

Work Flexibility and Gender Inequality in Paid and Unpaid Labor: Evidence from European Time Use Surveys

Introduction

The availability of flexible work arrangements has increased markedly in recent years, driven in large part by the COVID-19 pandemic, which abruptly transformed organizational structures and accelerated the adoption of flexible working practices that had previously stagnated. What initially emerged as an emergency response has since evolved into a lasting feature of contemporary labor markets. Even after the pandemic, when a full return to on-site work became feasible, flexible work has remained a common and largely institutionalized component of employment in many sectors.

Across the European Union (EU), the share of employed persons aged 25 to 59 with access to flexible work arrangements rose from approximately 15% in 2019 to 25% in 2021. By 2024, this share had only slightly declined, stabilizing around 24%. In the Nordic countries, the prevalence is substantially higher, reaching nearly half of all employed persons (Eurostat 2024, own calculations).

However, the expansion of flexible work represents a double-edged development. While such arrangements can enhance workers' autonomy, allowing greater control over start and finish times, improving job satisfaction, reducing stress, and facilitating the reconciliation of employment and caregiving responsibilities (Byron 2005; Chandola et al. 2019; Hook et al 2022; Wheatley 2017), research has also documented less desirable consequences. Flexibility is often associated with longer working hours and work intensification (Fleetwood 2007), and the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life (Chung 2022). These tensions may give rise to what has been termed the flexibility paradox, a form of self-exploitation in which workers' apparent autonomy ultimately results in the intrusion of work into private life and an extension of working hours (Chung 2022).

Research Question

This study investigates how the expansion of flexible working arrangements in the post-pandemic period relates to gender (in)equality in the division of paid and unpaid work among couples. Specifically, it examines gender differences in the relationship between flexible work and the total time devoted to housework and childcare, as well as to specific domestic activities (e.g., cooking, managing groceries, cleaning, etc.). The analysis also examines childcare interferences (both their frequency and the type of interruptions) during paid work at home (see Kuang et al. 2025), and a couple-level perspective to explore how housework and childcare differ when both partners work from home.

With flexible work having transitioned from an occasional job benefit to a permanent feature of many employment contracts, labor markets in Europe have undergone a profound structural transformation whose social consequences are only beginning to be understood. Despite its growing prevalence, flexible work remains a relatively new and under-researched phenomenon, creating a pressing need for systematic evidence on its implications for family life and gender relations.

This question is particularly salient in light of Goldin's (2014) argument that the last barrier to achieving gender equality in earnings lies in availability of work flexibility. Firms often disproportionately and nonlinearly reward employees who work long or specific hours, which disadvantages most often women who often shoulder greater caregiving responsibilities and therefore require temporal flexibility to reconcile work and family demands. Supporting this, research from Canada shows that access to flexible work conditions reduces the motherhood wage penalty (Fuller and Hirsh 2019). However, existing research on flexible work and gender inequality remains limited. Most studies have focused on individual-level outcomes rather than family-level ones (e.g., Hofäcker & König 2013; Kelly et al. 2014) and have primarily focused on the U.S. context (Hook et al. 2022; Kim 2020; Lyttelton et al. 2022). The present study addresses this gap by analyzing the consequences of flexible working for gender equality among couples within families across Europe, focusing on six countries: Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, and Poland. These cases represent diverse social, cultural, and welfare-state regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990; Holman 2013; Sobotka & Berghammer 2021), as well as differing institutional provisions for work flexibility (Holman 2013).

Flexible work opportunities are unequally distributed across the European labor force, and their effects vary by gender, socioeconomic status, and institutional context (Hofäcker & König 2013; Lott & Chung 2016; Lyness et al. 2012). These heterogeneities have consequences for household organization and well-being. Against this background, this research investigates how flexible work

shapes the gendered division of unpaid labor (childcare and housework) and employment, while also analyzing socioeconomic heterogeneity in these relationships within and across national contexts.

More broadly, flexibility, and the autonomy over time management and scheduling that comes with it, has emerged as a new form of social currency. Like income, time autonomy is a finite resource distributed unequally across gender and class, and institutions play a central role in regulating access to this resource.

Data

This study draws on data from the third round of the Harmonized European Time Use Surveys (HETUS), a cross-national survey coordinated by Eurostat. These nationally representative surveys are conducted approximately every ten years and provide detailed information on how individuals allocate their time across various daily activities. In the most recent round, the six countries that this research focuses on have introduced new questions on flexible working arrangements, enabling a comparative analysis of work flexibility and its implications for time use and gender inequality within the household.

At present, data are available for five countries: Austria, Finland, Bulgaria, Estonia, and Serbia; while data collection is ongoing in other participating countries. In total, around twenty countries are expected to complete data collection and transfer datasets to Eurostat, with the process scheduled for completion by 2026. Given the standardized design of the questionnaire and harmonized time-use diaries, the code developed for cleaning, processing, and analyzing data from the first five countries can be reused as additional datasets become available.

Time-use surveys have a long and well-documented history in social research (Bauman et al. 2019) and are widely regarded as the gold standard for measuring daily activity patterns (Gershuny et al. 2021). Validation studies confirm their reliability and accuracy in capturing individuals' allocation of time across work, care, and leisure activities (Gershuny et al. 2020). Recent innovations, such as the integration of digital technology have enabled even more powerful real-time trackers of time use (Cornwell et al. 2019). In the HETUS diary, respondents record their primary and secondary activities on paper or on their phone in 10-minute intervals (144 time slots per day) over two days (one weekday and one weekend day). As recommended by Andorka (1987), these rich data surveys provide opportunities to analyze gendered divisions of paid and unpaid labor, offering detailed insights into the organization of family life in contemporary Europe. In terms of methodology, the main analysis will employ ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to estimate gendered associations in time use.

Expected Findings and Heterogeneities

Gender

The effects of flexible working arrangements are expected to vary by gender, consistent with patterns observed in the U.S. (Kim 2020). U.S. evidence suggests that telecommuting can promote greater gender equality in childcare but may exacerbate inequalities in housework and lead to more frequent interruptions (Lyttelton et al. 2022). Although there has been convergence in the division of housework and childcare over time (Bianchi et al. 2000), persistent gender differences remain. Women generally perform a larger share of childcare than men, with variations influenced by maternal education and national context (Craig & Mullan 2011), as well as occupational-related strain (Hook et al. 2022).

More highly educated couples are more likely to engage in dual-earner arrangements, which tend to foster a more egalitarian division of household tasks (Steiber et al. 2016). In contrast, in households with more traditional gender norms, flexible work arrangements may reinforce gendered patterns, allowing women to combine paid work with 'intensive parenting' childcare responsibilities (Hays 1996). Consequently, flexibility may inadvertently strengthen traditional gender roles, as women merge work and caregiving while men maintain clearer work boundaries (Sullivan & Lewis 2001).

Men are also more likely to work overtime and extend their working hours, possibly to capture the nonlinear and disproportionate rewards associated with long work hours (Goldin 2014). In Germany, flexible working arrangements have been associated with fathers working longer hours and therefore spending less time in childcare. Moreover, men but not women, are more likely to work long hours and overtime when they have schedule control (Lott & Chung 2016; Wanger & Zapf 2022). In a pan-European study, men were found to use autonomy over their working hours to increase work

commitments, whereas women used it to achieve a better work-life balance (Hofäcker & König 2013). Men may also show heightened digital presence (i.e., remaining available outside standard working hours) to signal commitment and productivity (Bünning et al., 2022).

Occupational characteristics can also shape the gendered effects of flexible work. Evidence from the United States shows that mothers in strain-intensive occupations (i.e., marked by competitive pressure, conflict, monotony, and physical hazards) spend less time with their children and on childcare activities than men exposed to similar adverse job conditions (Hook et al. 2022).

Overall, flexible work is expected to produce heterogeneous effects across gender, moderated by educational attainment, potentially reinforcing both egalitarian and traditional patterns of labor division depending on the family and institutional context.

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Access to flexible work arrangements is highly stratified by socioeconomic status. Flexible work is concentrated among higher-skilled workers in higher-status jobs (Golden 2009), where greater flexibility often accompanies higher pay, rather than having lower wages in return for more flexibility (Glauber 2011). As a result, flexible work may reinforce existing SES advantages, amplifying existing social inequalities. As such, the availability of flexible working arrangements, such as schedule control, are an underappreciated axis of social inequality (Gerstel & Clawson 2018).

However, flexible arrangements are also associated with increased overtime work hours and blurred boundaries between work and non-work life (Chung 2022). Therefore, higher-SES workers may experience greater interference of work with non-work life due to elevated expectations and responsibility, a phenomenon described as the “stress of higher status” (Schieman et al. 2009). The “stress of higher status” hypothesis may also intersect with gender, if men are more likely to occupy high-status professions characterized by elevated demands. Indeed, these dynamics have important gendered implications too. Because higher-SES workers have greater access to flexible work, which is often associated with longer working hours and reduced time for childcare, men, who may disproportionately hold such positions due to occupational gender inequalities or traditional hypergamous household structures, are likely to increase their work hours and reduce their participation in housework and childcare. As a result, the burden of domestic labor may fall disproportionately on women.

Context

The socio-cultural and welfare-state context significantly shapes family, gender, and employment regimes, influencing both access to flexible work and its consequences (Hook 2010). Access to schedule control varies widely across countries (Lyness et al. 2012), and the effects of flexibility on the gendered division of labor will be conditioned by these institutional and cultural differences.

In welfare states with low familialism, where the state assumes a substantial share of childcare responsibilities, such as Norway, the potentially negative effects of flexible work on women’s childcare time are expected to be smaller compared to countries with strong familialist traditions, such as Italy. Conversely, in countries with entrenched traditional gender roles, flexible work may exacerbate household gender inequality, if women use flexibility to reconcile care.

Empirical evidence from the Dutch context shows that flexible arrangements can benefit both men and women, parents and non-parents alike, improving job satisfaction and work-life balance (Possenriede & Plantenga 2011). However, it is crucial to differentiate between types of flexibility, as not all arrangements provide equal outcomes (Gerstel & Clawson 2018). Teleworking, for example, may lead to greater work intensification (Fleetwood 2007) and blur boundaries between work and home (Chung 2022). On the contrary, schedule control (i.e., having control over start and end work time) is associated with better job satisfaction and reduced work-family conflict, especially among women (Lyness et al. 2012). Employer-oriented flexibility (e.g., job insecurity, short-term contracts, and irregular or unpredictable hours) tends to be detrimental to workers, whereas employee-oriented flexibility (e.g., autonomy over working hours and task scheduling) is positively associated with higher job satisfaction (Hofäcker & König 2013; Holman 2013). Moreover, when work flexibility is not institutionalized as a universal policy at the firm level but instead granted at the discretion of individual managers as an employee-specific privilege, it can generate stigma and perceptions of lower productivity (Chung 2020). By contrast, when flexibility is normalized and embedded as part of a

broader organizational culture implemented as a structural rather than individual benefit, it can effectively reduce work-family conflict without undermining work performance.

Conclusion

Although the empirical analysis for this study has not yet begun, it is scheduled to start within the next month, and a full analysis of the available data will be completed well in advance of the conference in early June. As additional countries submit their datasets to Eurostat, Stata do-files will be run to automatically extend the analysis to these new countries. This research will provide an important overview of how flexible work arrangements are currently shaping family life in Europe, offering timely insights into the gendered distribution of paid and unpaid work across European households.