

When Work Moves Home: Fertility Responses to Working From Home in Europe

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Extended abstract:

Globalization of markets and rapid technological advancements have been the main forces behind significant changes in the employment landscape in recent decades. Broadband expansion and the diffusion of information and communication technologies have enabled more flexible and connected forms of labor, transforming traditional work patterns (OECD, 2019). These developments have not only revolutionized how work is performed but also given employees greater freedom in choosing where they work. In parallel, employers, responding to global pressures, increasingly adopt high-commitment policies that aim to raise productivity while granting workers more autonomy over their schedules and locations (Piva & Vivarelli, 2017).

The rise of workers' autonomy, particularly in the form of working from home (WFH), presents a complex interplay with fertility behavior, particularly as it influences the integration of work and family domains. While WFH can enhance flexibility, potentially enabling individuals to balance professional commitments with family responsibilities (Annink & Den Dulk, 2012; Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020; Clark, 2000), the implications for fertility remain ambiguous. On one hand, WFH may encourage family formation by making childbearing more feasible (Osiewalska et al., 2024; Wang & Dong, 2024). Conversely, the very nature of WFH can blur the lines between professional and personal life, leading to heightened work demands that may hinder reproductive decisions (Chung, 2022; Schieman et al., 2009). Furthermore, the impact of WFH on fertility behavior is likely contingent upon the broader institutional framework within which individuals operate. Variations in national policies regarding family support—such as access to public childcare and options for part-time employment—can significantly shape the necessity for WFH, influencing how effectively individuals navigate the challenges of reconciling work and family life.

Despite the growing relevance of this issue, there is surprisingly little comparative evidence on the relationship between WFH and fertility. Existing studies tend to focus on single-country contexts, limiting the generalizability of their findings. For example, Sinyavskaya and Billingsley (2015) found a positive association between WFH and birth intentions among Russian mothers, while Osiewalska and Matysiak (2025) observed a similar relationship between work autonomy (including working from home) and the likelihood of having a second child in the UK. However, cross-national analyses that account for different institutional contexts are still lacking, leaving significant gaps in our understanding of how work autonomy shapes fertility decisions in diverse settings.

This paper aims to address this gap by conducting a comprehensive comparative analysis of the relationship between WFH and fertility across three European countries – Austria, France, and Poland – which differ substantially in institutional contexts, family policies, and labor market structures. Building upon existing theories, including work-family border theory (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000), the job demands-resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2023), and the stress of higher status hypothesis (Schieman & Glavin, 2016; Schieman et al., 2009), we outline how WFH may affect childbearing. We anticipate two alternative consequences of WFH for childbearing. On the one hand, WFH, being a resource, may ease work-family reconciliation and thus increase birth risks; on the other, it may entail a higher commitment to paid work and larger work burdens, with little room left for family development. The outcome may further vary according to institutional setting, parity, and gender.

To test these theoretical expectations we rely on longitudinal microdata from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) covering 2006–2023. The LFS design enables us to track respondents for 5–6 consecutive quarters and reconstruct short labor market and fertility histories. We identify first and second births and link them to respondents' reported work arrangements, distinguishing between onsite work, occasional WFH, usual WFH, self-employment, and non-employment. We employ discrete-time complementary log–log models of first and second birth risks. Models control for a wide set of individual characteristics, including age, education, partnership status, working hours, and parity. We further interact the WFH status with the type of employment contract (permanent vs. temporary) to capture the role of job security. Separate models are estimated by gender and country.

Our results show that the relationship between WFH and fertility is highly context- and gender-specific. In France, WFH is associated with a higher likelihood of transitioning to parenthood, while in Austria the relationship appears more neutral, and in Poland it is linked to a lower

likelihood. The negative association in Poland is especially pronounced when WFH coincides with temporary employment, pointing to the dual burden of insecurity and precarity. For second births, we find that among mothers, WFH increases the probability of having another child in Austria and France, but not in Poland, whereas for fathers WFH shows no significant effects across countries. These findings underscore that institutional support, job security, and gender roles critically shape how flexibility translates into family outcomes.

Overall, this study provides some of the first cross-national evidence on the fertility implications of WFH. It highlights the dual nature of flexibility as both a resource and a strain, while also revealing that its consequences depend heavily on national contexts. The gendered patterns suggest that women's fertility decisions are more responsive to reconciliation policies and to the terms under which flexibility is granted.

From a policy perspective, the findings demonstrate that WFH alone cannot compensate for weak childcare provision or insecure employment. Instead, it risks amplifying disadvantage where institutional supports are lacking. In contrast, in settings with robust family policies and greater security, WFH can support family formation and encourage subsequent childbearing, offering meaningful tools for integrating paid work and family responsibilities. These insights advance our theoretical understanding of work–family reconciliation and provide actionable knowledge for policymakers seeking to promote both labor market participation and family well-being in an era of growing work autonomy.

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