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Working from home and fertility outcomes

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Topic

The separation between the workplace and the home is one of the main factors underlying the negative relationship between female employment and fertility in industrialized societies (Brewster & Rindfuss, 2000; Goldscheider et al., 2015). In recent years, however, the rise of digital technologies has enabled an increasing share of workers to carry out at least part of their paid employment from home (Osiewalska et al., 2024), potentially reshaping work-family balance and transforming childbearing behaviors. Given the widespread adoption of home-based work (HBW) since the Covid-19 pandemic, investigating its effects on fertility outcomes is particularly relevant. This study examines the relationship between HBW and women's expected and actual births in France between 2014 and 2023.

Theoretical focus

There are multiple, sometimes opposing, ways in which HBW affects fertility.

HBW offers numerous advantages that may facilitate fertility. One key mechanism is that it creates opportunities for combining paid work and family. It allows workers to save on commuting time, offers greater flexibility in organizing paid work around family responsibilities (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007), and it increases parents' presence in their children's lives (Callister & Singley, 2004). In addition to the opportunities it provides in terms of work-family balance, HBW presents material advantages for workers by allowing them to save the money that would be otherwise spent on transport or office dressing and to reallocate it to child-related expenses (Raiborn & Butler, 2009).

However, HBW may also entail disadvantages that could lead to lower fertility. First, it can exacerbate work-family conflict by blurring the boundaries between paid work and family life, extending working hours, and increasing work intensity, time fragmentation, and mental load (Felstead & Henseke, 2017). Additionally, HBW may hinder workers' career progression by limiting networking opportunities, reducing visibility at work, and generating perceptions of lower job commitment, which can in turn lead to fewer promotion opportunities (Matysiak et al., 2025; Richardson & Kelliher, 2015).

Despite growing interest in HBW following its unprecedented expansion during Covid-19 pandemic (International Labour Organisation, 2021), the literature exploring its relationship with fertility remain limited. Research investigating the relationship between HBW and fertility intentions revealed that this association can be positive (Sinyavskaya & Billingsley, 2015), negative (Kurowska et al., 2023) or that a given remote work arrangement within a couple may affect women's and men's fertility intentions in divergent ways (Jansen, 2025). As for the association between HBW and actual fertility, a study conducted in the United Kingdom indicates that working from home promotes higher fertility only among women who would face long commutes if working on-site. Conversely, it reduces the likelihood of childless women becoming mothers and has no effect on second-birth outcomes (Osiewalska et al., 2024).

The inconclusive findings of prior research on the potential effects of HBW on family functioning and fertility can be partly explained by the use of different definitions of HBW, by the heterogenous contexts in which this work arrangement was implemented and by the small and specific samples on which most previous studies were based (Reboul et al., 2023).

This study contributes to existing research by exploring the relationship between HBW and fertility outcomes in the French context over a 10-year period covering the pre-pandemic, the pandemic and the post-pandemic phases. Over the past decade, except for a slight post-Covid rebound in 2021, France has experienced a steady decline in its total fertility rate, which fell from 2.03 children per woman in 2010 to 1.68 children per woman in 2023 (Papon, 2024). HBW, which concerned a few share of the population prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, became much more prevalent following the massive expansion of telework during the health crisis, most of which was often carried out at home (Vayre, 2019).

This study will examine the impact of working from home on both expected and occurred births, taking into account the composition of the family (presence or absence of children and their number), the professional activity of both spouses and whether or not they engage in HBW, as well as the nature of their occupation and the social position of individuals and households.

Data and method

This study draws on data from the French version of the Labour Force survey (Enquête Emploi en Continu) conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (Insee) in France. The LFS survey provides detailed information on the characteristics of individuals and those of their jobs. It is conducted in several waves and collects the dates of events, which makes it possible to link HBW with subsequent fertility. Each dwelling is interviewed every three months over six consecutive quarters. We use data from the 2014 to 2023 waves of the LFS survey. The information provided by the LFS survey allows for the identification of the work arrangement in the first quarter of the survey and the occurrence, in the following quarters, of a birth or a maternity leave indicating an expected birth. The longitudinal aspect of this survey helps reduce the risk of obtaining estimates biased by endogeneity.

Expected results

HBW presents both positive and negative consequences for work-family balance and for workers' careers. The overall effect of this work arrangement on fertility outcomes remains unclear and likely depends on a variety of circumstances that determine whether the negative or positive effects prevail, or whether they cancel each other out. We expect that the overall effect of HBW on fertility outcomes will be determined by the interplay between both partners work arrangements and by family composition.

The below section presents some of our preliminary results:

Our sample consists of women of childbearing age (18 to 49 years old) who were employed and who responded to the first wave of quarterly surveys and to at least one of waves 4, 5, or 6.

28% of women in our sample do at least some of their work from home, while 72% do not work from home. We find roughly similar proportions among employed male partners. For both women and men, the frequency of working from home does not exceed half of the working hours for the majority of those who do so.

We apply logistic regression to model the probability of a respondent being on maternity leave or having given birth during one of waves 4, 5, or 6 based on whether they worked from home during wave 1. We stratify according to the presence of children in the household.

The association between women working from home and occured or expected births is not significant, either for women without children or for mothers. The partner's working from home has no significant effect on occurred births or expected births compared to his working outside the home among respondents with children (p_value=0.8), but it has a slightly significant positive effect among respondents without children (OR=1.23 and p_value=0.095). (Appendix)

Further analysis is needed to explore the role of occupation, number and age of children, and the configuration of HBW within couples in the relationship between HBW and fertility.

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Appendix

Table 1. Factors associated with having had or expecting a child, versus having had none and not expecting any, stratified by the presence of a child/ children in the household.

Stratified models according to the presence of children						
	Women without children			Women with children		
Characteristic	**OR**	**95% CI**	**p-value**	**OR**	**95% CI**	**p-value**
Use of Home-based work among women						
No	—	—		—	—	
Yes	0,83	0.64, 1.06	0,14	0,93	0.77, 1.13	0,5
Age						
18-24	—	—		—	—	
25-29	2,06	1.47, 2.89	<0.001	0,78	0.49, 1.26	0,3
30-34	2,66	1.88, 3.78	<0.001	0,46	0.29, 0.73	0,001
35-39	1,71	1.13, 2.58	0,011	0,14	0.09, 0.23	<0.001
40-44	0,7	0.41, 1.21	0,2	0,03	0.01, 0.04	<0.001
45-49	0,08	0.03, 0.23	<0.001	0,01	0.00, 0.02	<0.001
Urban area size						
Non-urban area	—	—		—	—	
Urban area of less than 199,999 inhabitants	0,82	0.63, 1.06	0,13	0,93	0.76, 1.13	0,4
Urban area with 200,000 to 1,999,999 inhabitants	0,63	0.48, 0.83	<0.001	1,2	0.97, 1.49	0,089
Paris urban area	0,62	0.45, 0.85	0,003	1,33	1.05, 1.68	0,018
Department type						
Metropolitan France	—	—		—	—	
Overseas departments	0,81	0.47, 1.38	0,4	0,95	0.65, 1.37	0,8
Highest level of education completed						
No diploma	—	—		—	—	
Highschool diploma or lower	0,83	0.43, 1.59	0,6	1,43	0.92, 2.21	0,11
Higher education diploma	1,09	0.56, 2.11	0,8	1,81	1.14, 2.85	0,011
Socioprofessional category (PCS classification)						
Intermediate professions	—	—		—	—	
Agriculture	2,14	0.46, 10.0	0,3	0,75	0.27, 2.06	0,6

Craftsmen, merchants and business owners	0,64	0.30, 1.35	0,2	0,49	0.28, 0.84	0,009
Managers and professionals	1,16	0.88, 1.53	0,3	1,35	1.08, 1.68	0,008
Clerical workers	0,93	0.72, 1.21	0,6	0,93	0.74, 1.16	0,5
Blue-collar workers	1,08	0.70, 1.67	0,7	1,22	0.84, 1.75	0,3
Not coded	0	0.00, 0.00	<0.001	0	0.00, 0.00	<0.001
Partner's occupation						
The partner works but not from home	—	—		—	—	
The partner works from home	1,23	0.96, 1.57	0,095	0,97	0.80, 1.19	0,8
The partner is not employed	0,7	0.47, 1.03	0,07	1,03	0.76, 1.40	0,8
No partner	0,12	0.09, 0.16	<0.001	0,51	0.36, 0.71	<0.001
Survey year						
2014	—	—		—	—	
2015	0,91	0.63, 1.33	0,6	0,92	0.70, 1.21	0,5
2016	0,8	0.56, 1.13	0,2	0,93	0.71, 1.23	0,6
2017	0,89	0.61, 1.29	0,5	0,77	0.58, 1.03	0,077
2018	0,66	0.45, 0.96	0,029	0,94	0.70, 1.26	0,7
2019	0,94	0.66, 1.36	0,8	0,87	0.65, 1.16	0,3
2020	0,83	0.54, 1.27	0,4	1,19	0.87, 1.64	0,3
2021	0,76	0.52, 1.10	0,14	1,15	0.87, 1.53	0,3
2022	0,69	0.46, 1.02	0,062	0,89	0.66, 1.22	0,5
2023	0,42	0.18, 0.94	0,036	0,22	0.07, 0.62	0,004

Abbreviations: CI = Confidence Interval, OR = Odds Ratio
Source : LFS survey