



# Extension request avoidance predicts greater time stress among women

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**In nine studies using archival data, surveys, and experiments, we identify a factor that predicts gender differences in time stress and burnout. Across academic and professional settings, women are less likely to ask for more time when working under adjustable deadlines (studies 1 to 4a). Women’s discomfort in asking for more time on adjustable deadlines uniquely predicts time stress and burnout, controlling for marital status, industry, tenure, and delegation preferences (study 1). Women are less likely to ask for more time to complete their tasks because they hold stronger beliefs that they will be penalized for these requests and worry more about burdening others (studies 1 to 2d). We find no evidence that women are judged more harshly than men (study 3). We also document a simple organizational intervention: formal processes for requesting deadline extensions reduce gender differences in asking for more time (studies 4a to 5).**

gender | burnout | well-being | workplace practices | time stress

A large body of research suggests that women experience greater time stress than men: they are more likely to feel like they have too many things to do and not enough time to do them (1). Worldwide, working women report feeling more rushed than men (2, 3) and experience greater stress and anxiety (4, 5). Given the close association between time stress and burnout (6), depression (5), and poor work performance (7), this gender difference in time stress can have implications for gender disparities in work-relevant success and subjective well-being (4, 8, 9).

Research shows that gender differences in experienced time stress is partially driven by women having more work than men. At home, working women in heterosexual marriages in the United States are the primary managers of domestic life and childcare, completing an average of 8 more hours of chores and childcare each week as compared to men (10–12). During the pandemic, this gender difference has increased substantially, with working women worldwide completing an average of 5 additional hours of chores and childcare per week than working men (13).

At work, women take on more activities outside of formally defined responsibilities (14), both voluntarily and due to more frequent requests (15). Women have a harder time delegating work tasks to others than men (16). As a result, women end up with a greater task load relative to men, which contributes to the feeling of having too many things to do and not enough time.

The time stress that employed adults experience at work also results from tight deadlines (17, 18). Some deadlines are strict: once an original deadline has passed, taking any action related to the task is impossible or costly. However, many everyday work tasks are subordinate tasks: smaller actions that must be completed to achieve a larger goal (19), which are less likely to incur deadline adjustment costs. For example, a supervisor may ask an employee to submit an initial draft of a proposal for an event that is happening next month by the end of this week, to build in time to edit and revise the proposal before the final deadline. Initial research suggests that asking for more time on adjustable deadlines at work can reduce feelings of time stress

(20). Given the volume of tasks that women disproportionately juggle, requests to extend deadlines—especially deadlines that are explicitly adjustable and relatively costless—could be an unexplored and useful strategy for reducing time stress among working women.

In particular, encouraging women to ask for more time could impact their subjective experience of time constraints. Perceived resource scarcity is not only impacted by objective reality, but also by the extent to which people feel control over their current and future resources (21, 22). Most relevant to the present investigation, the feeling of being rushed is often a better predictor of stress, well-being, and work outcomes than the objective amount of time that is available to complete one’s tasks (23). Together, this research suggests that the comfort people feel about asking for more time could reduce their feelings of time scarcity, in turn impacting stress and subjective well-being. To the extent that women feel less comfortable asking for more time, women should also report higher levels of stress and lower levels of well-being.

We propose that women could be especially likely to avoid requesting extensions due to heightened interpersonal concerns. Women tend to be more relationally oriented and sensitive to the needs of other people as compared to men (24, 25). Women often endorse more relationally oriented traits, such as sacrificing their own needs to attend to the needs of others, both voluntarily and in response to social pressure (13, 14, 26). Relationally oriented individuals tend to be more attuned to

## Significance

**Time stress—the feeling of having too many things to do and not enough time to do them—is a societal epidemic that compromises productivity, physical health, and emotional well-being. Past research shows that women experience disproportionately greater time stress than men and has illuminated a variety of contributing factors. Across nine studies, we identify a previously unexplored predictor of this gender difference. Women avoid asking for more time to complete work tasks, even when deadlines are explicitly adjustable, undermining their well-being and task performance. We shed light on a possible solution: the implementation of formal policies to facilitate deadline extension requests. These findings advance our understanding of the gendered experience of time stress and provide a scalable organizational intervention.**

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**Table 1. Sample characteristics by study**

	Study 1	Study 2a	Study 2b	Study 2c	Study 2d	Study 3	Study 4a	Study 4b	Study 5
<i>n</i>	575	651	599	600	596	872	103	767	975
Sample source	Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk).	Panel service Qualtrics	MTurk	MTurk	MTurk	MTurk	United States Undergrads	United States Undergrads	United States Undergrads
% Female	42.1	51.8	44.7	47.5	48.5	44.2	57.28	57.3	60.7
Age	35.80 (SD = 9.65)	43.60 (SD = 12.60)	37.42 (SD = 9.94)	38.13 (SD = 11.23)	40.50 (SD = 11.00)	37.50 (SD = 10.21)	—	—	22.00 (SD = 4.11)

social costs, which can deter such individuals from requesting additional resources, such as monetary compensation (27, 28). We predict that women’s greater relational orientation may be linked to greater concern about impression costs, such as appearing as a less competent and committed worker, as well as greater interpersonal concerns related to burdening other people with their requests (29). Due to these concerns, women should be less willing to make extension requests than men, even on deadlines that are explicitly adjustable.

We further propose a means to alleviate women’s discomfort toward making extension requests at work: introducing formal policies for requesting an extension. Prior research finds evidence that women perceive greater social costs for initiating salary negotiations than men when norms about making these requests are ambiguous (30). Yet, removing ambiguity can reduce gender differences in negotiation contexts. For example, in one field experiment with 2,500 job-seekers, women were equally likely to negotiate their salary as men when the job posting mentioned an explicit policy about wage negotiations (31). Building on this research, we propose that reducing ambiguity about whether or not asking for an extension is an acceptable behavior by establishing a formal policy around extension requests could mitigate the proposed gender differences in asking for more time on adjustable deadlines at work.

Overall, women’s greater experience of time stress on a daily basis contributes to gender disparities in workplace success and personal well-being (2). In contrast to prior research, which has identified how gender differences contribute to women’s greater task load relative to men (e.g., refs. 14–16), the current research investigates a previously unstudied contributor to women’s experience of time stress at work: their reluctance to ask for more time, even on relatively costless and explicitly adjustable deadlines at work. While prior research has examined gender differences in the propensity to negotiate for financial compensation, little is known about when or why women may attempt to negotiate for more time. We propose that compared to men, women will feel less comfortable asking for more time, as they believe it will lead to greater interpersonal costs, affecting their task performance and well-being. It is possible that women might objectively incur greater costs for requesting an extension (30); however, we predict that these costs will be overestimated by women due to higher interpersonal sensitivity.

To explore these hypotheses, we conducted nine studies using a variety of methods, including two field studies, and we recruited a total of 5,738 working adults and students. See Table 1 for sample demographics. Across studies, we focused on deadlines that were explicitly adjustable and relatively costless: that is, the requests did not have immediate, obvious negative repercussions for the requestee or requester. This decision provided a conservative initial test of our research question; if women are less likely to ask for more time in these relatively costless contexts, they should also be unlikely to make costlier requests.

In study 1, we surveyed working adults to explore the existence and consequences of gender differences in comfort

toward requesting extensions on adjustable deadlines. In studies 2a to 2d, we investigated whether gender differences in perceived social costs (i.e., impression management concerns and concerns over burdening others) explained women’s lower willingness to request extensions on adjustable deadlines. In study 3, we examined whether women actually experience higher interpersonal costs. Finally, in studies 4a to 5, we tested whether formal organizational policies reduce gender differences in the willingness to request deadline extensions. Across studies, we explore how gender differences in attitudes toward extension requests shape the experience of time stress and task performance, identify the causes of these attitudes, and test a theoretically relevant intervention designed to promote a more equitable experience of adjusting work-relevant deadlines. Materials, data, and code for all studies are available on the Open Science Framework ([https://osf.io/6zdsw/?view\\_only=dd1053834cd346419d7f1691bcb36a54](https://osf.io/6zdsw/?view_only=dd1053834cd346419d7f1691bcb36a54)).

**Results**

**Study 1: Survey of Working Adults.** We first examined whether employed women felt less comfortable requesting deadline extensions on adjustable deadlines at work than men, and whether this difference significantly predicted women’s greater time stress and burnout, controlling for variables that could otherwise explain this relationship.

We recruited adults located in the United States who worked at least 21 h a week outside of the home (*n* = 575; 42.4% female). All respondents answered the question, “In general, how comfortable do you feel making extension requests for adjustable deadlines at work?” and reported their experience of time stress and burnout. In addition, respondents reported factors that could vary across gender and shape both time pressure and comfort with requesting deadline extensions, such as attitudes toward delegating tasks (16), industry, tenure, age, marital status, and race.

As predicted, women felt less comfortable making extension requests on adjustable deadlines at work,  $\beta = -0.19, P < 0.001$ , 95% confidence interval (CI) (−0.89, −0.35). Consistent with prior research (16), women felt less comfortable delegating tasks than men. Women had greater tenure in their workplaces, were older, and were more likely to be married compared to men. Women were also more likely to work in office and administrative support and less likely to work in computer and mathematical-based occupations (*SI Appendix, Table S3*). The gender difference in comfort with requesting extension requests held controlling for this key set of covariates (i.e., industry, tenure, age, marital status, race, and attitudes toward delegating tasks),  $\beta = -0.14, P < 0.001$ , 95% CI (−0.76, −0.20). As indicated by the CIs that crossed 0, our effect was not moderated by marital status,  $\beta = 0.05, P = 0.498$ , 95% CI (−0.36, 0.74) or job tenure,  $\beta = 0.02, P = 0.769$ , 95% CI (−0.04, 0.05). These results provide evidence for gender differences in comfort with requesting extensions that are not explained by gendered

\* See *SI Appendix* for the means, SDs, and correlations of all variables.

differences in related constructs, such as workplace industry, tenure, or comfort with delegating tasks.

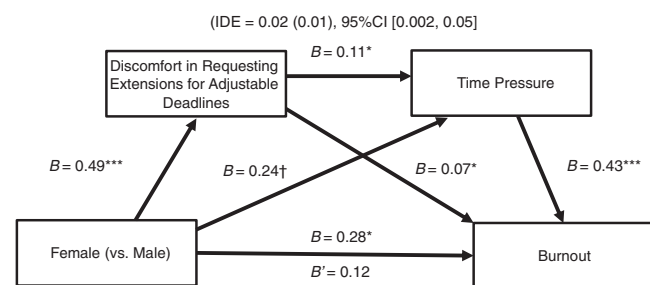
Consistent with prior research (4, 5), women reported feeling more time pressed compared to men, controlling for our set of key covariates,  $\beta = 0.12$ ,  $P = 0.011$ , 95% CI (0.09, 0.68). Consistent with prior research (4, 5), women also reported experiencing more burnout than men, controlling for our set of key covariates,  $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $P = 0.002$ , 95% CI (0.14, 0.61). A serial mediation analysis revealed that women's higher levels of burnout were partially explained by their greater experience of time pressure, which in turn was explained by their discomfort with requesting extensions for adjustable deadlines, 95% CI indirect effect (IDE) (0.002, 0.05) (Fig. 1).

There were no three-way interactions between gender, participants' sociodemographic characteristics (i.e., hours worked, marital status, job tenure, age), comfort requesting extensions on adjustable deadlines, and time stress or burnout ( $P_s \geq 0.241$ ). These findings provide initial evidence that comfort with making extension requests is a predictor of women's stress levels and subjective well-being, regardless of their sociodemographic background.

Together, the data in study 1 suggest that women feel less comfortable asking for extensions on adjustable deadlines at work, which predicts higher feelings of time pressure and burnout.

**Studies 2a to 2d: Simulated Workplace Interaction with a Supervisor.** In studies 2a to 2d, we explored why women feel less comfortable requesting deadline extensions, even on explicitly adjustable deadlines. Building on past research (19, 29), we examined whether women (vs. men) were more likely to believe that requesting a deadline extension affected their appearance as a competent and committed worker and were more likely to worry that they were burdening their colleagues with their requests.

Across studies 2a to 2d, participants imagined that they were assigned to submit a proposal for an upcoming event that was due the following day. They imagined that they were feeling highly pressed for time and could ask for an extension to their direct supervisor. Based on this imagined interaction, participants answered how comfortable they would feel requesting an extension in this situation. Participants rated six statements predicting how the extension request might impact their image as a competent and committed worker (e.g., "Asking for more time, relative to not asking, will make my supervisor see me as" using a scale ranging from  $-3$  [much less competent] to  $+3$  [much more competent]). We also measured participants' relational orientation using a validated scale that included items, such as "When making a decision, I take other people's needs and feelings into account" (25).



Note. All  $B$ s represent standardized regression coefficients obtained through bootstrapping using 5,000 resamples. The range in brackets represents the 95% CI of the indirect effect. †  $p < 0.10$ ; \*  $p < .050$ ; \*\*  $p < .010$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Fig. 1.** The effect of gender on time stress and burnout via comfort with requesting extensions (study 1).

It is possible that women's greater discomfort, in part, reflects women occupying lower status positions in their workplace (32, 33). To explore this possibility, in study 2b we measured men and women's comfort with requesting extensions to same-status colleagues (vs. higher-status supervisors) in a simulated work experience. It is also possible that the women in study 1 reported feeling less comfortable requesting extensions than men because many supervisors in the workplace tend to be men. People feel more comfortable making requests to targets who are similar to them (34). For example, employees are more likely to seek help from work colleagues of the same race (35, 36). Similarly, women may be equally willing as men to request an extension when their supervisor is a woman. To explore this possibility, in study 2c, we measured men's and women's comfort with requesting extensions from a male or female supervisor.

In study 2d, we clarified the precise nature of the interpersonal concerns that women experience. Building on prior research (29), we examined whether women's greater discomfort was primarily driven by competence concerns, fear of burdening other people (resulting in self-conscious emotions such as shame and guilt), or lower feelings of entitlement (37). We also explored whether our critical findings held controlling for additional job and task characteristics that could vary by gender, including differences in job control (38), hierarchical rank (39), and differences in self-perceived competence as a result of making a deadline extension request (40).

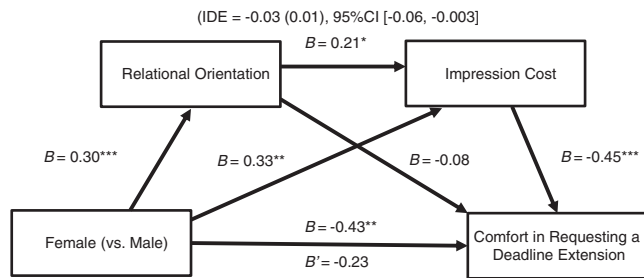
In study 2a, we recruited an online panel of employed adults located in the United States ( $n = 651$ ; 51.8% female) to complete the study procedures described above. Consistent with study 1, women felt less comfortable requesting an extension on an adjustable deadline than men,  $d = -0.23$ ,  $P = 0.004$ , 95% CI  $(-0.72, -0.14)$ . Yet, women perceived the deadline as equally adjustable and the extension as equally helpful (SI Appendix). Women's greater discomfort with requesting a deadline extension was robust controlling for our key covariates: tenure, age, and industry,  $\beta = -0.12$ ,  $P = 0.009$ , 95% CI  $(-0.78, -0.11)$ .

Women expected that requesting a deadline extension would result in greater impression costs toward being seen as a committed and competent worker,  $d = -0.26$ ,  $P = 0.001$ , 95% CI  $(-0.62, -0.16)$ . These impression concerns partially explained women's greater discomfort with requesting an extension, even after controlling for perceptions of deadline adjustability and the perceived helpfulness of receiving an extension. Including impression concerns as a mediator weakened the effect of gender on the level of comfort with adjusting deadlines (from  $B = -0.37$ ,  $P = 0.009$  to  $B = -0.26$ ,  $P = 0.056$ ). Bootstrap mediational analysis using 5,000 simulations confirmed that this indirect effect was significant, 95% CI IDE  $(-0.19, -0.04)$ .

Next, we explored whether women's relational orientation explained their perception of greater impression costs resulting from asking for more time. Consistent with prior research, women scored higher in relational orientation than men,  $d = 0.42$ ,  $P = 0.001$ , 95% CI  $(0.19, 0.41)$  (24, 25). A path analysis using bootstrap estimation revealed a significant serial mediation. Women's higher relational orientation partially explained their perception of greater impression costs relative to men (from  $B = 0.39$ ,  $P = 0.001$  to  $B = 0.33$ ,  $P = 0.006$ ), 95% CI IDE  $(0.04, 0.26)$ . Including the hypothesized serial mediation path of perceived impression costs via relational orientation significantly weakened the effect of gender on extension request comfort (from  $B = -0.43$ ,  $P = 0.004$  to  $B = -0.23$ ,  $P = 0.106$ ), 95% CI IDE  $(-0.06, -0.004)$ .

Overall, study 2a suggests that women—due to their greater relational orientation—hold stronger beliefs than men that requesting an extension will be costly for their image as a committed and competent worker. As a result, women feel less





Note. All *B*s represent unstandardized regression coefficients obtained through bootstrapping using 5,000 resamples. The range in brackets represents the 95% CI of the indirect effect. \**p* < .050; \*\**p* < .010; \*\*\**p* < .001

Fig. 2. The effect of gender on willingness to request an extension through impression cost and relational orientation (study 2a).

comfortable requesting extensions on adjustable deadlines at work as compared to men (Fig. 2). These findings held regardless of the lower vs. higher work status of the female employee (study 2b) or the gender of the manager (study 2c) (Fig. 3 and *SI Appendix*). Thus, women’s greater discomfort with requesting extensions in studies 1 and 2a were not likely driven by women occupying lower status positions in the workplace than men or disproportionately working with male supervisors. While informative, the results of studies 2a to 2c were unable to clarify the precise nature of women’s concerns. Perhaps women worried more about managers’ perceptions of their competence. Or, perhaps women worried more about what asking for time signaled to themselves about their own ability to do their job. It is also possible that women’s higher relational concerns could result in greater worry about burdening managers and team members (29). Because women take on more of the chores and childcare at home (1), it is also possible that asking for more time could create additional burdens for women themselves. To clarify the precise nature of women’s impression management and interpersonal concerns, we conducted an additional study to explore several potential mechanisms.

**Study 2d.** In study 2d, participants imagined the identical scenario from study 2a and reported on how comfortable they felt

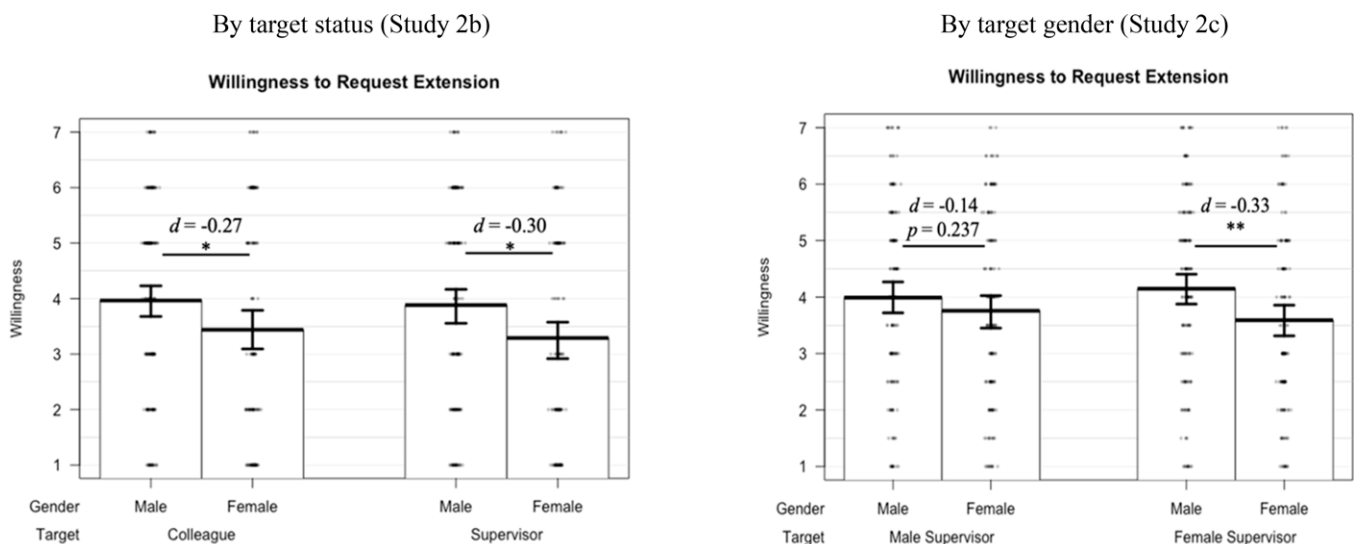
requesting an extension in this situation. To identify the precise nature of the concerns that women experienced when presented with the opportunity to ask for more time, all participants completed items measuring perceptions of manager beliefs of their competence, self-perceptions of competence, the burden of asking for more time (for colleagues and for oneself), and perceived entitlement about receiving a deadline extension.

To capture perceptions of manager judgments, participants completed statements about how asking for more time would shape manager perceptions of competence and commitment (e.g., “Asking for more time, relative to not asking, will make my manager think of me as competent, intelligent, capable, committed to my job, engaged in my job, motivated to do my job, able to handle the responsibilities of my job”) using a scale ranging from  $-3$  (much less) to  $+3$  (much more). To capture self-perceptions, participants completed the exact same items about themselves (e.g., “Asking for more time, relative to not asking, will make me think of myself as ...”) on the same scale.

To measure perceived burden, participants answered questions about whether they felt asking for an extension would let their team down, their manager down, burden their team, burden their manager, create additional stress for themselves, or make it difficult to balance personal responsibilities on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). Participants completed a two-item measure of perceived entitlement to receive an extension on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree). They also reported the extent to which asking for more time at work in this scenario would make them feel ashamed, guilty, and embarrassed.

Finally, participants completed job and task-relevant measures, including the decision latitude and psychological demands subscales of the job content questionnaire (38), a validated measure of hierarchical rank at work (39), a measure of whether their colleagues saw them as a competent worker, a measure of general feelings of entitlement (40), and a brief measure of job security (41). All measures were counterbalanced; order did not change the results.

Consistent with the results of studies 2a to 2c, women felt less comfortable requesting a deadline extension than men,  $d = -0.33$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , 95%  $(-0.85, -0.30)$ . Women’s greater discomfort with requesting a deadline extension held controlling for our expanded set of demographic, job, and task relevant



Note. Error bars indicate 95% confidence interval. \**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .10; \*\*\**p* < .001

Fig. 3. Men and women’s willingness to request an extension by target (studies 2b and 2c).

covariates (i.e., marital status, race, number of children living at home, industry, age, job tenure, household income, education, delegation comfort, number of direct reports, perceived job security, perceived job control, self-reported hierarchical rank at work) as well as participants' general feelings of entitlement and their overall perceptions that colleagues saw them as a competent worker,  $\beta = -0.13, P = 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } (-0.73, -0.18)$ .

Next, we explored the precise mechanisms that predicted gender differences in extension request discomfort (i.e., perceptions of managers' competence judgments, self-perceptions of competence, burden, and entitlement). A path analysis using bootstrap estimation revealed a significant serial mediation. Women's greater concern with being a burden partially explained their greater discomfort with asking for an extension (from  $B = 0.58, P = 0.001$  to  $B = 0.42, P = 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI IDE } (0.05, 0.29)$ ). Critically, when entering all of the proposed mechanisms into an indirect effect analysis to predict comfort with extension requests, only concerns about being a burden significantly explained the relationship between gender and extension request comfort,  $95\% \text{ CI IDE } (0.02, 0.16)$ . The CIs for all other variables crossed 0, demonstrating that these measures did not explain the relationship between gender and comfort with asking for more time (*SI Appendix*).

Delving into the perceived burden mechanism further, we explored the specific perceptions that predicted women's discomfort. In these analyses, concerns about burdening team members and managers explained women's discomfort with asking for more time, whereas concerns about creating additional stress for oneself and making it harder to balance other work and personal responsibilities did not (*SI Appendix*).

On an exploratory basis, consistent with prior research (29), we conducted a serial mediation analysis to examine the role of self-conscious emotions in explaining the observed link between burdening others and women's discomfort with asking for more time on adjustable deadlines at work. Including the serial mediation path of perceived burden via self-conscious emotions significantly weakened the effect of gender on extension request discomfort (from  $B = 0.58, P = 0.0001$  to  $B = 0.40, P = 0.002, 95\% \text{ CI IDE } (0.01, 0.08)$ ). Perceived burden together with heightened self-conscious emotions like shame, embarrassment, and guilt, explained why women (vs. men) experienced greater discomfort with asking for more time.

**Study 3: Simulated Supervisor Perspective.** Prior research suggests that people sometimes judge women who use flexible work options as less committed to their workplaces compared to men (35,36). Thus, it is possible that women's impression concerns are grounded in reality. To investigate this question, we recruited 872 employed adults located in the United States, who work with at least three direct reports. This study was pre-registered (<https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=9n2gx3>).

Participants took on the role of the supervisor and imagined themselves in the identical scenario from studies 2a to 2d. To enhance the ecological validity of this design, participants imagined being a manager and having the interaction with a direct report that they actually worked with at their current jobs. Participants imagined assigning one of their direct reports (randomly selected among three direct reports that they had most recently started working with) to complete a task that was due the next day, and the direct report requested a deadline extension. Then, participants reported how the extension request impacted their evaluation of the direct report's competence and commitment using six statements adapted from study 2a (e.g., "The direct report's asking for more time, relative to not asking, made me see him/her as" using a scale ranging from  $-3$  [much less competent] to  $+3$  [much more competent]). We created a composite measure of supervisor evaluation by taking the average of the six items ( $\alpha = 0.95$ ).

Supervisors evaluated female and male employees who requested a deadline extension as equally competent and motivated,  $d = -0.04, P = 0.580, 95\% \text{ CI } (-0.13, 0.23)$ . To examine how strongly our data supported the null (vs. alternative) hypothesis, we compared supervisor ratings by employee gender using the Bayesian  $t$  test with an uninformative prior (42, 43).<sup>†</sup> This resulted in a Bayes factor of 0.09, revealing strong support for the null hypothesis (44). These results suggest that contrary to female employee's expectations, supervisors do not disproportionately judge women more negatively for requesting an extension on tight yet adjustable deadlines.

We also explored whether supervisors were more likely to attribute female employees' extension requests to factors like a lack of commitment or having outside responsibilities by asking supervisors to indicate why they believed the employee requested an extension. Supervisors were no more likely to attribute a female employee's extension request to lack of commitment or additional family responsibilities compared to a male employee's extension request (Table 2 and *SI Appendix*).

Contrary to female employees' expectations, study 3 suggests that supervisors do not disproportionately judge women more negatively for requesting an extension at work. We also replicated this finding in the context of a nonhypothetical, interactive task in a preregistered exploratory analysis of an experimental study conducted for a different purpose (*SI Appendix, Supplemental Study A*). To illustrate the methods of this study, online workers were matched with a male or female direct report and assigned a writing task with a 3-min deadline. Halfway through the task, the direct report requested more time to work on the task. Comparing managers' evaluations of the competence and motivation of their direct reports revealed no difference by employee gender, adding further support for our finding in study 3.

**Table 2. Supervisor's attribution to male vs. female employee's extension request (study 3)**

	Male employee	Female employee	<i>df</i>	Statistics			Bayes factor
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)		<i>t</i> value	<i>P</i> value	<i>d</i>	
Lack of skill	3.70 (1.85)	3.31 (1.94)	870	3.07	0.002	-0.21	0.02
Lack of motivation	3.96 (1.78)	3.64 (1.84)	870	2.62	0.009	-0.17	0.02
Personal reason	4.26 (1.64)	3.84 (1.73)	870	3.68	< 0.001	-0.29	0.02

Note.  $n = 872$ . Bayes factor  $\leq 0.10$ : Strong evidence for H0. Supervisor did not believe female (vs. male) employees were more likely to request a deadline extension for these reasons.

<sup>†</sup>A Bayes  $t$  test provides a Bayes factor that assesses the strength of the evidence in favor of one hypothesis (the null) over the alternative.

**Study 4a: Classroom with no Formal Policy.** Ambiguity can reduce women's willingness to negotiate for more money (30). As related to deadline extension requests, in ambiguous situations where there are no clear norms or explicit policies, it is unclear whether asking for an extension on an adjustable deadline at work is an acceptable behavior. As a result, individuals may worry that they are engaging in an unacceptable behavior that will result in negative judgements by others. Because women are more relationally oriented and—as the current research demonstrates—are significantly more likely to worry that they are burdening other people with their request, women might perceive a higher relational cost for engaging in the potentially unacceptable behavior of asking for an extension. By reducing ambiguity through a formal policy, asking for an extension could become a clearly condoned behavior, thereby reducing women's interpersonal concerns. Thus, we examined whether ambiguity also shaped women's willingness to ask for more time, with consequences for performance.

We first explored the possibility that ambiguity would foster the proposed gender differences in a college setting, which closely mirrors early workplace experiences and outcomes (45). The data were collected in a setting where deadlines could be adjusted through an informal process: directly asking their professor. Focusing on an academic setting allowed us to examine a consequential objective performance outcome: assignment grades.

We analyzed the performance of 103 college students (57.3% female) who were enrolled in an undergraduate course at a university located in the United States on an assignment with an adjustable deadline. The sample size allowed us to detect a minimum effect of  $w = 0.23$  in a  $\chi^2$  test with 80% power.

All students were given 1 wk to submit a discussion paper worth 20% of their grade. When the paper was assigned in class, the professor informed students that if they needed more time, they could email the professor to request an extension without penalty. The same information was reiterated on the syllabus (SI Appendix). Male students were more than twice as likely as female students to request an extension for the assignment (15.3% of female vs. 36.4% of male students),  $\chi^2(1) = 6.11$ ,  $P = 0.013$ ,  $w = 0.24$ . Students who asked for more time performed better on the assignment as rated by a teaching assistant blind to the student's identity and research hypotheses,  $\beta = 0.29$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , 95% CI (0.58, 2.85). Students' grades ranged between 20 (66.67%) and 30 (100.00%) points, with a median grade of 28 (93.33%). We estimated how requesting an extension impacted student's predicted assignment scores, controlling for their grades in the class prior to the assignment. A linear regression revealed that on average, students who asked for more time experienced an 8.2% increase in their assignment grade than what was expected from their class performance prior to the assignment (estimated marginal means from 26.8 to 29.0) (see SI Appendix for regressions). Thus, in contexts without a formal policy about requesting a deadline extension, female students were 32% more likely to forgo the opportunity to request an extension on an adjustable task deadline than male students, which compromised their performance.

**Study 4b: Online Courses with Formal Policy.** We then examined the consequences of reducing ambiguity on male and female students' tendency to request extensions on assignments in an online educational setting where deadlines could be extended using a formal process. We analyzed anonymous data of students' extension requests provided by an online university ( $n = 767$ ; 53.3% female). This institution had a formal policy for extension requests; all students were entitled to four 24-h assignment extensions per semester, which could be requested using an online form.

We compared the rate of requesting extensions during the 2018 to 2019 academic year between male and females, across all of the courses in which they were enrolled. In line with our theory that reducing ambiguity should reduce gender differences in extension requests, in this context, female students were equally as likely as male students to submit at least one extension request during the semester (24.0% of female vs. 25.1% of male),  $\chi^2(1) = 0.14$ ,  $P = 0.705$ . These results held in a binary logistic regression controlling for graduation year and age,  $B = -0.01$ ,  $P = 0.955$ , 95% CI (-0.70, 1.41). Female students also requested as many extensions throughout the academic year,  $\beta = 0.02$ ,  $P = 0.599$ , 95% CI (-0.05, 0.09); these results held controlling for graduation year and age,  $\beta = 0.03$ ,  $P = 0.347$ , 95% CI (-0.04, 0.10). Further supporting the lack of gender differences in this context, comparing the average number of extension requests made by student gender using a Bayesian  $t$  test with an uninformative prior resulted in a Bayes factor of 0.09, revealing strong support for the null hypothesis (44). See SI Appendix for a plot of male and female student's extension requests across the course of the academic year.

**Study 5: Simulated Classroom Experience with and without Formal Policies.** Building on our theorizing and the findings from studies 4a and 4b, in study 5 we experimentally examined whether formal policies could effectively reduce gender differences in attitudes toward extension requests. This study was preregistered (<https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=dh98z8>).

We analyzed the responses of 975 college students who simulated being a student in study 4a. Participants imagined that they were enrolled in a college course with around 100 students and were assigned a discussion paper that was worth 20% of their grade. The paper was due the next day, and they felt tight on time to complete the assignment.

Depending on condition assignment, participants were given no additional information (Control), reminded that they may ask for more time by sending the instructor an email (Informal Request), or reminded of a school-wide policy that would allow them to ask for more time by sending the instructor an email (Formal Policy Request). We then measured students' willingness to ask for an extension, predicted impression costs, and trait relational orientation.

Consistent with the findings of study 4a, female students who were assigned to the Informal Request condition were significantly less willing to ask for an extension as compared to male students,  $d = -0.45$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , 95% CI (-1.10, -0.40). Female students who were assigned to the Control condition also reported being less willing to request an extension than the male students,  $d = -0.46$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , 95% CI (-1.06, -0.35). Yet, when students were informed of a formal policy, female students were equally likely as male students to make an extension request,  $d = -0.10$ ,  $P = 0.400$ , 95% CI (-0.21, 0.52), suggesting that a formal policy reminder uniquely reduced the gender difference in willingness to request an extension. To further investigate whether a formal policy uniquely eliminated the gender difference in willingness to request an extension, we used a Bayesian  $t$  test with an uninformative prior to compare male and female students' responses in each condition. While the Bayes factor of the gender difference in the Control condition ( $BF_{Control} = 340.57$ ) and the Informal Policy condition ( $BF_{Informal} = 249.02$ ) revealed extreme evidence for the alternative hypothesis that women were less likely to make an extension request than men, the Bayes factor in the Formal Policy condition ( $BF_{Policy} = 0.179$ ) revealed moderate support for the null hypothesis of no gender differences (44).

Next, we examined whether formal policies reduced gender differences in the willingness to request extensions by mitigating predicted impression costs for female students. In the Control and Informal Request conditions, female (vs. male)



students expected that extension requests would result in greater perceived costs in how competent and committed they appeared to their instructors,  $d = -0.42$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , 95% CI  $(-0.76, -0.24)$  and  $d = -0.43$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , 95% CI  $(-0.78, -0.26)$ , respectively. However, when informed of the extension request policy, females expected significantly lower impression costs,  $d = -0.27$ ,  $P = 0.020$ , 95% CI  $(-0.60, -0.05)$ . Using a Fisher- $R$ - $Z$  transformation, this reduction was statistically significant,  $Z = 2.49$ ,  $P = 0.006$ .

Overall, women reported greater relational orientation,  $d = 0.38$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , 95% CI  $(0.16, 0.31)$ . Consistent with our theory, within the Control and Informal Request conditions, predicted impression costs were significantly correlated with student's trait relational orientation,  $r = 0.10$ ,  $P = 0.011$ . The link between predicted impression costs and trait relational orientation was attenuated in the Formal Policy condition,  $r = 0.06$ ,  $P = 0.316$ . Thus, a formal policy allowed relationally oriented individuals to be less fearful of social repercussions when asking for extension requests.

## Discussion

Across nine studies with over 5,000 participants using diverse populations, including online panels of working adults and undergraduate students, women were less likely to request workplace extensions, even for deadlines that were explicitly feasible and helpful to adjust. Working women expressed less comfort with requesting extensions on adjustable deadlines compared to male peers, which significantly predicted greater feelings of time pressure and burnout (studies 1 to 2d). Female students were also less likely to request an extension on an important assignment, forgoing the opportunity to improve their performance (study 4a). Our studies offered an intervention to reduce this gender difference: having formal policies to request extensions led women to feel as comfortable as men about making extension requests (studies 4b to 5).

Women were more prone to avoid extension requests than men due to their greater relational orientation, which led women to perceive extension requests as being more harmful (study 2a). In particular, women were more worried about burdening other people, such as their team members and managers (study 2d). It was the concern about burdening others—and not the concern about burdening themselves, the concern about appearing competent to their managers or themselves, or lower feelings of entitlement—that most strongly predicted women's discomfort with asking for more time on adjustable deadlines at work. These findings build on recent research showing that women feel more uncomfortable with making time-saving purchases because they worry about burdening the service provider with disliked tasks (29).

While prior research suggests that some gender differences, such as the willingness to negotiate, reverts when women are in high-status positions (28), our data suggest that women are more likely to avoid asking for more time than men regardless of their workplace status or their manager's gender (study 2b and 2c). The negotiations literature consistently shows that women are more reluctant to ask for more money than men because they are concerned about backlash effects for acting in gender atypical ways (46) and because they feel more energized to negotiate for the needs of others rather than for themselves (30). In an additional study ( $n = 906$ ) (SI Appendix, Supplemental Study B), we found evidence for a psychological mechanism that distinguishes the current work from the salary negotiations literature. While women were more hesitant than men to ask for both time and money, women were especially concerned with impression management (i.e., appearing incompetent) when asking for more time, which explained their greater discomfort with making an extension request.

In a follow-up study ( $n = 799$ ) (SI Appendix, Supplemental Study C), we replicated and extended these findings by showing that women experienced greater discomfort with asking for more time than with asking for more advice, help, or information because they were again concerned with appearing incompetent. Consistent with the results of study 2d, these beliefs were driven by negative self-conscious emotions and the fear of burdening others.

By pointing to the psychological mechanisms that underpin women's hesitation to ask for more time, these studies offer preliminary insight into specific psychological interventions that may uniquely help women overcome their hesitation with asking for more time: helping women overcome their concerns over appearing incompetent and their concerns with burdening others. Future research should further replicate and extend these results.

One question that requires further investigation is whether women are accurate in their beliefs. If women experience greater backlash for extension requests on adjustable deadlines, as they do when being assertive in other domains (27), women's avoidance of extension requests may be a necessary precaution. As indicated in study 3 and SI Appendix, Supplemental Study A, our data suggest that supervisors do not evaluate women more harshly, despite women predicting harsher judgement, nor are they more likely to attribute women's requests to family or personal responsibilities. As this evidence is based on laboratory studies, future work would benefit from further examining the predicted and actual interpersonal outcomes of requesting deadline extensions in workplace settings.

We deliberately conducted our studies in contexts where the deadlines were explicitly adjustable, where there was little or no interdependence between the work of the manager and employee, and where there were no obvious negative repercussions associated with the extension request. This methodological decision provided a conservative test of our research question—if women were less likely than men to ask for more time in situations that incurred objectively fewer costs—it is also unlikely that they would make costlier requests. Of course, managers can incur costs from granting deadline extensions, such as when the requests meaningfully alter their work schedule. Employees can also incur reputational costs for requesting deadline extensions, such as when an employee makes repeated extension requests and consequently is judged negatively by their manager.

Although managers did not perceive men and women differently in response to one-off, costless extension requests, it is unclear from our studies whether managers would perceive female employees more negatively in costlier contexts. To provide an initial test of this question, we conducted two additional studies. In one study of managers ( $n = 1,731$ ) (SI Appendix, Supplemental Study D), participants imagined that one of their female or male employees requested an extension that either delayed their schedule (or did not) and was the first or third request from this employee in the last 6 mo. Unsurprisingly, managers judged employees most harshly when they asked for an extension on a task that would delay their own timelines, especially when this was the third vs. first extension request. Importantly, even when extension requests delayed timelines or were the third request, managers did not judge females (vs. males) more harshly. We also replicated these findings in a consequential behavioral study where participants supervised either a female or male employee who made repeated, financially costly deadline extension requests ( $n = 849$ ) (SI Appendix, Supplemental Study E). Although women worry more about seeming incompetent when asking for more time than men, our data suggest that these fears are unfounded, even in costlier contexts. More research should replicate and extend these results by varying the length and frequency of extension requests.

In study 1, we observed no moderating role of personal characteristics on the link between comfort with asking for more time, time stress, and burnout. Research would also benefit from further examining the links between demographic, job characteristics, comfort with asking for more time at work, and subjective well-being in diverse organizational settings.

Scholars have identified how women end up with more tasks at work, which contributes to their experience of greater time pressure. Women receive more requests to complete tasks outside of their formal responsibilities (14) and have a harder time delegating tasks to others at work (16). Our findings shed light on a previously unexplored contributor to women's experience of time pressure: their reluctance to ask for more time. Compared to men, women feel less comfortable asking for more time, as they believe it will be more interpersonally costly. Therefore, women could end up with less time, affecting their performance and wellbeing.

## Materials and Methods

All studies were approved by Harvard University's Institutional Review Board, and all participants gave their informed consent before participating. See Table 1 for a breakdown of sample characteristics by study. All surveys were administered via the Qualtrics survey platform.

**Study 1: Survey of Working Adults.** Through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), we recruited 587 adults working as paid employees outside of the home, at least 21 h a week, and located in the United States, who indicated that they had people whom they could delegate tasks to at their primary job (e.g., coworkers, junior colleagues, direct supervisees). Sixteen respondents who did not report their gender or age were excluded from the final analysis, resulting in a final sample of 575 adults from 22 industries, including information and technology (12.4%), business and finance (11.8%), sales (10.6%), and administrative and support services (10.1%).

As our primary outcome variable, respondents indicated how comfortable they felt requesting extensions for adjustable deadlines at work, defined using the following text: "Some task deadlines in the workplace are adjustable. For these deadlines, people may ask for more time to work on their task." Our key predictor variable was respondent gender. We also measured two downstream psychological variables that we predicted would be impacted by attitudes toward making extension requests. First, respondents indicated how time-pressed they felt at work by rating their agreement with two statements from prior research (47), including, "There have not been enough minutes in the day." Second, respondents reported their experience of workplace burnout during the past 4 wk using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (48). Finally, we measured a number of exploratory outcome variables and covariates, including level of comfort with delegation, overall happiness, age, tenure, race, and industry (see *SI Appendix* for these measures).

**Study 2a. Simulated Workplace Interaction with a Supervisor.** We recruited 656 full-time working adults located in the United States through Qualtrics, a survey panel service. Five respondents did not report their gender as either male or female and were excluded from the final analysis, resulting in a final sample of 651 adults. All participants imagined a high time-stress workplace situation based on a scenario constructed from pilot surveys which suggested that the scenario is representative of stress-inducing yet adjustable deadlines.

First, participants answered how comfortable they would feel asking for an extension on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). Next, participants predicted how the extension request would impact their supervisor's perception of them as a committed and competent worker using a six-item measure adapted from prior research (20). We assessed trait relational orientation using an eight-item measure adapted from prior research (25). See *SI Appendix* for a full description of these measures.

We also measured a number of covariates that we thought could differ across genders and potentially impact the level of comfort in requesting deadline extensions, such as how possible and helpful a deadline extension would be. We also measured how aversive participants expected the extension request experience would be using questionnaires adapted from prior research (49). See *SI Appendix* for more detailed descriptions of these measures.

**Study 2b. Simulated Workplace Interaction with a Colleague vs. Supervisor.** We recruited 599 United States adults employed for pay outside of the home at least 21 h a week through MTurk. Study 2b largely followed the procedures of study 2a, with three key differences. First, participants were assigned to

imagine the interaction with their direct supervisor or a colleague of the same status (vs. everyone imagined interacting with their supervisor) (see *SI Appendix* for full text). Second, participants predicted how much more or less committed and competent their manager would perceive them to be using a two-item version of the scale from study 2a. Finally, to ensure that women's greater discomfort in making extension requests was not driven by women perceiving the deadline adjustment as less likely or less helpful, we measured: 1) how likely participants thought the extension request would be granted on scale from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 7 (extremely likely) and 2) how much the participant thought the proposal would improve if they received the extension on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a great deal).

**Study 2c. Simulated Workplace Interaction with a Female vs. Male Supervisor.** We recruited 604 United States adults employed for pay outside of the home at least 21 h a week through MTurk to answer a work-related survey. We excluded 4 participants who indicated their gender as "Other," resulting in a final sample of 600 participants. Study 2c followed the same procedures of study 2b, with one key difference: instead of randomly varying the relative status of the requestee, we varied the gender of the direct supervisor. Half of the participants imagined an interaction with a male direct supervisor—either named Mike, Kevin, or Allen—while the other half imagined an interaction with a female supervisor named Ellen, Kathleen, or Joanne.

**Study 2d. Simulated Workplace Interaction.** We recruited 600 United States adults employed for pay outside the home at least 21 h a week through MTurk. We excluded 4 participants who indicated their gender as "Other," resulting in a final sample of 596 participants. Study 2d followed the same procedures as study 2a and included the same outcome measures as in study 2b, with the addition of several measures including job control and job status as described above.

**Study 3: Simulated Employee vs. Supervisor Perspective.** We recruited 872 adults who worked for pay at least 21 h a week with at least three direct reports through MTurk to simulate a workplace scenario. Participants listed three direct reports that they most recently started working with. Then, they took on the role of the supervisor and imagined themselves in the scenario from study 2a with one of the direct reports they listed. To explore whether supervisors were more likely to attribute female (vs. male) employees' extension requests to a lack of commitment or competence, we asked participants to indicate how much they believed their employee requested an extension due to various reasons, including personal obligations, other work commitments, and lack of skill, on scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a great deal). See *SI Appendix* for a full list of these items.

**Study 4a: Classroom with no Formal Policy.** One hundred three students enrolled in a university in the United States were assigned to submit a discussion paper about advertisements. The paper was worth 20% of their final grade. The adjustability of the deadline was communicated both when the paper was assigned in class ("If you need more time, email the instructor") as well as on the syllabus ("If you need an extension for this assignment, please email me [professor's email address] to request one."). A teaching assistant blind to the student's identity and the research hypotheses graded the essay on a scale from 0 to 30. We examined students' rates of extension requests and their final grades by gender.

**Study 4b: Online Courses with Formal Policy.** We analyzed an anonymous log of data from students' extensions on assignment deadlines during the 2018 to 2019 academic year from an online university. At this institution, all students are entitled to four 24-h assignment deadline extensions per course. The extension requests are made by submitting an online form, processed centrally by the school. See *SI Appendix* for an example of the online form. We compared how often male and female students asked for extensions on their assignment by submitting this form. The data included the number of extensions each of the 905 students—spanning from freshmen to seniors—requested on their assignments across all the classes they took throughout the academic year. We focused our analysis on currently enrolled undergraduates who indicated their gender as male or female on the school system, which led to a final sample of 767 students.

**Study 5: Simulated Classroom Experience with vs. without Formal Policy.** In study 5, 1,012 undergraduates simulated a classroom experience in an online survey. We excluded 37 students who did not meet our preregistered criteria, yielding a final sample of 975.<sup>‡</sup>

<sup>‡</sup>We were unable to reach our preregistered sample size of  $n = 1,200$  after exclusions due to the shutdown of our behavioral laboratory following the COVID-19 pandemic.



All students imagined that they were enrolled in a college course with around 100 students and were assigned a discussion paper with a 1-wk deadline. They were additionally told the assignment was due tomorrow and they felt tight on time. Students were assigned to one of three conditions: Control, Informal Request, and Formal Policy Request. Those in the Formal Policy Request condition were told "When assigning the task, your instructor reminded you that according to the school policy you can ask for more time to work on the task by sending them an email"; those in the Informal Request condition were told "When assigning the task, your instructor reminded you that you can ask for more time to work on the task by sending them an email"; those in the Control condition were given no additional information (see *SI Appendix* for a full description of the scenario). Thinking about how they would think and feel in the scenario, participants answered, "How comfortable would you feel making an extension request?" and "How likely is it that you would ask for more time to work on the assignment?" on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). We created a composite item of willingness to request an extension by taking the average of these two items

( $\alpha = 0.75$ ). Participants predicted the impact of the extension request on their appearance by completing the competence and commitment measures from study 2b. We created a composite measure by taking the average of these two items ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ). We measured participants' trait relational orientation using the validated eight-item measure from study 2a ( $\alpha = 0.69$ ).

**Data Availability.** All data have been deposited in the Open Science Framework ([https://osf.io/6zdsdw/?view\\_only=dd1053834cd346419d7f1691bcb36a54](https://osf.io/6zdsdw/?view_only=dd1053834cd346419d7f1691bcb36a54)).

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