjoy life. At the same time, they aim to ensure high productivity [3,4].

Adopting FWAs is assumed to perfectly reflect the work–life balance. FWAs have been employed in some organizations around the world, using different forms such as flexibility in location (working from home or working in mixed locations), flexibility in time (e.g., a four-day work week or flexible hours), and workload (e.g., part-time jobs or job sharing) [5–7].

Although the concept of flexible working arrangements was raised in the past few decades, it has received greater attention since the COVID-19 lockdown, during which time multiple articles have discussed the possibility of adopting different FWAs and their impact on productivity and employees' wellbeing [8,9].

FWAs can take different forms. However, for space and time limitations, this article will focus only on two forms of FWAs, namely, a four-day workweek (as a form of flexibility in time) and working in mixed locations (as a form of flexibility in location). The four-day week is a trend in the United States. There is a little more caution in Europe, but the phenomenon is gradually taking hold. Employees' stress reduction and improvements in wellbeing at work have become serious challenges to companies' competitiveness. It has been argued that a long weekend allows one to spend more time with family and friends, which can considerably improve employees' work–life balance [10]. To become globally competitive, flexibility will become a keyword for companies in the coming years, especially for younger generations who care more about their personal work–life balance. Thus, a company that practices the four-day week might appear more attractive to recruit new talents and retain its employees [11].

Flexible working arrangements were developed as an organizational alternative for various industries during the COVID-19 lockdown. Higher education institutions are no exception, since all the important stakeholders, including faculty members, have embraced remote learning as a replacement for the conventional methods of work.

Despite the ability to use technology for some aspects of work since the last decade, it has become a problem for many higher education employees, especially faculty members, who want to manage their work and lives to maintain balanced wellbeing [12]. Educational institutions are beginning to prioritize the mental health and wellbeing of their staff members, because they desire to play a role in achieving social sustainability. Globally, the higher education system has made significant changes to encourage flexibility in the organization and scheduling of work hours [13]. As evidenced by experiences in non-educational institutions, both academic and non-academic staff require flexibility in the workplace to considerably improve their mental health and general wellbeing [14].

FWAs can also be affected by gender disparities in some countries. In fact, Alon et al. [15] think that women and other marginalized groups have been particularly negatively impacted by COVID-19. Working women now confront unprecedented difficulties in juggling their personal and professional obligations because of the pandemic's impact on workplace trends [16]. Research on the COVID-19 pandemic has focused on the effects of flexible working arrangements on women's employment in the education sector [17–19].

For this reason, this study aims to reveal the preferences of female faculty members toward future FWAs post-COVID-19 and to examine the motivational factors that influence female faculty members' job preferences. Further, it aims to bring to light some insights into social sustainability by evaluating the impact of adopting flexible work arrangements in the higher education sector on female mental health and wellbeing.

The study uses mixed methods of research, including the choice modeling (CM) method, one sample *t*-test, a paired sample *t*-test, cluster analysis, and probit models. These methods of research have been used in various behavioral economics domains, including health and labor, as well as the behavioral, social, business, and health sciences [20–22].

The study has chosen the higher education sector for two reasons. First, academic work is considered a diverse job. It is determined by several aspects, such as teaching, administrative work, research, involvement in technology, and lifelong learning. At least one of these aspects can be performed effectively under FWA circumstances. Further, the merits of one or more of these tasks may positively affect workers' wellbeing. Second, technological advancement has severely affected academic jobs by moving them completely and easily to flexible working arrangements during the pandemic. The two reasons cited above underline the reasons why preferences for FWAs are worth investigating. Moreover, the current study focuses on female faculty members, as it argues that female employees in different sectors usually have multiple responsibilities in the workplace as well as at home

compared to their male colleagues. Therefore, female preferences toward FWAs might be different from men's and require extra investigation.

As this study focuses on examining future FWA preferences for female faculty members, all the participants were from Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University (PNU). PNU is the only women's university in Saudi Arabia. It is ranked first worldwide in 2021 in achieving SDG5: gender equality and twenty-first in achieving SDG4: quality education [23]. In the initial stage, different scenarios related to FWAs are developed and presented to the various participants, and every individual is required to choose their preferred choice. Then, the motivational factors influencing work preferences are examined and linked to female faculty members' wellbeing.

In this vein, this paper contributes to three aspects of research. First, the paper explores an issue that is currently under discussion in the literature related to organizational behavior and workplace conditions by focusing on female faculty members' preferences for flexible working arrangements after the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, it emphasizes the assertion made by female employees that a balanced work–life condition contributes to social sustainability by ensuring their wellbeing. Third, the study explores the association between job preferences for female academic staff, demographic and professional variables, and wellbeing. As this study looks at female academic staff's desires for FWAs using CM models, it is the first research study in Saudi Arabia to use CM in behavioral labor economics while considering women employees.

The paper is arranged as follows. After a brief introduction, a literature review is presented in Section 2, followed by the data and methodology adopted. After that, the results are presented in Section 4, followed by the discussion and the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1. FWAs before and Post-COVID-19

Today, it is widely acknowledged that achieving a work–life balance is necessary for ensuring social sustainability. Rao [24] points out that the concept of work–life balance is an important component of the road map for sustainable human development. Work–life balance is considered an issue that might affect one's self-respect in the work environment, and at the same time, it might represent a sign of social development as balancing work and family to ensure a balanced life and the wellbeing of parents, which in turn has a favorable impact on the care of children.

Throughout the literature, it has been discussed that flexible working arrangements can be temporal or spatial [25]. Work arrangements might be displaced by a shift in schedules, the number of hours worked overall, and/or one's place of work [26].

Numerous studies have reviewed the true impact that flexible working arrangements have on society and, more specifically, on our everyday lives, such as [12,27–29]. Grant et al. [12] trust that online work has performed an important role in overcoming challenges to guarantee a work–life balance in several institutions to attract and retain employees. This has been very helpful for workers who need flexible work arrangements due to family concerns. Even though special work arrangements through online work have provided some employees with flexibility in managing their lives, several studies, such as that from Hilbrecht [29], have shown that flexible working arrangements negatively impact work–life balance, as employees spend their time dealing with children's care and online work tasks simultaneously, which results in reducing their leisure time and, therefore, their wellbeing.

A similar study by Shirmohammadi [8] analyzed 40 empirical studies that examined FWAs and work–life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 to August 2021. The authors used the person–environment fit theory to highlight the mismatch between the expectations and realities of flexible working arrangements. They shed light on four themes representing the contrast between desirable expectations (flextime, flex place, technologically feasible, family friendly) and undesirable experiences (work intensity, space limitation, technostress and isolation, housework, and care intensity) of flexible

working arrangements. The authors propose that in order to find a balance between work and employee wellbeing, policymakers may favor remote employment.

Multiple studies on the impact of adopting FWAs on different aspects, such as employees' productivity, wellbeing, burnout, and stress, have been conducted before and post-COVID-19 [13,30–32]. Almer and Kaplan [30] conducted a study in the US to examine the impact that flexible working arrangements had on employees' wellbeing. The study examined flexible workers and non-flexible workers in a public accounting firm and concluded that workers in flexible organizations enjoy greater wellbeing and lower turnover rates than those in standard work organizations. Employees working under flexible working arrangements generally had lower levels of burnout and stressors. The study also found that workers who switched to flexible work environments reported considerable increases in wellbeing, decreased intentions to leave their current positions, and some declines in burnout and stress.

A similar study was conducted in Namibia that focused on the higher education sector and examined the opinions of students and faculty members on the use of flexible working arrangements to explore whether flexible working improved or decreased staff productivity. A total of 253 people were surveyed to obtain their thoughts on how flexible working could be used to ensure an optimization of space, lower property-related costs, and boosted employee productivity. The study revealed that a unified institutional policy is necessary for the successful implementation of FWAs [13].

By looking at the potential drivers that might influence the successful implementation of FWAs, Atiku et al. [11] studied the impact of FWAs adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic in selected African countries on employees' productivity. They used a quantitative technique as the research method and found that the increase in productivity after implementing FWAs was mainly driven by two factors, namely, employers' support and a boost in IT. The authors argue that employers' support, security precautions, and technical help or knowledge offered by head management all play a substantial role in the viability of FWAs.

2.2. FWAs for Women's Work in the Arab Region

The impact of FWAs on workers in general and on women, in particular, is an interesting research question. In fact, due to some gender stereotypes and traditional norms, women in the Arab world generally have difficulty finding work [33,34]. According to Bahudhailah [35], women in Arabian society are typically responsible for taking care of their families and may choose to abandon their jobs to do so. Therefore, achieving a life–work balance for women in the Arab region is a very sensitive issue. Similarly, Din et al. [19] claim that there are three typical stages to women's career development, each of which is punctuated by specific disruptions. Motherhood, marital status, and other factors have an impact on women's careers. Marital status, childbirth, and childcare are circumstances that can cause a career to be interrupted in the mid-level job stage. Women frequently choose workplace flexibility or career breaks to care for a partner and grandchildren throughout the late-level work period. Women's opportunities are limited as a result of the frequent interruptions to their employment, which are often caused by a cultural acceptance of and ideas about the place of women in society [33,36]. Multiple studies have found that flexible working arrangements are an alternative for women with childcare duties to manage the conflicting responsibilities of home and work, and it may be the best career option, especially with the advancement of technology and the internet [15,18,37–39].

Roy et al. [9] analyzed survey data from 120 respondents and concluded that there is no difference in the perspectives of both genders when it comes to providing better care and support for their families when they work from home. According to the report, 87% of women were more inventive and creative when they worked from home. FWAs ensure a better work–family balance.

Not all past studies support the need for adopting FWAs in different workplaces as they explore the benefits of FWAs on women's work–life balance and wellbeing. Multiple studies

have focused on and discussed the negative impact of experiencing FWAs involuntarily during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study by Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir [40] is one example. They employed a diary entry method to conduct a study in Iceland during COVID-19, which aimed to explore the impact of COVID-19 on women's work-life balance. The study found that during the pandemic, women's wellbeing was negatively affected, as women felt that they were under pressure, and during the pandemic, they engaged in much more mental effort than usual. This may lead to prioritizing family over work, which negatively affects social sustainability.

Similarly, Dean et al. [41] showed that COVID-19 increased the mental load related to the cognitive and emotional labor of family life, which frequently falls disproportionately on women. However, they emphasized the need for considering the importance of this mental load on women's lives and the need for implementing new policies in workplaces that adopt more FWAs to increase the wellbeing of women. Unlike Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir [40], Dean et al. [41] emphasized that the FWAs can be a solution that could improve women's wellbeing if implemented correctly by employers.

In the higher education sector, recently, Alfarran [42] has focused on exploring the opportunities and challenges that women have faced after changing their working style during COVID-19 in one Saudi university. The study used semi-structured interviews to explore the opportunities and challenges that female faculty members faced when they worked remotely during the pandemic. Interestingly, the study found that the majority of the respondents preferred to work in mixed locations in the future, as this type of FWA helps them to increase productivity and improve their work-life balance.

Over the past years, most of the ongoing investigations have taken a fascinating turn. Researchers have chosen quantitative methods over qualitative ones when examining the cultural values and perceptions of FWAs. Further, research that employs qualitative methods to examine FWAs does not pay attention to gender differences or consider specific sectors. Therefore, the current study aims to fill this gap by employing a mixed method that combines a choice modeling method, one sample *t*-test, one paired sample *t*-test, cluster analysis, and probit models to examine the preferences of female faculty members towards FWAs in the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia and the impact of adopting FWAs on women's social sustainability.

3. Hypotheses, Data, and Methodology

3.1. Hypotheses

Our research hypotheses explore the impact of different forms of FWAs during the COVID-19 pandemic on the aspects of teaching and job preferences of female faculty members and their wellbeing. Therefore, the research hypotheses could be written as the following:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Female faculty members prefer flexibility in location rather than flexibility in time.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Motivational factors impact the job preferences of female faculty.*

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *FWAs ensure a lifelong learning process and improve faculty wellbeing.*

3.2. Participants, Procedure, and Measures

The data used in the current study were obtained from an online survey that was generated in order to achieve the study's objectives. The survey was designed to include three main sections. The first section focused on gathering information on female faculty members' preferences toward future FWAs by employing choice modeling techniques. Three FWA options were displayed, and the respondents were asked to rate each option independently on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 meaning the option was not preferred, and 10 meaning the option was perfect. The second section of the survey aimed to reveal the motivational factors that may influence FWA preferences. Using a Likert scale from 1 to 5, respondents were asked to state whether they agreed or disagreed with multiple statements

to examine the factors that affect their choice of FWAs. The final section of the questionnaire was designed to collect demographic information.

Since the current study focuses on revealing the preferences of female faculty members and ensured that the online survey was filled out only by female faculty members, PNU was chosen for the study. Female faculty members who had already involuntarily experienced flexible working arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic were the target audience of the questionnaire.

During the academic year 2021–2022, invitations were sent via email to all 2142 PNU female faculty members, inviting them to respond to an online survey. It took about 15 min to complete all sections. The participants were told that their participation was totally voluntary. Prior to sending the survey via email, two steps were taken. First, the questionnaire was tested on 10 faculty members, and slight changes were made based on the received feedback. Then, the survey was authorized by the Institutional Review Board at PNU.

For the analysis of the study, only completed responses were considered. A total of 59 completed responses were received and deemed a representative sample size of all PNU faculty. Calculating the sample size is crucial in statistics to draw conclusions about a population. In practice, the expense of data collection and the requirement for adequate statistical power determine the sample size that is utilized in a study. Table 1 shows that 59 responses are considered a representative sample for a population size of 2142, with a confidence level of 90% and a margin of error between 10% and 11%.

Table 1. Sample size.

Sample Size Justification	66	55
Confidence Level	90%	90%
Margin of Error	10%	11%
Population Proportion	50%	50%
Population Size (PNU-faculty members)	2142	2142

Source: Authors' calculations.

After defining the sample size, we present the key socioeconomic and demographic features of the sample in Table 2. Saudi people made up more than 69% of the respondents. Most of the sample participants were between 31 and 40 years old. About half of the sample had more than two children.

Table 2. Demographic and socio-economic statistics.

	Frequency	%
Nationality		
Saudi	41	69.5
Non-Saudi	18	30.5
Age		
≤30 years old	3	5.1
31–40 years old	35	59.3
41–50 years old	18	30.5
51–60 years old	3	5.1
Academic rank		
Professor	2	3.4
Associate professor (faculty members with Ph.D. degrees—mid-level professor)	8	13.6
Assistant Professor (faculty members with Ph.D. degrees—beginning-level professor)	28	47.5
Lecturer (faculty members with Master's degrees)	12	20.3
Teaching Assistant (faculty members with Bachelor's degrees)	9	15.3

Table 2. Cont.

	Frequency	%
Years of Experience		
≤5	12	20.3
6–15 years	34	57.6
More than 15 years	13	22
Children		
None	13	22
One child	6	10.2
Two children	10	16.9
More than two	30	50.9

Source: Authors' calculations using SPSS 24.0 software.

3.3. Methodology

According to Johnson et al. [43], it is possible to choose a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed approach in sensitive studies. The present study used mixed methods of research, combining a choice modeling method, one sample *t*-test, one paired sample *t*-test, cluster analysis, and probit models to achieve its objectives.

3.3.1. Choice Modeling

Choice modeling (CM) or conjoint analysis is one of the methods used in the economic valuation of multiple goods and services. Although it is generally employed in market research to estimate how much consumers are willing to pay for a particular good or service [44,45], it has recently been used in labor economics and working arrangement literature. The CM approach was used in numerous studies to reveal how employees in different sectors value different working features such as location, flexible time, and salary, as well as the issues that influence their choices [20,22,46,47].

The CM technique is employed by generating hypothetical options, where each option should have multiple attributes and levels, and the respondents should choose their preferred option. CM can have different forms, such as choice experiment, contingent ranking, and contingent rating. In the choice experiments, respondents are asked to choose between two options, whereas in the contingent rating, respondents are asked to rate each option independently on a scale of 1–10, where a higher number indicates a higher preference [48].

Since the current study aimed to explore which aspect of flexibility is preferred by female faculty members, three hypothetical, formal FWA options were generated with different attributes and levels. In order to make it easy for the faculty members to choose, and in order to reduce the number of tasks, only two attributes were included in the survey, which were flexibility in time and flexibility in location. Each one of the attributes had two levels, indicating examples of flexibility. Table 3 shows the attributes and their corresponding levels. After that, four alternatives were manually generated. However, one option was excluded, which was working for five days from university, as it does not reflect the forms of flexibility that the study focuses on. Therefore, three generated options were included in the study. Table 4 summarizes the alternatives used in the survey. All the created options were presented to the respondents in the first section of the survey, and they were asked to rate each option independently on a scale from 1 to 10 (see Appendix A). After that, the part-worth utility was estimated to explore which aspect of flexibility was preferred by female faculty members.

Table 3. Attributes and their corresponding levels.

Attribute	Level	
	1	2
Number of days	4 days a week	5 days a week
Location	Traditional (University)	Mixed (University and home)

Table 4. Alternatives.

Options	Details
Option 1	Four days and traditional work
Option 2	Four days and mixed locations
Option 3	Five days and mixed location

3.3.2. Tests, Clustering, and Probit Models

In addition to the CM, a paired sample test was employed to confirm the favored option chosen by the faculty members. For exploring the motivation factors impacting job preferences, one sample *t*-test, a paired sample test, and clustering were implemented. Finally, a probit model was generated to identify the association between demographic and socio-economic variables, job preferences, and wellbeing.

In the initial stage, the current study used the SPSS statistical program. Descriptive and inferential statistical analysis was used to assess the data and test the hypotheses. The following statistical techniques were employed:

- Mean: to identify to what extent the responses to statements are the main dimensions of the study.
- Standard deviation: shows how much variation or dispersion exists from the average (mean) or expected value; the closer the values are to zero, the more responses are centered and dispersion decreases.
- One sample *t*-test: to determine whether the sample mean is statistically different from a known or hypothesized population mean.
- Paired sample *t*-test results: to test the statistically significant differences between two means, it is a statistical procedure used to determine whether the mean difference between two sets of observations is zero.

Then, the study implemented a mixed classification method combining the K-means method and hierarchical ascending classification based essentially on motivational factors. This method allowed us to explore the sample motivation stratification and to identify whether subsamples exist.

Finally, the study employed an econometric technique by estimating probit models that produce predictions of probabilities. The models aim to compare the current wellbeing (post-COVID-19 period) and last year's wellbeing (during the COVID-19 period) by considering the sample motivation stratification and other socio-demographic factors.

4. Results

To understand which attribute is the most valuable to the female faculty members when evaluating each profile and which is the most important level, the part-worth utility was estimated using the ordinary least-squares regression model (OLS). Table 5 represents the part-worth utility for all attributes and their corresponding levels. It could be noticed that flexibility in location plays a significant role in the decisions made by female faculty members about future working arrangements. The importance of flexibility in location scored 96%. On the other hand, working four or five days a week did not affect mainly female faculty members' preferences. Furthermore, allowing for location flexibility was preferred by female faculty members, because doing so greatly increases the utility gained by female faculty members by 0.762.

Table 5. Contribution of all attributes to the total utility.

Attribute	Level	Part-Worth Utility	Relative Importance
Number of days	4 days	−0.025	3.22%
	5 days	0.025	
Location	Traditional (University)	−0.762 ***	96.78%
	Mixed (University and home)	0.762 ***	
Constant		5.55 ***	

Source: Authors' calculations using JMP software (JMP Pro 16). Levels of statistical significance: *** $p < 0.001$.

The findings of the paired sample test and correlation coefficient analysis for the FWAs preferred by faculty members are presented in Table 6. The analysis shows that Pair 1 (option 1 and option 2) and Pair 2 (option 1 and option 3) have statistically significant differences, with a p -value less than 0.05. These findings support the preference for a diverse work environment over fixed working arrangements (working solely from the university). The correlation coefficients show that options with the same number of days and options with the same type of work location have weak correlations. Based on these findings, we can confirm that female faculty members' decisions concerning their future working arrangements are heavily influenced by their ability to choose their work location more than the number of working days per week.

Table 6. Paired sample t -test—exploring working arrangement preferences.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	Sig. (2-Tailed)	Correlation (Significant)
Pair 1 Option 1—Option 2	−1.5254	3.6923	0.4807	−3.173	0.002	0.307 (0.018)
Pair 2 Option 1—Option 3	−1.5763	4.1862	0.5450	−2.892	0.005	0.066 (0.618)
Pair 3 Option 2—Option 3	−0.0508	3.3959	0.4421	−0.115	0.909	0.330 (0.011)

Source: Authors' calculations using SPSS 24.0 software.

A refinement of the analysis was then performed, and additional variables related to job working preferences were examined. For each item, the average mean, standard deviation, and one-sample t -test are reported in Table 7. The average mean shows the range of responses to the question, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). At a 95% confidence level, all p -values are less than 0.01. The average mean scores, which ranged from 3.305 to 4.034, exhibit strong and nearly identical levels of agreement. The factors are listed in decreasing order. "Finish the teaching task more efficiently" occupies the first position (4.034), and "increase work voluntary" takes the last position (3.305).

Table 7. One sample t -test—examining the motivation factors impacting the job preferences.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T	Sig. (2-Tailed)
To finish my teaching task more efficiently	4.034	0.8298	0.108	37.342	0.000
To achieve more in research	3.932	0.7849	0.1022	38.483	0.000
To finish my administrative tasks more efficiently	3.831	0.8935	0.1163	32.929	0.000
To achieve a higher level of lifelong learning and develop new skills	3.729	0.9619	0.1252	29.777	0.000
To have more time with family and friends	3.593	1.1762	0.1531	23.466	0.000
To spend more time on hobbies	3.525	0.9888	0.1287	27.385	0.000
To increase work voluntary	3.305	1.0708	0.1394	23.707	0.000

Source: Authors' calculations using SPSS 24.0 software.

By employing clustering techniques, the study proposes to improve the identification and characterization of motivational factors. Two distinct profiles depending on faculty roles and duties were discovered. Both profiles aimed to maintain a balance between administration, research, and teaching tasks. A major difference between Group (1) and Group (2) is that in Group (1), 75% of the sample prioritized lifelong learning and developing new skills (65.90%), whereas in Group (2), 25% of respondents believed that lifelong learning and developing new skills were less relevant (53.30%). Facilitated by reducing costs and benefiting from technology, the two primary forces behind these changes may be regarded as the acquisition of new skills and a commitment to lifelong learning (Table 8).

Table 8. Clustering is based on motivational factors.

	Cluster 1 (75%)			Cluster 2 (25%)		
	Importance	Most Frequent Category	%	Importance	Most Frequent Category	%
Finish administrative tasks more efficiently	1	4	65.90%	1	5	80%
Finish teaching tasks more efficiently	0.8	4	63.60%	0.8	5	73.30%
Achieve more in research activities	0.49	4	63.60%	0.49	5	66.70%
Increase work voluntary	0.47	4	40.90%	0.47	5	46.70%
Spend more time on hobbies	0.43	4	54.50%		5	46.70%
Lifelong learning and developing new skills	0.43	4	65.90%	0.43	5	53.30%
More time with family and friends	0.26	4	47.70%	0.26	5	46.7

Source: Authors' calculations using SPSS 24.0 software.

The results in Table 9 show how different variables can affect female faculty members' wellbeing using a probit model. Interestingly, the experience of working in mixed locations had a positive and significant effect on employees' wellbeing post-COVID-19 lockdown for all the sample and for cluster 1, at 1.20553 * and 1.46613 *, respectively, whereas the effect was insignificant during the COVID-19 period for both samples. Moreover, the distance between home and university had a positive impact on the wellbeing of cluster 1 during the pandemic. This means that female faculty who focus on the development of new skills and lifelong learning consider the time they spend going to work to be a waste, as it could instead be spent learning and developing new skills when they work under FWAs and can complete their work from home.

Table 9. Probit regressions.

All Sample	Model 1 Current Wellbeing	Model 2 Last Year's Wellbeing
Nationality	−0.840247 (0.77)	−0.347686 (0.73)
Age ≥ 30	16.4964 *** (0.80)	2.62529 * (1.38)
Faculty members with Ph.D. degrees	−1.07888 * (0.56)	−0.981435 (0.64)
FWAs	1.20553 * (0.63)	−0.177323 (1.004)
More than 10 km distance from home	0.0557287 (0.55)	0.708157 (0.58)
Cluster 1	Model 1 Current well-being	Model 2 Last year's well-being
Nationality	−0.746621 (0.96)	−0.964851 (0.90)
Age ≥ 30	13.8517 *** (1.32)	12.3603 *** (1.66)
Faculty members with Ph.D. degrees	−1.13615 * (0.60)	−1.54816 ** (0.70)
FWAs	1.46613 * (0.76)	1.41063 (1.130)
More than 10 km distance from home	0.364636 (0.64)	1.71177 *** (0.64)

Source: Authors' calculations using GRTEL software (GRTEL 2022c). Levels of statistical significance: *** $p < 0.001$. ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

5. Discussion

5.1. Flexible Working Arrangements: Time or Location

It was found that female faculty members value flexibility and tend to prefer working in mixed locations over working from the university for all working days. These results could be explained by the fact that during the COVID-19 pandemic, all faculty members

involuntary experienced special working arrangements in which they either worked fully remotely or in mixed locations during the academic years of 2020–2021 and 2021–2022. Practical experience could be the reason behind the preference for flexibility in location. As women are usually expected to have other obligations, especially if they are expected to take care of children, they preferred working under FWAs that allow them to work in mixed locations. The obtained result is similar to Alfarran's results [42], which found that women preferred to work in mixed locations in the future, as this allows them to improve themselves and increase their work–life balance, and the findings of Roy et al. [9] that women are more productive when they work from home.

It should be noted, however, that not only would women employees prefer flexibility in location. Further, Berkery et al. [32] argue that generally, employees would welcome flexibility in location, as it serves their needs, and at the same time, it benefits firms by increasing the productivity of workers. However, it could be argued that females would prefer flexibility in a location more than their male colleagues, as it might help them with their daily responsibilities. Valet et al. [49] found that if flexibility is compared to other job attributes, flexibility is strongly preferred by females more than males.

On the other hand, it has been found that the option of working fewer days a week does not significantly affect female faculty members' preferences. This could be explained by the fact that, first, to our knowledge, no sector in KSA has officially adopted the four-day work week. Therefore, female employees and female faculty members, in particular, have not previously experienced working fewer days a week. Second, since the total working hours a week is the same in both frames and is not reduced in the four-day work week, female faculty members might prefer working more days a week with reasonable working hours in a day instead of working fewer days with longer working hours each day. These results could be explained by the nature of women's daily life responsibilities. In order for working mothers to maintain a high level of work–life balance, it seems to be better for them not to work for long hours daily. This result goes in the same direction as Hjalmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir [40] and Dean et al. [41], who discuss the negative effect of the work flexibility experience during COVID-19 on women's life.

This means that not all types of FWAs are equally preferred by female faculty members, and they might prefer certain types of flexibility that they believe will positively impact their work–life balance and improve their wellbeing. Having said this, the result of FWA preferences can verify Hypothesis 1 (H1) of the research. Therefore, we do not reject the hypothesis that female faculty members prefer flexibility in location rather than flexibility in time.

5.2. Drivers of Working Arrangement Preferences

One of the study objectives was to examine the motivational factors that influence female faculty members' job preferences. It seems that the responses toward motivations may differ even among employees within the same institution. As the study shows, 75% of the respondents were keen to develop new skills and continue in lifelong learning, whereas only 25% of the respondents were looking for job preferences that would help them to finish their required jobs more efficiently. This result implies that designing the right FWAs should be performed based on the characteristics of the institutional employees in order to ensure a high level of work–life balance and achieve social sustainability. A similar recommendation has been emphasized by Shockley and Allen [31], who focused on flexibility at universities and found that faculty members' motivations for choosing specific FWAs were driven by multiple factors such as age, family matters, etc. Although Shockley and Allen [31] did not focus only on women in their study, the current study does and finds similar results. Relying on this result, we can say that our Hypothesis 2 (H2) is valid, and that motivational factors impact the job preferences of female faculty.

5.3. FWAs, Lifelong Learning, and Wellbeing

Through this research, the paper aims to bring to light some insights into social sustainability in terms of human resources organization by evaluating the impact of flexible work arrangements on mental health and wellbeing. Increasing awareness of lifelong learning practices in the higher education sector post-COVID-19 is crucial, since it is anticipated that multiple workplaces will change by adopting different FWAs once the pandemic ends [50].

It was found that the experience of FWAs during the last two academic years had a positive and significant impact on the wellbeing of all respondents during the academic year of 2021–2022, whereas it did not have a significant impact on the wellbeing of all respondents during the academic year of 2020–2021. This could be explained by the fact that FWAs that were adopted during the academic year of 2020–2021 were mandated as part of public health and social measures in response to the COVID-19 epidemic, which could have conflicted with female faculty members' preferences. For academic staff, working remotely can also be stressful for their mental and emotional wellbeing. If the faculty are expected to work on computers all day to finish their lectures and administrative tasks, they might suffer from loneliness and miss having face-to-face conversations with others. Given these considerations, it is not surprising that productivity and overall wellbeing would be negatively impacted. This is not a surprising result. Afota et al. [51] obtained similar results that working from home during COVID-19 reduced the productivity and wellbeing of workers, as they worked all day and missed having face-to-face conversations.

However, after the lockdown, the academic staff changed their perception of flexible working arrangements, as they could now use these as a tool to help them record their lectures for students and finish their administrative tasks from home or from the office. This can be advantageous for social and mental wellbeing when planned and executed appropriately. It can enhance work–life balance, reduce travel time, and provide possibilities for flexible work arrangements to allow female faculty members to expand their knowledge in some other subjects (lifelong learning), all of which may enhance social and mental wellbeing.

Moreover, it has been found that female faculty who focus on the development of new skills and lifelong learning consider the time they spend going to work to be a waste. These hours could instead be spent learning and developing new skills when faculty work under FWAs and can complete their work from home. In fact, flexible working arrangements can save time for faculty members and help them to be engaged in new challenges to improve themselves and strengthen their abilities and personal resources. This result goes in the same direction as the first result of this study that working in mixed locations is preferred by female faculty members. Working in mixed locations not only helps women in their daily responsibilities but may also save them time, which may positively affect lifelong learning and help female faculty members to develop new skills. According to Michalos [52], formal working conditions for the education sector seem to have little impact on wellbeing, yet when non-formal and informal education (lifelong learning) are considered, they do have an impact. Therefore, based on our findings, we can prove the validity of Hypothesis 3 (H3) that FWAs ensure a lifelong learning process and faculty's current wellbeing.

6. Conclusions

To ensure that FWAs research remains relevant after the COVID-19 pandemic, this study contributes to promoting research within the context of the larger pandemic and pre-pandemic literature. It has aimed to focus on FWAs and investigate the preferences of higher education female faculty members for future work–time arrangements in a post-COVID-19 world. The study employed mixed methods in order to reveal faculty members' preferences toward FWAs and to examine the motivational factors that influence female faculty members' job preferences.

It has been found that flexibility in location plays a significant role in the decisions made by female faculty members, whereas flexibility in time does not play a significant

role in the decisions made by the same respondents. Further, it has been found that lifelong learning and developing new skills were the main motivations for 75% of the respondents. Finally, the results revealed that for 75% of the sample, the distance between home and work location significantly and positively affected female faculty members' wellbeing during the pandemic. All obtained results have been discussed in the previous section.

FWAs allow working women the opportunity to be more effective and productive, develop personally, achieve a better work–life balance, and improve their technological abilities. This result supports the claims made by several studies [18,37,38,53] that a flexible working process can improve workers' performance and productivity, because there are fewer distractions, a quieter work environment, a better life–work balance, and reduced travel time.

It could be argued that the different forms of FWAs experienced by working women in Saudi Arabia in the education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic were useful and positively impacted future job preferences. The academic job includes multiple tasks that might be performed outside the workplace. Therefore, implementing FWAs that include working in mixed locations could be suitable for women in higher education. This finding is consistent with earlier studies that found virtual work to be suitable for a variety of jobs [37,38], and it suggests implementing flexible working arrangements in Saudi universities [53].

Having said this, the current study emphasizes the recommendation of Alhareth et al. [54] that action has to be taken to empower working women to work in mixed locations. Although working fully remotely might not be effective, working in mixed locations might be suitable for higher education sectors, and as seen in the current study, this is preferred by female faculty members. However, it is important to note that the benefits of FWAs are not limited to women and can transcend gender, as they have the potential to boost everyone's productivity and self-development, promote work–life balance, and advance technological abilities.

Further, the current study suggests that the government and employers should implement different types of FWAs that are believed to serve the needs of employees and not negatively impact their productivity. As this study focuses on female faculty members in the higher education sector, it finds that flexibility in location could better serve the female faculty members and increase their wellbeing.

Although this study has several theoretical and managerial implications, some limitations should be highlighted. First, the sample that was considered was heterogeneous in terms of experience, age, gender, and the number of children, and as a result, FWAs may have varying effects on people's wellbeing. These control variables should be further investigated in future research to provide greater insight into how FWAs might affect academic satisfaction and wellbeing. The current study focuses only on female faculty members, as they are more exposed to issues in work–life balance. Potential future research may consider all education stakeholders, including faculty members, students, and staff. Further, it was beyond the scope of the research objective to examine the differences in FWAs taking into consideration their monetary value. Future research may consider FWA differences in the context of changing salaries. Finally, future research may consider motivating the respondents to participate in future investigations.

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Appendix A

The First Part of the Survey—Conjoint Tasks

Table A1. Option 1: Please evaluate the following timetable, which represents four working days (orange color means working on campus) 100% on site.

Days	8:00	Break	13:00	16:00
	12:00		16:00	18:00
Monday	On campus		On campus	
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday	Weekend			
Saturday				
Sunday				

I do not prefer this at all It is perfect.

Table A2. Option 2: Please evaluate the following timetable, which represents four working days, and the work is flexible (the orange color means working on site, and the green color means flexible working arrangements), with 80% on site and 20% remote.

Days	8:00	Break	13:00	16:00
	12:00		16:00	18:00
Monday	On campus		On campus	FWAs Online for all (students and staff) Research, online courses . . .
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday	Weekend			
Saturday				
Sunday				

I do not prefer this at all It is perfect.

Table A3. Option 3: Please evaluate the following timetable, which represents four working days, and the work is flexible (the orange color means working on site, and the green color means flexible working arrangements), with 80% on site and 20% remote.

Days	8:00	Break	13:00	16:00
	12:00		16:00	18:00
Sunday	FWAs Online for all (students and staff) Research, online courses ...		FWAs Online for all (students and staff) Research, online courses ...	
Monday	On campus		On campus	
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday	Weekend			
Saturday				

I do not prefer this at all It is perfect.

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