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

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Abstract: This study examines the role of working from home (WFH) in shaping fertility across Austria, France, and Poland. While WFH can enhance flexibility and facilitate work–family reconciliation, it may also blur boundaries and intensify work demands, with ambiguous implications for childbearing. Using longitudinal Labour Force Survey (2006–2023), we estimate hazard models of first and subsequent births, distinguishing women’s and men’s on-site work, occasional and usual WFH, self-employment, and non-employment, as well as their couple-level configurations. The association between WFH and fertility is strongly context-, gender-, and parity-specific. For first births, women’s WFH is positively associated with entry into parenthood in France and Austria, but negatively in Poland, particularly when combined with temporary employment. For subsequent births, women’s WFH is linked to higher birth risks in France and Austria, whereas in Poland, this pattern appears only when she works from home and he works on-site. Men’s WFH shows little association with fertility. These findings highlight that WFH operates as both a resource and a strain: supportive policies and secure employment can turn WFH into a facilitator of family formation, whereas their absence may transform it into a source of constraint and inequality.

Keywords: work from home, flexible work, fertility, couples, Europe

JEL codes: J13, J81, J16

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, labour markets have undergone a pronounced shift away from the standard Fordist model of full-time, on-site employment (OECD, 2019; Piva & Vivarelli, 2017). Developments in digital communication and broadband infrastructure have made it technically possible to perform many tasks outside the employer's premises, giving rise to the expansion of working from home (WFH). This expansion was already visible before the pandemic, accelerated sharply during it, and persisted thereafter, though unevenly across Europe and particularly across Austria, France, and Poland, the three countries examined here. In Austria and France, about one quarter of the workforce worked from home at least occasionally in 2019, increasing to around one third in 2023, whereas in Poland the corresponding share remained much lower, at about 14% in both years (Eurostat, 2026).

As WFH has become more widespread, it has also become a central component of imagined future work–family arrangements for many couples, especially those with young children (Barrero et al., 2023). From a work–family perspective, this is unsurprising: WFH is often seen as an emblematic tool for reconciling paid labour and family life. By allowing workers to avoid commuting and reallocate working hours throughout the day, it promises a better fit between the spatial and temporal demands of employment and the needs at home (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020; Clark, 2000). At the same time, research has repeatedly shown that WFH can intensify work demands, blur boundaries between work and non-work, and extend the reach of employers into family time (Chung, 2022; Glavin & Schieman, 2012), with the negative consequences being particularly salient among precarious, insecure jobs (Lu et al., 2023). Moreover, the consequences of WFH are likely to be gendered, increasing women's unpaid and men's paid workload (Chung & Booker, 2023).

These ambivalences are particularly relevant in light of debates on low and postponed fertility. Tensions between employment and care are routinely identified as one of the key reasons for delayed family formation and curtailed family size in advanced economies (Goldscheider et al., 2015). Any institutional or organizational change that alters the cost of combining work and family, such as the spread of WFH, could therefore have important demographic consequences. The central question addressed in this paper is, thus, whether, for whom, and in what institutional context WFH supports or hinders childbearing.

Existing research provides important, but still incomplete, clues. In the UK, women's WFH is associated with higher second-birth risks but lower entry into motherhood (Osiewalska & Matysiak, 2025; Osiewalska et al., 2024), and wives' WFH appears to matter more

for fertility than husbands' (Wang & Tan, 2024). WFH is also positively associated with fertility intentions among women in Singapore and among Russian mothers (Sinyavskaya & Billingsley, 2015; Wang & Dong, 2024). Evidence from Norway further shows that the expansion of WFH during the first COVID-19 lockdown was followed by a rise in births, especially among high-earning women in previously inflexible jobs (Bratsberg & Walther, 2025).

Despite this growing literature, several gaps remain. First, because longitudinal comparative data covering both WFH and fertility behaviour are scarce, most existing studies rely on single-country evidence (e.g., Bratsberg & Walther, 2025; Osiewalska et al., 2024), making it difficult to know how far their findings travel beyond the studied settings. Second, studies often focus on fertility intentions rather than behavior and sometimes find that WFH affects female and male partners' intentions differently (Jansen, 2025), leaving it unclear how these conflicting effects translate into couples' actual childbearing. Third, existing research pays limited attention to the conditions under which WFH is experienced. In particular, it remains unclear whether WFH can compensate for weak institutional support for families, or whether, conversely, it is most beneficial where such support is already strong.

This paper addresses these gaps by examining how women's, men's, and couple-level WFH are associated with first and subsequent births in Austria, France, and Poland. The three countries represent contrasting institutional and normative environments: a dual-earner model with extensive childcare support in France, a long leave-based model with maternal part-time norms in Austria, and a more familialistic setting marked by higher labour-market insecurity in Poland (Matysiak & Węziak-Białowolska, 2016; Thévenon, 2011).

The paper contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it further develops a theoretical framework that conceptualizes WFH as both a potential resource and a potential burden for fertility (Osiewalska & Matysiak, 2025). Drawing on work–family border theory (Clark, 2000), Job Demands–Resources theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), and the 'flexibility paradox' (Chung, 2022), and linking these to fertility research on employment uncertainty and institutional context (Thévenon, 2011; Vignoli et al., 2020), we derive nuanced expectations about how the association between WFH and fertility may depend on the broader environment in which WFH is embedded. Second, we provide the first cross-national evidence on the link between both partners' WFH and birth transitions in Europe. Using longitudinal microdata from the Labour Force Survey (2006–2023) obtained from national authorities, we follow respondents over five to six consecutive quarters and model

first- and subsequent-birth risks by partners' work arrangement. We distinguish between on-site work, occasional and usual WFH, self-employment, and non-employment as well as their couple-level configurations. Third, we examine how effects vary by country and interpret the results in light of country-specific institutional configurations and gender norms. In doing so, we speak to debates about whether flexible work, and WFH in particular, can compensate for weak institutional support for care or whether, instead, it amplifies existing inequalities within families and societies.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Reconfiguring home and work: why working from home matters for fertility

The recent diffusion of WFH does not simply add another flexible arrangement to the menu of employment options. It reconfigures the most basic geography of everyday life and may thus alter the compatibility of employment and family formation. While stable employment and adequate earnings are preconditions for family formation (Alderotti et al., 2021; Van Wijk, 2024), they may also be tied to time demands and organizational constraints that complicate care. To the extent that WFH relaxes these constraints, it may render parenthood more compatible with continued employment (Chung & Van Der Horst, 2018), thereby increasing fertility. Yet if WFH intensifies paid or unpaid workload (e.g., Allen et al., 2013), it may instead encourage the postponement of childbearing and lower fertility.

2.2. Working from home as a resource

Work–family border theory conceptualizes work and family as separate, though interconnected, domains that are structured by temporal, spatial, and psychological boundaries (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000). By relocating (part of) paid work into the household, WFH makes these boundaries more flexible and can facilitate movement between roles. In this sense, WFH may function as a job resource within the Job Demands–Resources (JDR) framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2023). It reduces the time and energy costs associated with commuting and may allow workers to structure their day to better fit family schedules (Bai et al., 2021; Hill et al., 2003). For parents, WFH may also make it easier to absorb temporary care disruptions, such as minor illnesses, school closures, or gaps in childcare, without fully withdrawing from employment (Zoch et al., 2021).

These features may be particularly consequential for women and dual-earner couples who seek to maintain employment continuity while having children. If WFH enables mothers

to remain attached to the labour market or return to work more easily after childbirth (Chung & Van Der Horst, 2018; Matysiak et al., 2025), it may lower the perceived costs of family formation and support both first and subsequent births. More broadly, when couples view WFH as a stable and usable arrangement for combining care and paid work, it may increase their willingness to start a family or progress to another child.

2.3. Working from home as a burden

The same features that make WFH attractive as a resource may also render it a burden. By weakening the spatial and temporal separation between work and home, WFH can blur role boundaries and increase spillover between paid work and family life (Allen et al., 2013; Glavin & Schieman, 2012). It may therefore coexist with longer work hours, expectations of constant availability, and greater involvement in unpaid labour (Chung & Van Der Horst, 2020; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010), leading to frequent role-switching and chronic multitasking associated with higher stress and work–family conflict (Delanoeije et al., 2019; Gadeyne et al., 2018). In line with the “*flexibility paradox*”, WFH may also foster work intensification and self-exploitation, as employees extend their effort to maintain high performance and compensate for working off-site (Chung, 2022; Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). These dynamics resonate with the *stress-of-higher-status hypothesis*, which argues that conditions typically associated with advantage, such as autonomy or status, often come with increased psychological strain because they entail greater responsibility, more complex tasks, and higher employer expectations (Schieman & Glavin, 2016). At the same time, WFH may carry longer-term career risks (“*flexibility stigma*”), including weaker promotion prospects, reduced visibility, or greater job insecurity (Golden & Eddleston, 2020; Kasperska et al., 2024), all of which can create uncertainty about future career trajectories that reduce fertility plans (Vignoli et al., 2020).

From a fertility perspective, these burdens may discourage both entry into parenthood and the decision to have additional children. Childless workers in demanding or insecure jobs may postpone family formation if they anticipate that combining WFH with childcare would be unsustainable or damaging to their careers. Parents, and mothers in particular, may likewise decide against another child if WFH is experienced primarily as overload and blurred boundaries.

2.4. Gendered and parity-specific mechanisms between WFH and fertility

The fertility consequences of WFH are likely to differ by gender and parity. Across Europe, women still perform a disproportionate share of unpaid work, particularly after

the birth of the first child (Pailhé et al., 2021; Solera & Mencarini, 2018; Zabel & Heintz-Martin, 2013). Men's involvement in routine childcare has increased but often remains secondary, and male breadwinning norms continue to shape expectations about who will adjust employment in response to family demands (Chesley & Flood, 2017; Fanelli & Profeta, 2021). These patterns affect both who seeks and obtains WFH and how its costs and benefits are distributed between partners.

For women who have not yet had children, WFH, in line with the JDR model (Bakker et al., 2023), may be viewed as a prospective resource that makes future motherhood more compatible with continuous employment, thereby reducing the perceived need to delay childbearing. At the same time, if WFH is tightly linked to constant availability or general career uncertainty, childless women, in line with the 'flexibility paradox' (Chung, 2022), may prefer to invest in their careers first and postpone family formation. For mothers, the experience of combining WFH with existing childcare responsibilities provides concrete information about its feasibility. If WFH enables them to stay employed without excessive stress, it may lower the marginal costs of another child and support subsequent births; if WFH primarily means doing two jobs at once (paid and unpaid), it may have the opposite effect.

For men, the link between WFH and fertility is likely to be weaker. Men more often use WFH to extend working hours or increase productivity, rather than to provide direct care (Powell & Craig, 2015). As secondary caregivers, their WFH may therefore matter less than women's for work-family reconciliation and, further, for fertility (e.g., Osiewalska & Matysiak, 2025; Wang & Dong, 2024). At the same time, fathers' WFH may matter indirectly, for example, by supporting female partners' employment reentry (Langner, 2018) or helping to coordinate schedules within the couple (Kuang et al., 2025).

2.5. Couple-level WFH and fertility

However, fertility outcomes are shaped not only by individual WFH status but also by how WFH is distributed within couples, as these combinations affect the household's bargaining power and division of labor (Wang & Tan, 2024). When both partners work from home, couples experience enhanced flexibility in coordinating schedules and sharing childcare responsibilities. This synergy can facilitate both the transition to parenthood and the decision to have subsequent children, particularly within egalitarian contexts where WFH serves as a shared reconciliation resource (Pabilonia & Vernon, 2023).

Yet joint WFH does not necessarily produce equal sharing. In less egalitarian contexts, it may instead reinforce gendered specialization, with women absorbing more domestic responsibilities while men remain more strongly oriented toward paid work. A similar dynamic may arise when only the female partner works from home (Beigi et al., 2024). Such specialization may ease work–family reconciliation and support childbearing, particularly where it aligns with prevailing norms of maternal caregiving. Yet it may also increase women’s total workload and generate coordination pressures and stress that discourage childbearing (Wang & Tan, 2024). By contrast, when only the male partner works from home, any positive effect on childbearing is more likely to depend on whether his WFH translates into greater involvement in unpaid labour and childcare, which is more likely in egalitarian contexts (Kuang et al., 2025).

2.6. Institutional context and expected cross-national differences

Beyond family and gender mechanisms, the broader institutional context may further condition the relationship between WFH and fertility. The availability of formal childcare, the design of maternity and parental leave, and broad labour-market conditions shape both access to WFH and the stakes attached to employment continuity (Brega et al., 2023; Bünning & Pollmann-Schult, 2016).

Austria, France, and Poland provide three contrasting contexts in which to examine these dynamics. France represents a dual-earner, state-supported model of work–family reconciliation, combining relatively strong public support for childcare with norms and policies that facilitate maternal employment (Druzhinenko-Silhan & Schmoll, 2025; Pfau-Effinger, 2005; Thévenon, 2011). Austria combines generous maternity and parental leave with more gender-specialized care arrangements and a strong norm of maternal part-time work after childbirth (Riederer & Berghammer, 2020). Poland, in turn, relies heavily on family-based care, offers uneven and insufficient formal childcare, and is characterized by women’s relatively high full-time employment, but often under temporary and insecure contracts (Chłoń-Domińczak et al., 2024; Lewandowski & Magda, 2017).

We therefore expect WFH to operate differently across these settings. In France, WFH is likely to operate primarily as an additional resource that helps couples manage daily logistics, bridge gaps between work schedules and care arrangements, thereby potentially encouraging both entry into parenthood and higher-order births. In Austria, WFH by either female or male partner may help some women maintain stronger labour-market attachment than the standard

long-leave, part-time trajectory would allow (Langner, 2018), thereby facilitating work-family reconciliation and supporting couples' fertility. At the same time, limited childcare for very young children and traditional gender norms that intensify particularly after the first birth can mean that women's WFH is accompanied by substantial multitasking and role overload, which may temper any positive association, especially with the progression to another birth. Finally, in Poland, WFH is more likely to function as a selective and potentially stigmatized private coping strategy under conditions of limited childcare and insecure employment (Harrington & Kahn, 2025), rather than as part of a broader reconciliation package, thereby increasing uncertainty and discouraging childbearing.

3. Data and Method

3.1. Sample

The empirical analysis draws on longitudinal microdata from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) obtained from national authorities for Austria, France, and Poland covering the years 2006–2023. We use the rotating-panel component of the survey, which follows sampled households for five (in Austria) or six consecutive quarters (in Poland and France). Because our main interest lies in the association between both partners' work arrangements and childbearing, we restrict the analysis to respondents living in co-resident couples.

Our initial sample includes almost 65,000 childless partnered women and 172,000 partnered mothers. We exclude respondents for whom information on fertility or labour-market characteristics required for the analysis is incomplete. The final analytical sample comprises 62,000 childless women (25,000 in Poland, 15,000 in Austria, and 22,000 in France) and almost 165,000 mothers (70,000 in Poland, 29,000 in Austria, and 66,000 in France). Within this sample, we observe 3,169 first births (1,670 in Poland, 318 in Austria, and 1,181 in France) and 5,550 subsequent births (2,867 in Poland, 447 in Austria, and 2,236 in France).

3.2. Key measures

The dependent variable is a transition to a first or subsequent birth occurring no earlier than the fifth quarter of the observation panel. This restriction ensures that key explanatory variables, measured in the first quarter, precede the onset of pregnancy and do not reflect adjustments in anticipation of an imminent birth. In the LFS, births are identified from changes in household composition between adjacent interviews, which allows us to detect co-resident newborns.

Our main explanatory variables capture the WFH of a female respondent and her co-resident partner. Using the standard LFS item on whether work is carried out from home, we distinguish between on-site work, occasional WFH, and usual WFH among employees. We separate self-employed from wage employees because they face distinct work demands and a different relationship to the household as a place of work (Van der Zwan et al., 2020). We also distinguish non-employment, which includes both unemployment and inactivity, as a separate category. This yields a five-category measure of current work arrangement: on-site work, occasional WFH, usual WFH, self-employed, and not working. Based on the work arrangements of the female respondent and her partner, we also construct a couple-level variable capturing partners' WFH configurations: both on-site, both WFH (occasional or usual), she on-site and he WFH, he on-site and she WFH, at least one partner self-employed, and at least one partner not working.

Cross-national differences are examined by interacting the key work-arrangement measures with country indicators for Austria, France, and Poland. We chose this approach rather than conducting separate country analyses to maximize the sample size and thereby strengthen statistical inference, while still allowing the relationship of interest to vary freely across settings. Accordingly, we present country-specific estimates derived from fully interacted pooled models. As a robustness check, we re-estimated the models separately by country; the results were substantively unchanged (available on request).

3.3. Control variables

All models control for socio-demographic and employment-related characteristics that are likely to be associated with both work arrangements and fertility. We include *women's age* (18–24; 25–29; 30–34; 35–39; 40–44), *time period* (2006–2009; 2010–2014; 2015–2019; and 2020–2023 capturing the post-COVID period), *partnership status* (cohabiting; married, including civil unions), and *educational attainment* of both partners (tertiary; below tertiary). In models of subsequent births, we also account for family composition by controlling for the *number of co-resident children* under age 15 (1 child; 2 children; 3 or more children) and the *age of the youngest dependent child* (0–4; 5–9; 10–14 years old). In the employee subsample used in sensitivity analyses, we additionally control for both partners' *occupational group* (professionals/managers; technicians/associate professionals/clerks; other), *working hours* (full-time; part-time), and *type of contract* (permanent; temporary).

3.4. Analytical strategy

We start with describing how WFH is socially and occupationally patterned among employed women and men by presenting country- and gender-specific logit models in which the outcome is a dummy that measures any use of WFH (on-site vs occasional/usual WFH). In addition to the standard covariates used in the fertility models (calendar period, number of children, education, occupation, working hours, and contract type), these models include indicators of potentially demanding work schedules and time constraints, namely weekend work (usual or occasional work on Saturday or Sunday), late work (usual or occasional work during evenings or nights), and holding a second job.

Next, in the main part of the analysis, we estimate discrete-time event-history models separately for first and subsequent birth risks using a complementary log–log specification, preferable to other probability models in case of rare events and short observation windows (Mills, 2010). The basic models for first (M1) and subsequent births (M2) are estimated on the full sample of working and not-working respondents and include measures of the woman's and her partner's WFH interacted with country indicators, along with control variables. These models assess whether women's and men's WFH are differently associated with parity transitions and whether these associations vary across Austria, France, and Poland. We then extend the analysis by introducing a couple-level WFH measure to examine how partners' WFH configurations are associated with first (M3) and subsequent birth risks (M4) across the three country contexts.

Finally, we conduct a series of robustness checks. First, we re-estimate the models on the subsample of employees, for whom we can additionally control for job characteristics such as occupation, working hours, and contract type. Second, we assess whether the associations differ if the sample is limited to the pre-pandemic period.

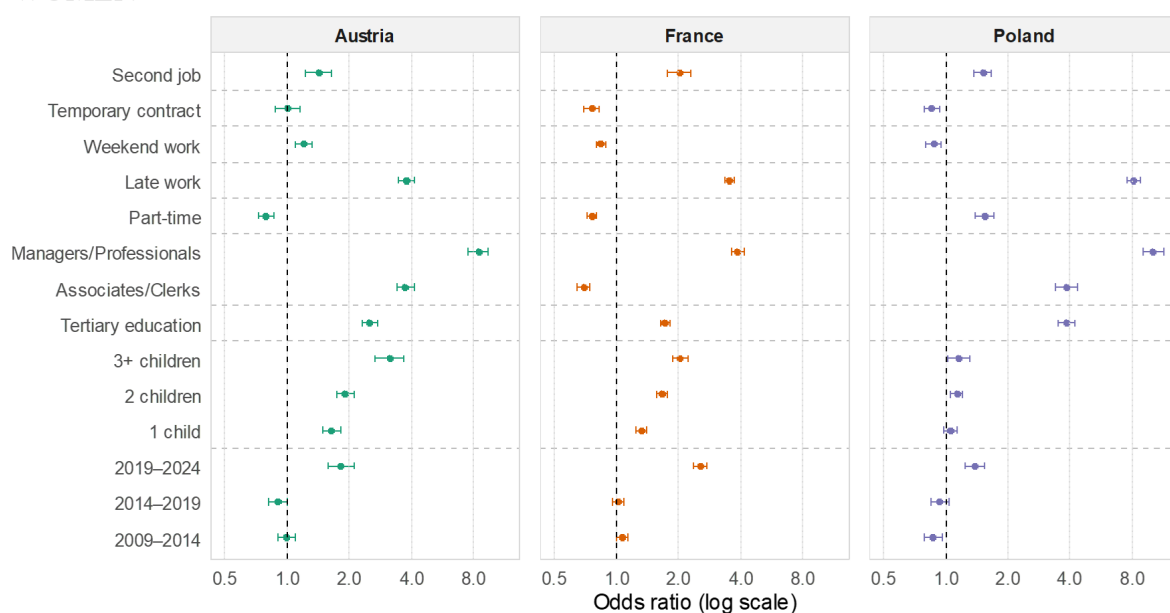
4. Results

4.1. Working from home by family and job conditions

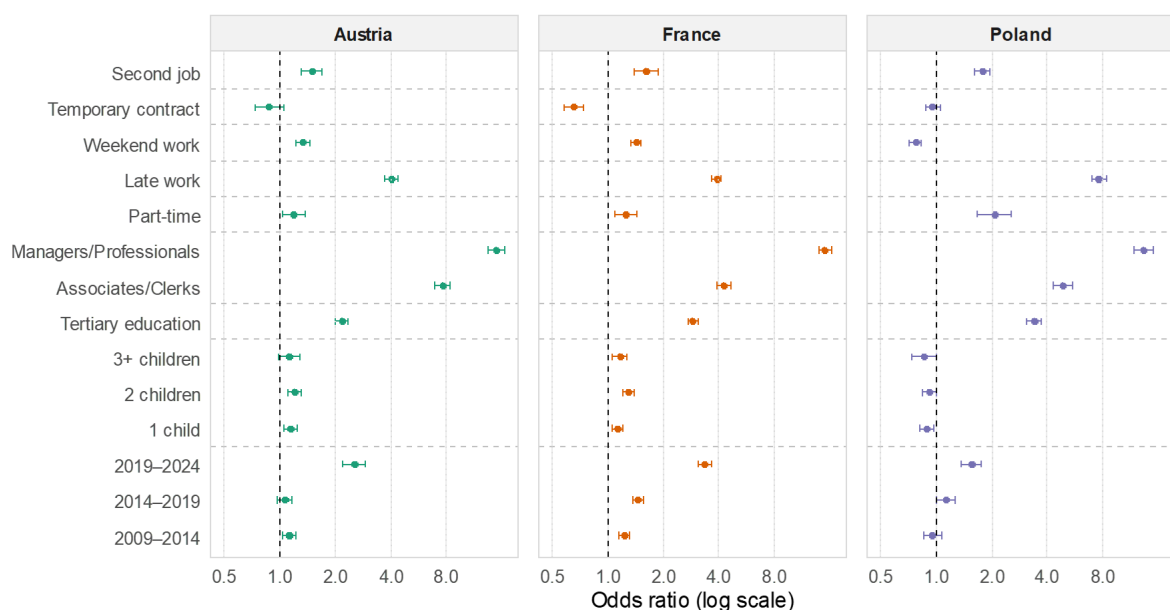
In our sample, WFH is least common in Poland, where only about 8% of women and 5% of men work from home at least occasionally, compared with 15% and 13% in France and 12% and 13% in Austria, respectively. Among employees, WFH is strongly concentrated in higher-status segments of the labour market: among professionals, managers, and the tertiary-educated workers (Figure 1). It is also more common among workers with a second job and among those

reporting late work, suggesting that WFH often coincides with more complex working-time arrangements (Felstead & Henseke, 2017). Late work is especially common among home-based workers in Poland, where the association is twice as strong as in Austria and France. Cross-country differences also appear for part-time work: among women in France and Austria, part-time employment is associated with lower odds of WFH, whereas in Poland, WFH is linked to reduced-hours employment, suggesting a stronger connection with constrained labour-market attachment.

Figure 1. Working from home by family and job characteristics among employed respondents
WOMEN



MEN



Note: Odds ratios with 95% confidence intervals from logistic regression models on occasional or usual WFH versus onsite work.

Source: Authors' calculation based on LFS data.

Further, the family gradient underscores the gendered nature of WFH. Among men, WFH shows little variation by number of children across countries, indicating that fatherhood is not systematically linked to increased use of home-based work. Among women, by contrast, WFH becomes more common with an increasing number of children in Austria and France, while no comparable gradient appears in Poland. This divergence suggests that WFH is more closely aligned with work–family reconciliation among women in Austria and France, whereas in Poland it appears less responsive to family circumstances and more strongly shaped by job-related characteristics and constraints.

4.2. Working from home and parity transitions across country settings

In the main analyses, we present predicted birth probabilities based on the estimated models plotted on Figures 2–4. To assess whether two predicted probabilities differ from one another, we use 83% confidence intervals for pairwise comparisons (Austin & Hux, 2002; Knol et al., 2011). Non-overlapping 83% intervals indicate a statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level. By contrast, 95% confidence intervals are appropriate for testing whether a single estimate differs from zero.

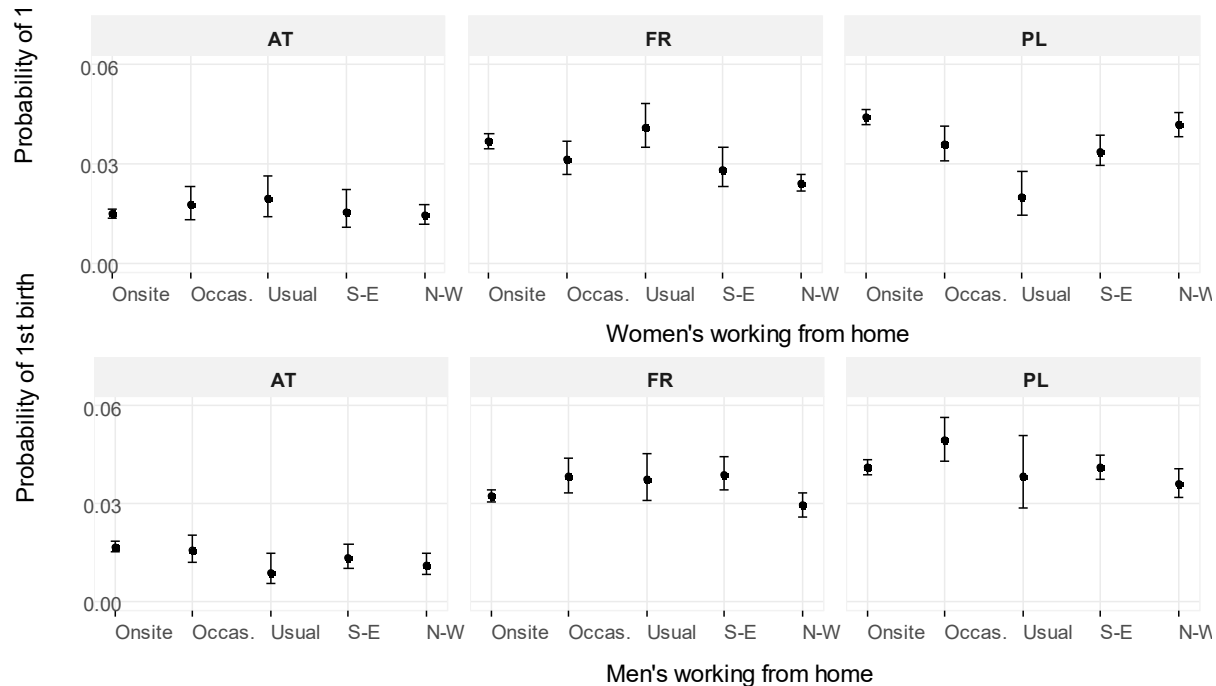
We begin by examining how partners' WFH is associated with transitions to first and subsequent births (Figure 2). The patterns are clearly country-specific and strongly gendered. In Austria and France, women's WFH is associated with higher predicted probabilities of childbearing, most clearly for subsequent births. Specifically, women who usually work from home display the highest probability of progressing to another child, at a level similar to that observed among non-employed women. For first births, the point estimates follow a similar direction, but the differences are smaller and less statistically distinguishable. In Poland, the relationship looks markedly different. Women working from home – both occasionally and usually – seem to postpone having children and show lower risks of motherhood transition compared to women working on-site. The gradient is pronounced: usual home workers have the lowest first-birth risks across all employment groups, including the self-employed and the non-employed. Further, in contrast to Austria and France, in Poland, WFH does not facilitate subsequent births and shows no systematic association with higher-parity progressions (Figure 2).

Among men, associations are generally modest, particularly for higher-order births. Some differences appear for first births – men's usual WFH is slightly negatively related to entry into parenthood in Austria, while men's occasional WFH is weakly positively related in France and

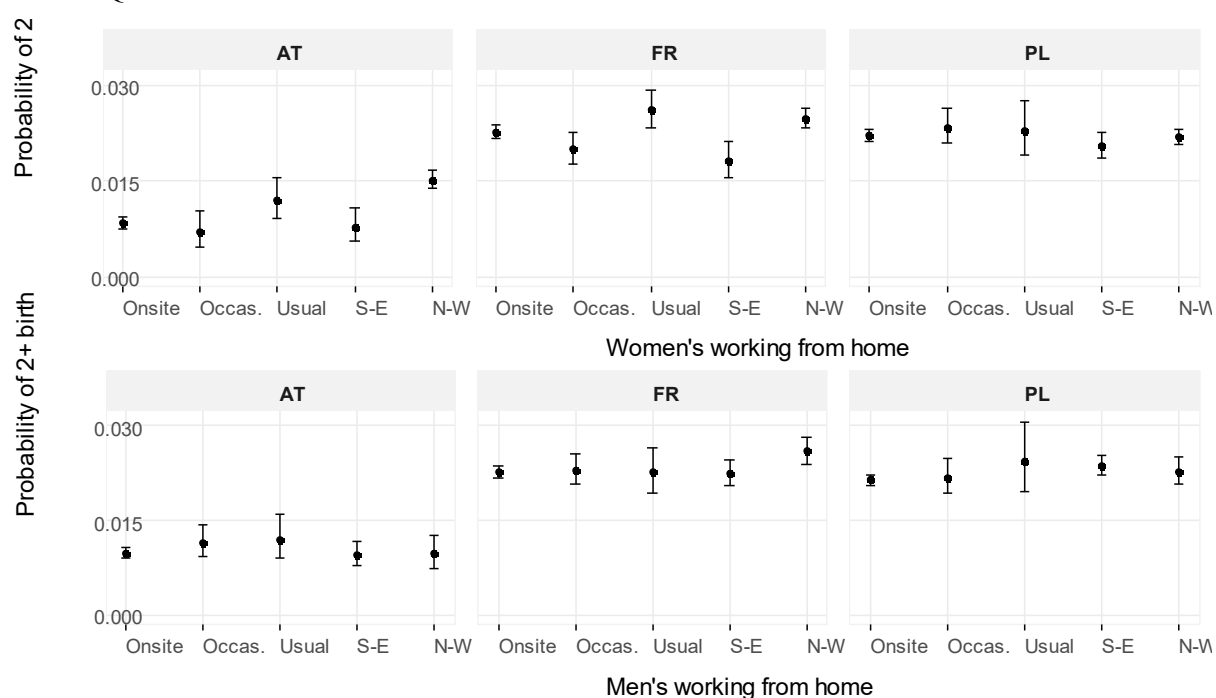
Poland - but overall the evidence suggests that fertility responses to WFH are driven primarily by women's work arrangements.

Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of first and subsequent births by women's and their partners' work-from-home arrangements. Austria, France, and Poland, 2006-2023

FIRST BIRTHS



SUBSEQUENT BIRTHS



Note: Predicted probabilities and 83% CI are calculated based on the estimates of Models 1-2, which include the measure of his and her WFH interacted with country indicators. Model controls for: woman's age, partnership status, time period, and woman's and her partner's educational level. The model for subsequent births additionally includes: number of children and age of the youngest child.

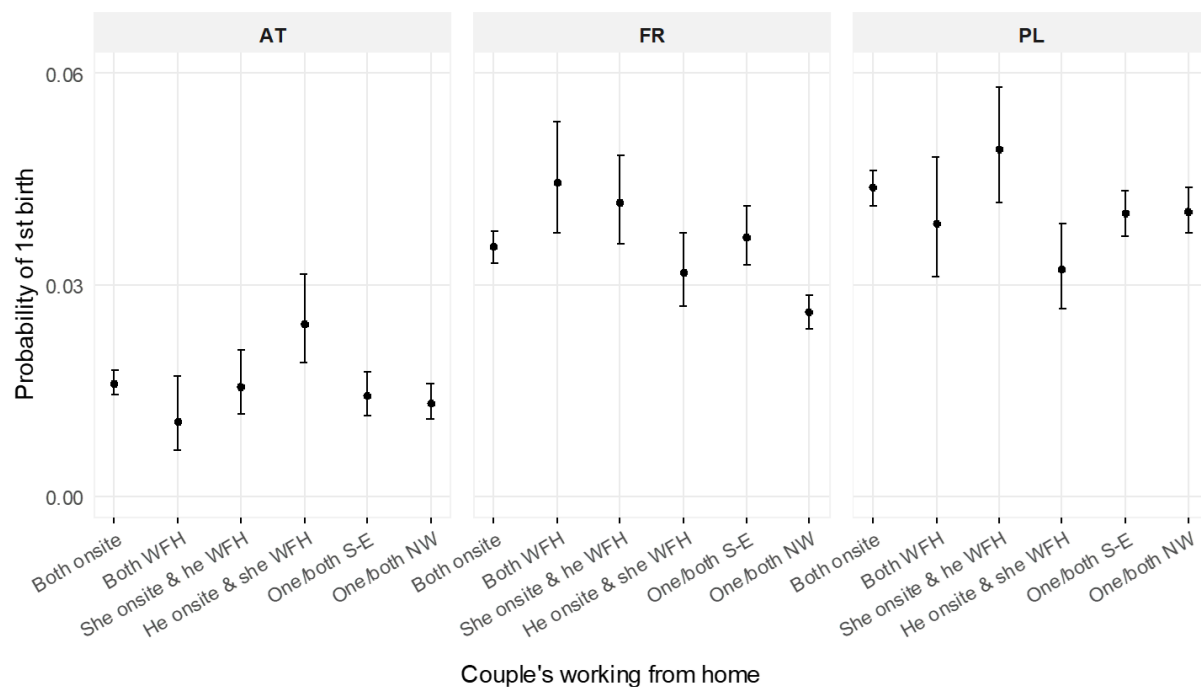
Source: Authors' calculations based on LFS data

4.3. Couple-level WFH and birth transitions

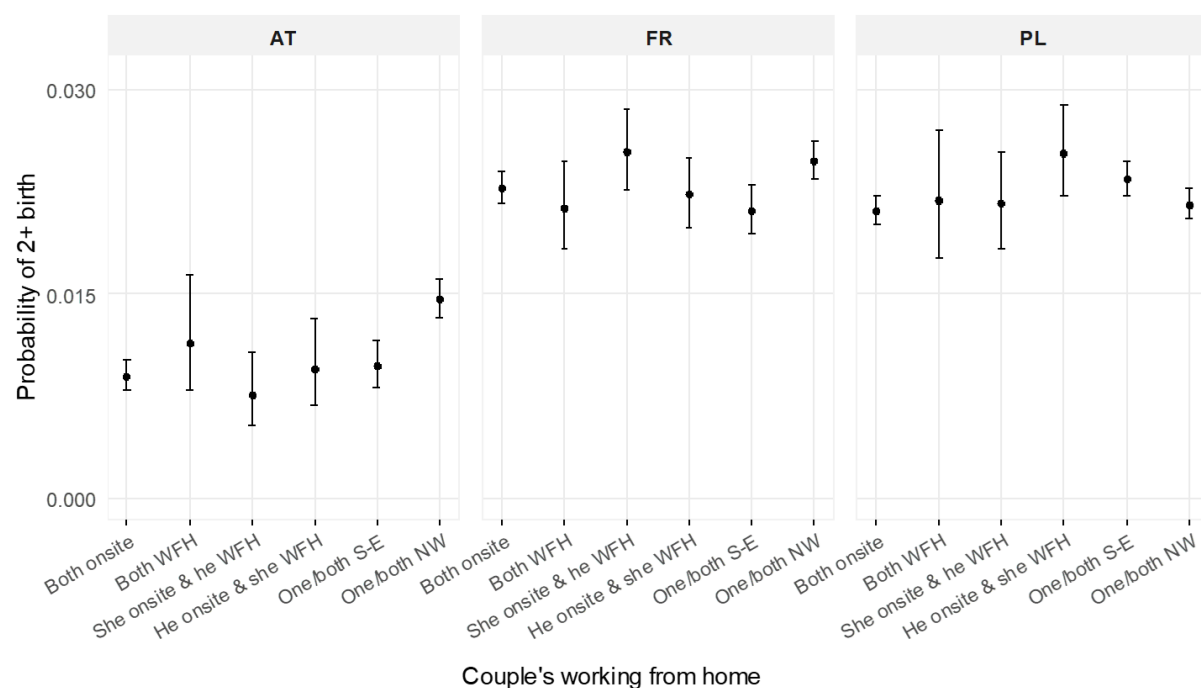
The couple-level analysis (Figure 3) further highlights the cross-national differences. In Austria, the highest probability of entry into parenthood is observed among couples in which the woman works from home, either occasionally or usually, while the man works on-site. In France, by contrast, first-birth transitions are more strongly associated with arrangements in which both partners work from home or in which the man works from home and the woman works on-site (though the latter result is weakly significant). In Poland, the previously found negative relationship between women's WFH and first births is concentrated primarily in couples in which the woman works from home and the man works on-site. For subsequent births, however, couples with this asymmetric arrangement in Poland are slightly more likely to progress to another child than couples in which both partners work on-site.

Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of first and subsequent births by couples' work-from-home arrangements. Austria, France, and Poland, 2006-2023

FIRST BIRTHS



SUBSEQUENT BIRTHS



Note: Predicted probabilities and 83% CI are calculated based on the estimates of Models 3-4, which include the measure of couple's WFH interacted with country indicators. Model controls for: woman's age, partnership status, time period, and woman's and her partner's educational level. The model for subsequent births additionally includes: number of children and age of the youngest child.

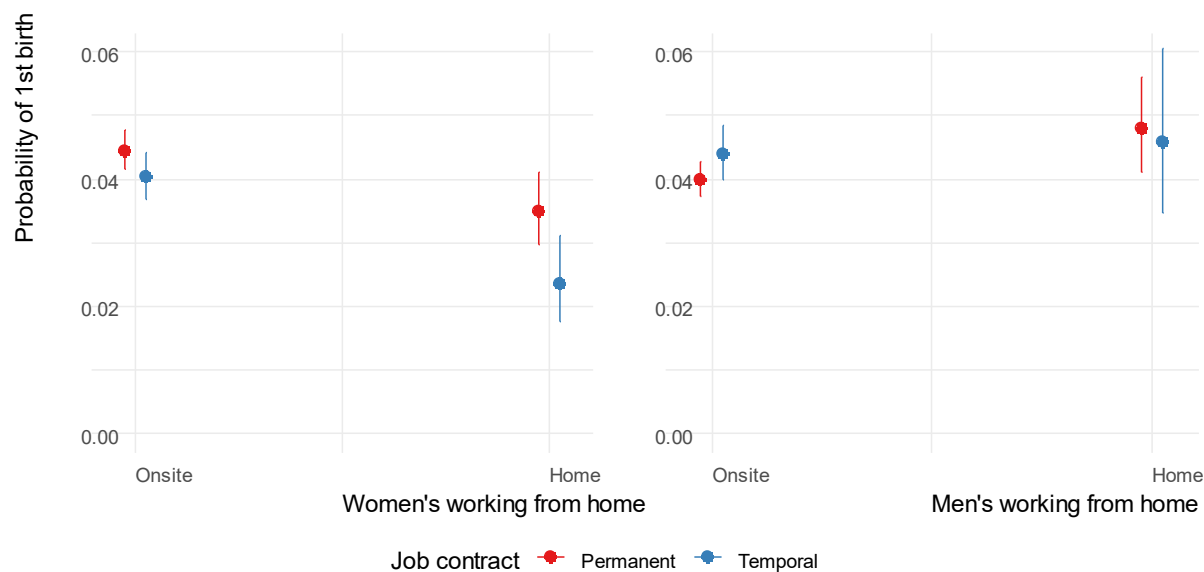
Source: Authors' calculations based on LFS data.

4.4. Employment insecurity and working from home in fertility transitions

The contrast between Poland and the two Western European settings suggests that WFH may carry a different meaning in the Polish labour market. While in Austria and France, WFH is generally associated with higher birth transitions, in Poland, it is linked to lower probabilities of entry into motherhood. One plausible mechanism behind these differences is employment insecurity. Poland has long been characterized by much higher levels of temporary employment – around 20–23% in 2009–2018, before declining to about 12% in 2023 – than Austria (around 7–8%) or France (around 11–13%). Temporary employment in Poland has also been particularly prevalent among women and younger workers, for whom family formation decisions are most salient (Lewandowski & Magda, 2017). Previous literature suggested that in such a context, WFH does not necessarily signal favourable working conditions; it may instead reflect limited bargaining power and uncertain prospects (Harknett et al., 2024; Kalleberg, 2011). The time and autonomy associated with WFH may thus be used less for work–family reconciliation than for protecting one’s labour-market position – for example, by working longer hours, remaining continuously available, or taking on additional tasks to secure contract renewal or transition to permanence (Danziger & Boots, 2008). In this sense, WFH becomes a constraint-driven strategy for coping with precarious employment rather than a resource for childcare or family formation. Since employment uncertainty itself discourages childbearing (Gatta et al., 2022), such a defensive use of WFH may help explain its negative relationship with entry into motherhood in Poland.

We assess this mechanism directly by interacting the contract type with WFH among childless employees in Poland. For parsimony, we distinguish only between on-site work and any WFH (occasional/usual). We find partial support for our expectations. Among women on temporary contracts, WFH is associated with a markedly lower predicted probability of a first birth than on-site work (Figure 4). Among women on permanent contracts, the negative association is much smaller. This suggests that employment insecurity amplifies – though does not fully account for – the negative association between WFH and the transition to motherhood observed in Poland. Among men, we find no statistically significant differences in fertility transitions between home-based and on-site workers, regardless of contract type.

Figure 4. Predicted probabilities of first birth by women's and their partner's work-from-home arrangements and type of contract. Employed childless respondents in Poland, 2006-2023



Note: Predicted probabilities and 83% CI are calculated based on the estimates of Models 3-4, which are estimated on a sample of employees and include the measure of his and her WFH interacted with the type of contract (permanent vs temporary) in Poland. Model controls for: woman's age, partnership status, time period, woman's and her partner's educational level, occupation, and working hours.

Source: Authors' calculations based on LFS data.

4.5. Robustness checks

To assess the stability of our findings, we conduct two additional checks. First, we re-estimate the models on the subsample of employees to assess whether additional job characteristics – occupation, working hours, and contract type – account for the observed association between WFH and birth risks. The results are broadly robust, although the positive association between women's WFH and subsequent births in France becomes weaker. Second, because the expansion of WFH during and after the COVID-19 pandemic may confound the estimated associations, we re-estimate the models on the pre-pandemic sample. The results remain substantively unchanged (available on request).

5. Discussion

This paper examines the association between working from home and childbearing across institutional settings and shows that WFH is not a universal solution to declining fertility. Rather, it appears to be a context-dependent arrangement whose consequences differ by gender, parity, and country setting. In line with the theoretical framework developed in this paper, WFH can function either as a resource that eases work–family incompatibilities or as a burden that

intensifies them, depending on the broader organization of family policies, employment, care, and gender relations that shape the costs of childbearing.

A first striking result is that the relationship between WFH and fertility is highly gendered. Across all three countries, women's WFH matters much more for birth transitions than men's. Men's WFH is only weakly associated with fertility, whereas women's WFH is clearly linked to both first and subsequent births, albeit differently across parity and contexts. This is consistent with evidence that women remain the main coordinators of everyday care and are the partners whose employment adjusts most directly to family demands (Chesley & Flood, 2017; Goldscheider et al., 2015; Pailhé et al., 2021). It also aligns with earlier findings showing that men often use WFH primarily to intensify paid work, whereas women are more likely to experience it through the lens of work–family reconciliation (Chung & Booker, 2023; Powell & Craig, 2015). In this sense, our results suggest that the fertility implications of WFH continue to run mainly through women's lives, even when both partners are employed.

Second, the association between women's WFH and fertility differs sharply by parity: it is most positive for subsequent births, but weaker or even negative for first births. This suggests that WFH matters differently before and after parenthood. For mothers, who already know what WFH means for combining paid work and care, this working arrangement may reduce the costs of another child by making it easier to coordinate childcare and absorb everyday disruptions without fully withdrawing from work (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020; Zoch et al., 2021). For childless women, by contrast, the same arrangement may be ambiguous: it promises flexibility, but it may also signal career penalties or uncertain future boundaries between work and care, ultimately leading to a weaker and less consistent association with first births.

Furthermore, the association between WFH and entry into parenthood varies markedly across the three countries: in Austria and France, it is weakly positive, whereas in Poland it is strongly negative. This contrast suggests that WFH does not carry the same meaning across institutional settings. In more supportive contexts, it may operate as a reconciliation resource; in less supportive ones, it appears more often as a demanding and uncertainty-laden arrangement. Our additional analysis by contract type reinforces this interpretation. Among childless women in Poland, the negative association between WFH and first births is strongest for those on temporary contracts. This suggests that, when combined with precarious employment, WFH may be used less to facilitate family formation than to protect one's position

in the labour market (Harknett et al., 2024; Vignoli et al., 2020). Under such conditions, WFH may not ease work–family incompatibilities but rather privatize and intensify them.

Finally, not only the availability of WFH matters, but also its distribution within the couple. In France, shared WFH is most compatible with first births, suggesting that flexibility supports fertility when it can be used jointly within a dual-earner model (Pabilonia & Vernon, 2023). In Austria, women’s solo WFH is most strongly linked to first births, reflecting a more gender-specialized work–family logic in which maternal adaptation to care remains normative (Riederer & Berghammer, 2020). In Poland, the pattern differs: among childless couples, first births are least likely when the woman works from home and the man works on-site. This suggests that in a context of family-based care, asymmetric WFH may shift the burden of reconciliation onto women and discourage entry into motherhood (Wang & Tan, 2024). The slight positive association of this arrangement with subsequent births in Poland may indicate that, once a first child is present, some couples use women’s WFH as an adaptive response to existing care demands. Even then, however, WFH does not appear to function as a broadly fertility-supportive resource.

Taken together, our findings carry two important implications. First, they contribute to the literature on low fertility by showing that WFH cannot be treated as institutionally neutral. It may indeed lower the costs of childbearing, but mainly where public support, employment security, and cultural expectations already make work–family reconciliation feasible for both partners. Second, the findings suggest that WFH should not be viewed as a substitute for family policy. Where childcare is weak or employment is insecure, home-based work is unlikely to resolve the tensions between paid work and care on its own. At best, it can complement supportive institutions; at worst, it shifts reconciliation burdens further into the household, especially onto women.

Our study also has limitations. The LFS does not allow us to measure fertility intentions, childcare use, or subjective experiences of work–family conflict. We therefore cannot fully rule out selection into employment or WFH among couples planning to have a(nother) child. Moreover, although the longitudinal design and lagged measures strengthen causal ordering, the short observation window captures relatively proximate fertility responses. Future research based on longer observation panels and richer information on work and care arrangements would help clarify the long-term role of WFH in family formation.

Despite these limitations, the study provides the first comparative longitudinal evidence on men’s, women’s, and couples’ WFH and birth transitions in Europe. Overall, the findings

suggest that WFH has the potential to enhance fertility, mostly for higher-order births and especially when embedded in secure employment and a supportive infrastructure of care. Otherwise, under conditions of institutional scarcity and uncertainty, WFH is more likely to operate as a private and gendered coping strategy, shifting reconciliation burdens onto households and deepening inequalities within families.

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