

# Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziologie Revue suisse de sociologie Swiss Journal of Sociology

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## **New Work – New Problems? Gender Perspectives on the Transformation of Work / New Work – New Problems? Geschlechterperspektiven auf den Wandel der Arbeit / New Work – New Problems? Perspectives de genre sur la transformation du travail**

Edited by Isabelle Zinn, Lucia M. Lanfranconi, Stephanie Steinmetz,  
Gesine Fuchs, Christina Bornatici, and Martina Peitz

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Núria Sánchez-Mira,  
and Stephanie Steinmetz Editorial [E]
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- Aashika Ravi Risky Business: Techno-Masculinist Conceptions of Flexibility  
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Ulrike Armbruster Elatifi

## Les usages de la ville par les personnes âgées

Collection Chôra

ISBN 978-2-88351-127-9  
312 pages, 15,5 × 22,5 cm  
Fr. 38.–/Euro 38.–

Quels usages les personnes âgées font-elles de l'espace urbain? Tout en se plaçant dans le cadre théorique d'une sociologie des épreuves, le questionnement se déploie sur deux axes: le premier porte sur l'impact de l'environnement sur l'avancée en âge; le deuxième interroge et scrute les modes de vie, les pratiques quotidiennes des personnes âgées dans l'espace urbain, ainsi que leur manière de le transformer, de le ruser, de s'y adapter pour répondre à leurs besoins, capacités et désirs. La partie empirique est constituée par une étude ethnographique menée durant deux ans avec vingt personnes âgées vivant dans une ville suisse.

Les planificateur-trice-s de la ville doivent davantage prendre en compte l'appropriation qui est faite de l'espace urbain par les personnes âgées afin de bâtir une ville hospitalière, inclusive et durable.

**Ulrike Armbruster Elatifi**, travailleuse sociale et sociologue, est maîtresse d'enseignement à la Haute école de travail social Genève (HETS) et chercheuse associée à l'Institut de recherches sociologiques (IRS) de l'Université de Genève. Ses intérêts de recherche portent sur la vieillesse et le vieillissement, l'espace urbain et le travail social.

## Editorial

Roman Gibel, Kenneth Horvath, Núria Sánchez-Mira, and Stephanie Steinmetz

2024 has been full of exciting new changes for the Swiss Journal of Sociology (SJS). In this inaugural issue, we would like to take the chance to inform our readership of all the novelties implemented over the last year, as well as to provide an overview on forthcoming issues and projects for 2025.

In last year's editorial, we already anticipated that 2024 would entail a thorough transformation of the journal to bring it into line with modern publishing standards, under the guidance of the editorial team, consisting of Kenneth Horvath (Zurich University of Teacher Education), Roman Gibel (University of Zurich), Stephanie Steinmetz (University of Lausanne), and Núria Sánchez-Mira (University of Neuchâtel), and with the essential support of the journal's manager, Marion Beetschen, who continues to ensure the day-to-day running of the journal. This exciting but intense process has culminated in 2024 in the re-launch of the journal on the Swiss-based publishing platform SOAP2, which offers all the functionalities of state-of-the-art academic publishing: including platinum open access, online first publication of articles, link with ORCID record, among other. The new website ([www.socio-journal.ch](http://www.socio-journal.ch)), with a modernized appearance, presents a straightforward and intuitive online submission process and clear and simplified guidelines for authors. As the SJS is published three times a year in regular issues, the possibility of publishing online first articles is a particularly valuable development. Authors no longer have to wait until the articles are published regularly but can already refer to the articles published online (with DOI). This ensures faster publication times.

Since 2025, for all new manuscripts submitted, the whole process from the receipt of the manuscript to the publication – including review, copyediting, and production – is handled through the new platform.

Over the year, the transition from an e-mail-based submission system to SOAP2 was conducted gradually and entailed a number of technical and operational challenges and adjustments. This transition would not have been possible without the support of all parties involved, including the technical team at SOAP2 and Thomas Henkel especially, the SGS-board, and the journal's publisher, Seismo. We take here the opportunity to thank, in particular, authors, reviewers, and special issue guest editors for their patience and collaboration during the process. The editorial team continues to update and improve the review and publication process, and 2025 will also see new developments, including the involvement of special issue guest editors in the management of the platform, the archiving of older issues, the complete renewal of the SJS's International Advisory Board, and the recruitment of new editors for



the core editorial team. A call for applications will be published in the spring, and we look forward to receiving your expressions of interest in joining our dynamic team of editors. In terms of content, 2024 included one special issue, 50(2), titled “Switzerland as a Site of Capital Accumulation: The Case of International Education”, edited by Karen Lillie and Anne-Sophie Delval, which focused on the reasons and processes by which foreign families and individuals, as well as local institutions capitalize on the Swiss private school market. The two *varia* issues, 50(1) and 50(3), offered a variety of topics and approaches, including theoretical discussions around temporality (Thoemmes), economic sociological perspectives on circuits of commerce of local currencies (Stamm), or how States make the market (Streckeisen et al.). Qualitative studies have addressed the production of narratives among applicants of financial aid (Paccaud & Tabin), the youthfulness among climate activists (Schaupp et al.), the making of school policy in Switzerland (Fouquet-Chaupdrade et al.), factors influencing transnational mobilities in old age (Tomás), and have attempted to answer whether legal sanctions can reduce cyberviolence (Stahel & Weingartner). Finally, we have published quantitative research on the impact of Covid-19 pandemic-related school closures on socioeconomic inequalities in schooling (Grätz et al.), credibility assessments in sexual orientation and gender identity in asylum cases (Schnell), and mixed methods approaches analysing heterosexist discrimination in dual vocational training (Dejussel et al.).

In 2025, we expect to publish three special issues. First, “New Work – New Problems? Gender Perspectives on the Transformation of Work” edited by Isabelle Zinn, Lucia M. Lanfranconi, Stephanie Steinmetz, Gesine Fuchs, Christina Bornatici, and Martina Peitz. Second, “Big Visual Data as a New Form of Knowledge. Theoretical Approaches, Methodological Procedures and Empirical Analyses”, edited by Sebastian W. Hoggenmüller. And third, “The Transformation of Banking from a Sociological Perspective”, edited by Philip Balsiger and Léna Pellandini-Simanyi. In turn, forthcoming *varia* articles will be published online first upon acceptance, before being published in a regular issue at the earliest possible point in time.

We look forward to receiving your articles and further interesting proposals for special issues in 2026!

The Editorial Board

Roman Gibel, Kenneth Horvath, Núria Sánchez-Mira, Stephanie Steinmetz

## New Work – New Problems? Gender Perspectives on the Transformation of Work. Introduction to the Special Issue

Lucia M. Lanfranconi\*, Isabelle Zinn\*, Stephanie Steinmetz\*\*, Gesine Fuchs°,  
and Christina Bornatici°°

*Abstract:* “New Work” practices, accelerated through the Covid-19 pandemic, offer opportunities for gender equity through flexible work arrangements, while they pose risks, especially for those with caregiving duties. This Special Issue features nine contributions from the 2023 conference “New Work – New Problems? Gender Perspectives on the Transformation of Work”. The articles examine remote work through a gender lens, explore evolving gender norms within organizations, and assess whether new work forms lead to dependencies and precarity globally. Collectively, they advocate for rethinking “work” to achieve a more equitable, just, and sustainable future.

*Keywords:* New work, gender, remote work, platform work, organizational norms

### New Work – New Problems? Perspectives de genre sur la transformation du travail. Introduction au dossier thématique

*Résumé:* Les nouvelles formes d'organisation du travail, promues par la pandémie de Covid-19, offrent des opportunités pour l'égalité des sexes grâce à des modalités de travail flexibles, tout en posant des risques, notamment pour les personnes à qui incombe le travail de care. Ce numéro thématique réunit neuf contributions de la conférence 2023 «New Work – New Problems?». Elles examinent le télétravail sous l'angle du genre, explorent l'évolution des normes de genre au sein des organisations et évaluent si les nouvelles formes de travail entraînent des dépendances et de la précarité à l'échelle mondiale. Collectivement, les articles plaident pour repenser le «travail» afin d'atteindre un avenir plus juste et plus durable.

*Mots-clés:* New work, genre, travail à distance, travail de plateforme, normes organisationnelles

### New Work – New Problems? Geschlechterperspektiven auf den Wandel der Arbeit. Einführung in das Themenheft

*Zusammenfassung:* «New Work»-Praktiken, beschleunigt durch die Covid-19-Pandemie, bieten Chancen für die Geschlechtergerechtigkeit durch flexible Arbeitsmodelle, bergen jedoch Risiken, insbesondere für Personen mit Betreuungsaufgaben. Dieses Sonderheft präsentiert neun Beiträge der Konferenz 2023 «New Work – New Problems? Geschlechterperspektiven auf die Transformation der Arbeit». Die Artikel untersuchen Telearbeit aus Geschlechterperspektive, erforschen sich wandelnde Geschlechternormen innerhalb von Organisationen und bewerten, ob neue Arbeitsformen weltweit zu Abhängigkeiten und Prekarität führen. Gemeinsam plädieren sie dafür, «Arbeit» neu zu denken, um eine gerechte und nachhaltige Zukunft zu erreichen.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Neue Arbeit, Geschlecht, Tele-Arbeit, Plattformarbeit, organisationale Normen

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## 1 Background<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 The Transformation of Work at the Intersection of Gender

Feminist scholars have long challenged conventional definitions of work, emphasizing the need of recognizing unpaid care work and domestic labor as essential components of economic systems and social reproduction (Federici, 1975). Building on this tradition, we define work in this introduction as encompassing both paid work (also referred to as occupation, employment, or job) and unpaid work (such as care and domestic work; Fuchs et al., 2021). At the same time, it is crucial to acknowledge that capitalist societies remain heavily centered and dependent on employment. In such systems, the job market plays a crucial role, not only in state budgets, stable social security systems, and ensuring economic livelihoods, but also in shaping social exclusion e.g. between those with (well-paid) jobs and those without (Piketty, 2020). In this logic of paid work an “ideal worker” model rooted in full-time male employment is deeply inherent (Acker, 1990).

Against this background, the concept of “New Work”, as articulated by Frithjof Bergmann (2019), challenges this traditional model by advocating a shift toward paid work that prioritizes employees’ well-being, meaning, and satisfaction – both in the workplace and beyond. A fundamental aspect of this concept is the empowerment of individuals to engage in occupations that align with their personal values and interests while also contributing to more sustainable pathways that offers an alternative to exhaustion, burnout, and the exploitation of oneself and others. Achieving this requires a comprehensive restructuring of employment systems to provide individuals with the necessary autonomy and resources.

In this context, technology is envisioned as a tool to automate mundane or repetitive tasks, thereby liberating individuals to engage in more meaningful pursuits and devoting more time to unpaid care work or civic engagement (Bücker, 2022; Fraser, 2022). Furthermore, this transition is predicated on a re-evaluation of economic models to support such transformations and pave the path for a more just society. However, while paid work is undergoing profound transformations, the current development is fragmented and has led to mixed outcomes. On the one hand, self-organization and flexible working patterns are becoming more prevalent leading to a degree of optimism and more autonomy, however, also stress and self-exploitation are on the rise. On the other hand, many employees continue to face

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1 Many thanks to Martina Peitz, Eva Granwehr, and all members of the scientific and organizational committee of the conference “New Work – New Problems”, organized by the Gender Studies Committee of the Swiss Sociological Association and the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, which took place in September 2023 in Lucerne. At the conference, we welcomed over 40 presentations from around the world (see Heidl, 2023; <https://www.hslu.ch/de-ch/soziale-arbeit/agenda/veranstaltungen/2023/09/07/new-work-2023/>, 27.01.2025).

precarious conditions which starkly contrast with the ideals of “New Work” (see articles in this special issue; Hardering, 2021; Schwiter & Steiner, 2020). It is thus important to keep in mind that specific social power relations shape the concrete prospects for a more just development (Fuchs & Graf, 2019).

Moreover, the core principles of “New Work” and the above-described transformations of paid work are closely tied to gender relations, as employment systems often reinforce gendered inequalities, and maintain the gender order (Acker, 1990; Connell, 1987, Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022), thereby limiting the potential for a full and equal inclusion of all individuals. By critiquing systems that devalue unpaid care work – still largely performed by women – and emphasizing self-determined employment, “New Work” may encourage a redistribution of responsibilities and opportunities across genders. However, most studies so far fail to fully address the broader implications of flexibilization and digital transformation on gender relations, particularly in the division between paid labor and unpaid care work.

Some research has explored the ambivalent effects of digitalization, noting that it offers both opportunities and challenges for gender equity, shaping career paths, caregiving roles, and workplace dynamics (Kutzner & Schnier, 2017). While the digital transformation can challenge stereotypes, it often reinforces outdated norms and structural inequalities (Hardering, 2020). For example, digital tools that promote flexible occupational arrangements are often heralded as facilitating more egalitarian workplace cultures. Yet, these tools frequently fail to address deeper, systemic issues, such as the persistent “gender time gap” in unpaid care work (Huws, 2019; Kümmerling et al., 2015). In addition, digitalization can lead to blurred boundaries between employment and personal life which increases stress, introduce health risks, and disproportionately impact women, who are more likely to shoulder unpaid domestic labor (Bornatici & Zinn, 2025; Fuchs et al., 2021; Lanfranconi et al., 2019). Despite hopes for decentralized decision-making and participatory collaboration enabled by digital tools, persistent gendered expectations around availability and commitment often undermine these possibilities (Huws, 2019). Women face significant challenges under flexible conditions, which demand long hours and constant availability. These expectations perpetuate the “ideal worker” (Acker, 1990). Part-time employment, predominantly held by women to accommodate caregiving, continue to hinder career advancement, and reinforces occupational segregation (Scheele, 2018).

This makes it clear that while digital transformation and flexibilization have the potential for more egalitarian paid and unpaid work practices, they often fail to do so due to structural inequalities and entrenched gender norms. The lack of sufficient empirical research further limits our understanding of how these shifts impact work-life balance, caregiving responsibilities, and career trajectories.

## 1.2 The Covid-19 Pandemic as a Transformation Catalyst: Gender, Caregiver, and Global Inequalities

While the above-described labor market transformations took place over the last decades with various speeds depending on the country context, the Covid-19 pandemic acted worldwide as a catalyst for the flexibilization of employment, rapidly transforming working conditions and structures. Flexible occupational arrangements – such as more flexibility in terms of time and place – were implemented almost overnight, creating opportunities for greater autonomy, balancing employment and personal life. However, the challenges associated with this rapid “flexibilization” were also significant, often leading to higher workloads, employer demands for constant availability, and work-life blending. During the pandemic schools and care institutions in many countries remained closed creating a significant gap in care work that had to be filled (Lanfranconi et al., 2021). In this context, a key question concerns the implications of these rapid, pandemic-induced transformations for gender equality.

The consequences of the pandemic from a gender perspective have been ambiguous. For example, European studies indicated gendered concerns, with women especially worried about childcare and men about paid work (Czymara et al., 2020; Eurofound, 2022; OECD, 2021) and increased mental health problems among women (Daly et al., 2022). Swiss studies showed that while men living in households with children became more engaged in unpaid work during the pandemic, women with children were disproportionately more affected by additional care work (Bütikofer et al., 2020; Lanfranconi et al., 2021; Steinmetz et al., 2022). Overall, the existing (gender) inequalities in paid and unpaid work have been reinforced and the gap widened, with single parents and caregivers for children or dependent adults being most impacted by lockdowns and quarantines (Fuchs et al., 2021).

Further research showed that this increased burden contributed, particularly for women, to higher levels of stress (Kuhn et al., 2021), mental health challenges, and with long-term implications for career advancement and earnings (Bahn et al., 2020; Ballif & Zinn, 2023). On a more structural level, women were disproportionately affected by job losses and reduced working hours, particularly in sectors like retail, hospitality, and caregiving, which employ a high proportion of women and were heavily impacted by lockdowns. For instance, studies from multiple countries highlighted that women were more likely than men to be employed in jobs considered non-essential but customer-facing, resulting in higher unemployment rates for women during the early stages of the pandemic. Conversely, many women in essential roles, such as healthcare and education, faced heightened exposure to the virus and increased workloads (Kabeer et al., 2021; Paz Nieves et al., 2021).

Yet, on the global scale, the Covid-19 pandemic has – again with some ambiguous effects – revealed and reinforced dependencies, hierarchies, and the privileges of the Global North. The increase in global inequality and poverty was largest in 2020 since at least 1990 (Mahler et al., 2022). Supply chain disruptions, such as short-

ages of protective materials, highlighted these inequalities, as did the breakdown of global care chains. For instance, border closures interrupted shuttle migration of live-in caregivers from Eastern Europe to German-speaking countries (Schwiter & Steiner, 2021). These shifts in the global division of employment and migration regimes are deeply structured by gender and other dimensions of inequality (Seminario, 2021; Sproll, 2020).

The pandemic also accelerated the proliferation of remote work on a global scale. Jobs that once required physical presence have increasingly become “anywhere jobs”, decoupled from geographical constraints. While these opportunities were previously reserved for a small segment of highly skilled workers, the normalization of remote work has expanded the potential for outsourcing tasks to countries in the Global South. This shift raises critical questions about its impact on labor markets and gender relations (Kakkad et al., 2021). Moreover, the digital divide significantly shaped women’s experiences of the pandemic. Limited access to technology and digital skills among women, especially in low-income and rural areas, constrained their ability to participate in remote work, access online services, and engage in digital learning opportunities (Mathrani et al., 2023; UN Women, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). The implication of the global outsourcing of jobs enabled by remote work, remain underexplored, as it could entrench new forms of labor exploitation in the Global South, disproportionately affecting women workers. These dynamics demand further investigation to ensure that the expansion of remote work contributes to more equitable labor markets and does not exacerbate existing inequalities.

### 1.3 The Role of Work-Gender Policies

The concept of “New Work” holds the potential to promote fairer living conditions and greater gender justice by challenging traditional employment structures and expanding the understanding of work beyond paid labor. Recent data from Switzerland demonstrate strong public support for increased recognition and remuneration of unpaid care work, as well as paid parental leave (Fuchs et al., 2021). These demands echo longstanding feminist critiques of the narrow definition of work (Méda, 2019) and call for a broader perspective of work that includes unpaid care and civic engagement.

The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified debates about these labor transformations, exposing structural inequalities and the essential role of care work. Recognizing care work as fundamental has underscored capitalism’s dependence on unpaid and underpaid labor, reinforcing the gendered division of work (Federici, 1975; Wichterich, 2021). This awareness raises critical questions: Will these shifts lead to emancipatory change, or will they exacerbate precarity, exploitation, and occupational intensification? The answer depends on political processes and the policies that emerge in response to these transformations. As Himmelweit and Plomien (2014) argue, care and its gendered provision remain a key feminist concern, and

the unequal distribution of care labor reflects and reinforces broader structural inequalities, as highlighted by social reproduction theory and Black and decolonial critiques (Beier et al., 2023).

The pandemic indeed revealed the urgent need for social security reforms, as the “standard employment relationship” (Hardering, 2020) continues to decline and hybrid employment models like platform work expand. Governments demonstrated strong capacities and willingness to provide income security during the crisis, but disparities in resources led to uneven protections across and within countries (Kabeer et al., 2021). A notable example is the expansion of short-time work compensation, which helped stabilize labor markets. In Switzerland, these policies were relatively inclusive, offering greater support to lower earners and covering non-standard employment categories such as the self-employed, part-time, fixed-term, and domestic workers (Pärli et al., 2023). In some cases, these policies acknowledged childcare responsibilities as grounds for income compensation, and short-time work allowances even extended to reduced working hours – all measures that disproportionately benefited women (see Cook & Grimshaw, 2021, for EU countries).

However, new employment models, such as platform work, continue to pose challenges. Research confirms that women in platform work face heightened precarity, low wages, and discrimination. Comparative studies between Germany and the U.S. indicate that institutional differences significantly influence how welfare policies mitigate or exacerbate insecurity and precarity (Gerber, 2022). Regulation and policy design are crucial in shaping employment conditions, yet they are informed by gender stereotypes, problem definitions (cf. Bacchi, 1999), and political discourses on the relationship between state and economy. The details of policy implementation – who is included, who is excluded – are critical in determining whether new policies foster fair employment.

Overall, there is an urgent need to systematically integrate a gender perspective into analyses of work transformations, in the context of the pandemic, at the local, organizational, and global level. With this Special Issue, based on the 2023 conference “New Work – New Problems? Gender Perspectives on the Transformation of Work”, organized by the Gender Studies committee of the Swiss Sociological Association and the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences, we aim to address some of these gaps and shortcomings.

## 2 Contributions of the Special Issue

The special issue seeks to address these gaps by examining how changes in work forms and conditions affect the compatibility of paid employment with unpaid care work, the division of labor between genders, and evolving gender norms. It brings together nine contributions organized into three overarching themes. The

first three contributions focus on remote work through a gender lens. The second set of articles examines the transformation of gendered norms at the organizational level, exploring how these shifts affect workplace practices and policies. The final three contributions adopt a global perspective, investigating whether new forms of work create new dependencies and forms of precarity.

## 2.1 The Gendered Impacts of Remote Work

These three contributions examine a specific form of “New Work” that expanded during the pandemic, namely remote work.

*Regine Graml and Veronika Kneip* focus on the gender-specific effects of working from home on careers. Their systematic literature review shows that career prospects for remote workers are influenced by stereotypes and stigmas, particularly affecting women (with and without children), and fathers. They conclude that the impact of working from home is contingent on an organization’s formal or informal culture and its adherence to the ideal worker norm. Based on these findings, they propose a phased model of structural and cultural change. The model emphasizes that a more formal organization of employment and cultural shifts towards greater work autonomy and employer’s trust, with clear processes and communication, can help narrow the gender gap in remote work settings.

*Anja Abendroth, Yvonne Lott, Lena Hipp, Sandra Dummert, and Tanja Carstensen* introduce the concept of “digital presence behavior” to describe how employees establish “presence” without being on-site. This encompasses digital availability, visibility, multitasking, and participation. Analysis of data from remote workers highlights the ambivalence and inequalities associated with digital technologies. The analysis reveals that men tended to be more digitally available than women, while mothers prioritized digital visibility and fathers frequently engaged in digital multitasking. Moreover, the persistent expectation of constant digital availability reflects the ongoing idealization of the “ideal worker” – always accessible and prioritizing employment – even in the digital era.

*Jana Z’Rotz, Timo Ohnmacht, and Patrick Rérat* examine the impact of gender differences in teleworking on daily mobility. Based on a cross-sectional survey, the study reveals that women and men differ in their attitudes toward teleworking and in how they utilize the time saved from commuting. The findings indicate that frequent teleworkers tend to have longer commutes, particularly men. Women prioritize efficiency and minimal disruption while teleworking, whereas men report greater challenges with distractions, self-discipline, and motivation. Parental status often amplifies these gender-based differences.

Overall, the three contributions reveal that “old problems”, such as the unequal distribution of household tasks, the “ideal worker” norm, and flexibility stigma, persist in remote work settings, reproducing gender inequalities. However,

they also identify opportunities for teleworking to reduce inequalities and highlight how working from home can benefit gender equality when implemented under the right conditions.

## 2.2 Reproduction or Re-Construction of Gender Norms on an Organizational Level

The following three contributions examine the opportunities and risks of “New Work” during the pandemic, focusing primarily on the organizational level.

*Lucia M. Lanfranconi's* contribution is based on an online survey of 31 family-friendly employers in two Swiss regions during spring 2021 on organizational responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of these employers benefited from pre-existing family-friendly practices in crisis management. However, a contradiction emerges: while caregivers were recognized as disproportionately affected, women and mothers bore the greatest challenges but were not explicitly acknowledged as more impacted. By adopting a gender-blind, equal-treatment approach, these employers unintentionally exacerbated gender inequalities, shifting the burden to caregivers – predominantly mothers – while failing to take responsibility for addressing these disparities.

*Hanna Haag and Markus Gamper* investigate how fathers in academia navigate care work within the meritocratic performance system of science. Using qualitative data from two studies on the pandemic's effects at German universities, they show that the Covid-19 crisis prompted some fathers to challenge heteronormative expectations of scientific identities. These experiences led to new caregiving practices and a reimagined self-image as “caring scientists”, highlighting the potential for transformation in academic working conditions.

*Alexandra Wrška* explores gender dynamics in collaborative workspaces in rural Austria, using ethnographic research from two organizations, including one focused on women. Interviews with users, managers, and operators reveal how organizational structures and workspace design influence gender (in)equality. The study underscores the potential of collaborative workspaces to serve as inclusive environments that address the specific needs and challenges of women in non-urban areas, while also identifying mechanisms through which inequality can persist or be reduced.

Overall, the contributions show how the pandemic created opportunities to rethink and renegotiate organizational structures and cultures. For example, during the pandemic employers recognized rising care inequalities, although often through a gender-blind approach, fathers in academia adopted new caregiving roles, and collaborative workspaces emerged as potential egalitarian work environments. However, these studies also reveal significant risks. As long as societal structures remain shaped by gender inequalities, and care work continues to be undervalued, achieving genuine equity for women and caregivers – regardless of gender – will remain a challenge. Collectively, they underline the critical need to address gender

norms and care inequalities within the evolving framework of “New Work”. While some progress has been made, meaningful structural and cultural changes are essential to create truly inclusive and equitable workplaces.

### 2.3 Global Perspectives: New Work – New Dependencies and Precarity

The final three contributions adopt a global perspective, focusing on precarious working conditions.

*Lisa Katharina Stalder* uses critical frame analysis to examine diverse policy documents from Swiss cantons on the regulation of sex work. She demonstrates that problem definitions and proposed solutions primarily focus on traditional forms of sex work associated with migrant women. Recent changes, such as digitalization, shifting mobility regimes, and evolving norms, are largely overlooked. Moreover, the discourse fails to adequately address the risks of exploitation. Precarity remains high due to limited regulation and the absence of labor rights for mobile migrant sex workers. As a result, the concept of sex work as “New work” – work that benefits the worker – appears hardly feasible.

*Romina Cutuli, Inés Pérez, and Débora Garazi* evaluate the *registradas* scheme to include the mostly informal domestic workers in the social security and protection system in Argentina. It<sup>2</sup> targeted the sector after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsidized the employment of domestic workers by middle-income employers. The analysis, supported by document analysis and expert interview, shows that three out of four workers continue to lack social protection. Thus, the program has little impact on gender equality in employment.

*Aashika Ravi* analyzes the experiences of women in India working for location-based digital platforms such as Uber. Based on narrative interviews, the study reveals a heightened risk of sexist and sexual violence, exacerbated by the inherent irresponsibility of the platforms. Information asymmetries and non-transparent algorithms make female workers, who rely on flexibility, particularly vulnerable. Ravi attributes this situation to underlying neoliberal ideals of freedom and entrepreneurship, as well as a techno-masculinist notion of flexibility embedded in the functioning of these platforms.

From different perspectives, these three contributions highlight that “New work” – defined as employment that serves workers’ needs and aspirations – requires regulation. As Stalder (in this issue, p. 148) explains, state intervention can promote the structural conditions for meaningful work and strengthen workers’ possibilities to make autonomous choices. For instance, sex workers need enforceable rights, platform workers require effective protection from sexual violence, and domestic workers need social citizenship. None of these protections will emerge automatically from new forms of employment.

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2     *Registradas* refer to the objective of the scheme, namely, to newly register more domestic workers.

### 3 Key Insights and Recommendations from the Special Issue<sup>3</sup>

Overall, the contributions of the special issue underscore the complex relationship between evolving work forms and persistent gender inequalities. In the following we highlight the key insights and lessons learned at the individual, organizational, and societal level.

At the *individual level* several contributions to this special issue underscore the importance of *promoting flexible and hybrid occupational arrangements* to accommodate diverse employee's needs. These measures not only help avoid rigid mandates for office presence but also leverage the strengths of various employment environments to enhance inclusion and efficiency (Z'Rotz et al., in this issue). Flexible arrangements, such as remote and hybrid work, are particularly valuable in addressing the diverse responsibilities of employees, including caregiving. While digital tools can enhance visibility and participation for caregivers, they also risk blurring work-life boundaries, thereby increasing stress. The challenge of balancing digital availability and multitasking – experienced acutely by fathers and mothers – illustrates the persistence of the “ideal worker” norm in the digital age (Abendroth et al., in this issue). Hybrid employment models should therefore strike a balance between in-office and remote work, tailored to diverse employee needs. Research shows that greater autonomy over occupational content, time, and location correlates with improved work-life balance (for an overview see Lanfranconi et al., 2019).

To further promote equity, *traditional performance indicators, such as “face time”, should be avoided*. Instead, organizations should align personnel development, evaluation, and communication systems to recognize achievements in a way that supports underrepresented groups. For example, structured processes for presenting results can enhance visibility for women, who are often overlooked in informal workplace dynamics (Abendroth et al., in this issue).

The pandemic highlighted the *need for greater support for men in caregiving roles* while creating opportunities to challenge the long-standing “omni-availability” norm that ties professional success to total dedication to paid work (Haag & Gamper, in this issue). These shifts at the individual level, however, could foster broader cultural change, promoting a more equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities within organizations and society. To capitalize on these moments of change, in particular organizations should actively support and normalize men's involvement in caregiving which can help dismantle traditional gender roles and promote a more balanced approach to caregiving responsibilities across genders fostering a more inclusive workplace.

At the *organizational level* the Covid-19 pandemic exposed the urgent need for a *redefinition of the “ideal worker” norm and greater gender-consciousness* within

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3 For a short German version of practical recommendations at the company level of the overall conference “New Work – New Problems”, see Heidl (2023).

organizations. Several contributions highlight how the persistence of this outdated norm continues to reproduce gender inequalities, also in emerging employment models like remote work (Abendroth et al., in this issue; Graml & Kneip, in this issue). Lanfranconi (in this issue) further demonstrates that gender-blind equal-treatment norms at the organizational level exacerbated preexisting inequalities in organizations during the pandemic. These findings emphasize the importance of shifting from a gender-blind equality approach to a gender-conscious equity approach in organizational policies and decision-making. Practically, this requires acknowledging the gendered realities of unpaid care work to prevent the perpetuation of inequalities. Organizations must also redefine the “ideal worker” in line with Bergmann’s (2019) concept of “New Work”, which prioritizes employee well-being, meaningful engagement, and job satisfaction over rigid, traditional productivity metrics.

A further key lesson from the pandemic is that organizations must *initiate cultural and structural changes*. While accelerated digitalization has enabled flexible work arrangements, such as remote work, flexibility alone is insufficient to achieve gender equity. Without accompanying cultural changes, flexibility stigmas persist, particularly for women, who are often perceived as less committed due to caregiving responsibilities. Moreover, to address these barriers, structural changes like remote work must be combined with cultural shifts that dismantle the outdated “ideal worker” stereotype. Organizations should adopt a holistic employee model that values diverse roles and contributions from various life areas, fostering motivation, health, and inclusivity (Graml & Kneip, in this issue; Haag & Gamper, in this issue).

On a more concrete level, *inclusively designed collaborative workspaces* hold the potential to serve as egalitarian environments and alternative workplaces for women, particularly in non-urban areas. When designed thoughtfully, such spaces can address the specific needs of female knowledge workers, enabling them to thrive in equitable and supportive environments (Wrbka in this issue). However, it is essential to recognize that they are not a panacea for workplace inequalities. Structural challenges such as gender gaps and societal expectations continue to shape women’s professional experiences. To maximize their potential, workspaces must prioritize flexibility, security, personal development, and networking opportunities. A deliberate and inclusive approach to designing collaborative workspaces can help bridge existing gaps and empower women in both urban and rural contexts.

Finally, achieving gender equity following the ideal of “New Work” would also require *targeted societal interventions*. These interventions must address systemic inequalities in caregiving responsibilities, legal protections, and worker representation to ensure equitable outcomes for all genders. More concretely, a core finding of the special issue is that societies need to invest *in family policies and childcare*. Addressing the unequal distribution of housework and caregiving responsibilities is critical to preventing remote work and other flexible employment arrangements from reinforcing traditional gender roles. Structural and cultural changes are essential to

achieve equitable outcomes for all employees, regardless of gender (Lanfranconi, in this issue; Z'Rotz et al., in this issue). Robust family policies, including affordable childcare for both preschool and school-aged children, as well as equal parental leave for mothers and fathers, are key to reducing the disproportionate caregiving burden on women and encourage shared responsibilities within households. Investment in these areas can help ensure that remote work arrangements support rather than hinder gender equity (Lanfranconi, in this issue).

Furthermore, the rise of informal work and new employment models, such as shuttle migration and platform-based labor, has shifted risks and responsibilities onto workers while leaving profits and decision-making power with employers or platform owners. *Legal regulations and their enforcement* are therefore essential to protecting workers' rights and fostering equitable opportunities, as demonstrated by three contributions in this issue (Stalder, in this issue; Cutuli et al., in this issue; Ravi, in this issue). In this context, policy makers must consider prospective gender impacts when drafting inclusive legislation, particularly given the vulnerabilities associated with informal and platform work. Emerging forms of labor organization and worker representation in these sectors, while promising, remain largely ungendered in research and policy discussions (Dasgupta et al., 2024). For example, prospects for effective regulation might differ between regions in the Global South, where informal work is widespread, and countries like Switzerland, where subsequent rulings of the Federal Supreme Court classified Uber as an employer in several cantons (Pärli, 2023). National labor market regimes and gender regimes also shape the effectiveness of regulation, requiring tailored approaches that take these variations into account (Ametowobla & Kirchner, 2024).

A final aspect of the increasing necessity for *worker empowerment in informal and platform-based work* is the crucial role played by (grassroots) organizations, trade unions, and other forms of collective action. These entities are essential for improving working conditions and providing self-protection for workers in these sectors. (Ravi, in this issue; Cutuli et al., in this issue; Poblete, 2022). An emerging alternative, platform cooperativism, offers a promising model for worker empowerment, though it faces structural tensions between platform and cooperative work models (Mannan & Pek, 2024). However, these challenges should not deter efforts to explore and support alternative organizational models. Instead, they should inspire political and practical strategies to strengthen collective worker representation and ensure that emerging forms of labor organizing address gender disparities. Researchers and political actors alike must engage in fostering gender-sensitive approaches to representation and policy advocacy (cf. Salvagni et al., 2022).

Overall, the contributions of this special issue highlight the need to seize the opportunity presented by the concept of "New Work", amplified by the pandemic, to fundamentally rethink "work" at the individual, organizational, political, and societal levels.

## 4 Perspectives

The pandemic has intensified discussions on the transition to a post-capitalist and post-growth society (Méda, 2019; Steinberger, 2020). The crisis moment has highlighted the urgency of rethinking labor structures from a feminist perspective – one that centers on social justice, challenges the invisibility of unpaid work, and questions the primacy of wage labor as the defining metric of economic and personal worth. Yet, as of 2025, heightened awareness of these issues has not translated into profound socio-political or ecological transformations beyond the paradigm of endless growth. As shown in this issue the ideal worker norm continues to dominate also during the pandemic (Abendroth et al.; Graml & Kneip; Lanfranconi) and thus to obscure its reliance on care work and the natural environment (Fraser, 2016; Scholz & Heilmann, 2018).

Working time reduction could offer a concrete strategy for disrupting these exploitative dynamics. Reducing working hours has long been a feminist demand, that not only has the potential to facilitate a more equitable division of care responsibilities but also promote well-being and social participation beyond market productivity (Beck, 2000; Fraser, 2013). A reduced working time is crucial for environmental sustainability, as excessive labor fuels consumerism and resource depletion (Antal et al., 2021).

These necessary transformations resonate with Bergmann's (2019) vision of "New Work", which sought to transcend the crises generated by our current modes of working and living. While often overlooked, his approach aligns with feminist critiques of wage labor (Fraser 2013; 2016; Young, 1988), envisioning a future where work prioritizes self-determination, collective well-being, and ecological balance, ensuring the stability and health of ecosystems over time. As feminist scholars have long argued, truly transformative labor models must center those who have historically been excluded from economic decision-making, ensuring that future work structures are not only more inclusive but also capable of fostering a just and sustainable world within planetary boundaries.

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## Gendered Stereotypes on Working From Home (WFH) Before and After the Pandemic – A Literature Review

Regine Graml\* and Veronika Kneip\*

*Abstract:* Working from home (WFH) has received a lot of attention due to the Covid-19-related lockdown phases. Questions about the impact of WFH on careers and possible effects on women have not yet been sufficiently investigated. The results of the systematic literature review show, that the career prospects of employees who work from home depend on stereotypes and related stigmas within the working environment, which particularly affect women. Based on the results, a phase model of structural and cultural change for organizations with implications for women's career prospects is developed.

*Keywords:* Career, gender gap, working from home, change, systematic literature review

### **Stéréotypes sexistes sur le travail à domicile avant et après la pandémie – une revue de la littérature**

*Résumé:* Working from home (WFH), le travail à domicile, a suscité une grande attention en raison des phases du confinement liées au Covid-19. Les questions relatives aux effets du travail à domicile sur l'évolution de la carrière des employé·es, ainsi que les effets possibles sur les femmes, n'ont pas été suffisamment étudiées jusqu'à présent. Les résultats de l'analyse systématique de la littérature montrent que les perspectives de carrière des employé·es qui travaillent à domicile dépendent des stéréotypes et des stigmates associés dans l'environnement de travail, qui affectent particulièrement les femmes. Sur la base de ces résultats, un modèle de changement structurel et culturel pour les organisations avec des implications pour les perspectives de carrière des femmes est développé.

*Mots-clés:* Carrière, écart entre les hommes et les femmes, travail à domicile, changement, analyse systématique de la littérature

### **Geschlechtsspezifische Stereotype zur Arbeit im Homeoffice vor und nach der Pandemie – ein Literaturüberblick**

*Zusammenfassung:* Working from home (WFH), das Arbeiten im Homeoffice, hat durch die Covid-19 bedingten Lockdown-Phasen hohe Aufmerksamkeit erhalten. Fragen nach den Auswirkungen von WFH auf die Karriere von Mitarbeitenden sowie nach möglichen Effekten für Frauen wurden bislang nicht ausreichend untersucht. Die Ergebnisse der systematischen Literatur-Analyse zeigen, dass bei WFH die Karriereperspektiven von unterschiedlichen Stereotypen und Stigmata innerhalb des Arbeitsumfelds abhängen, von denen insbesondere Frauen betroffen sind. Aufbauend auf den Ergebnissen wird ein Phasenmodell des strukturellen und kulturellen Wandels für Organisationen mit Implikationen für die Karriere von Frauen entwickelt.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Karriere, Gender Gap, Homeoffice, Wandel, systematische Literaturanalyse

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## 1 Introduction

Explanations for unjustified unequal treatment of women in the workforce comprise structural as well as ideological barriers. Structural barriers include for instance the unequal distribution of care work and related reconciliation issues, while ideological barriers refer to prejudices and stereotypes (Holst & Wiemer, 2010). The latter include, for example, the prejudice that women are less career-oriented than men (Kohaut & Möller, 2022).

Our question relates to the impact of working from home (WFH) on (women's) career prospects and/or barriers, including occupational prestige and financial attainment but also the ability to develop one's talents (Olson & Shultz, 2013). Thereby, we focus on WFH schemes that are part of flexible working arrangements in general and that involve a certain degree of time flexibility (Neidlinger et al., 2022). With regard to the degree of temporal freedom, we particularly refer to the discretion of employees to independently determine the start, timing, and end of working hours. This arrangement can apply to both full-time and part-time employment just as the scope of WFH can range from a few hours to the entire working day or week. Typically, WFH also involves the use of digital tools and technologies to communicate, collaborate, and complete work tasks (International Labour Organization, 2021).

The various effects of WFH have been studied for some time and have attracted even more attention with the expansion during the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, WFH in organizations is said to have increased significantly compared to pre-Covid-19 levels (Barrero et al., 2023). Although it is too early to conclude whether the pandemic has led to lasting changes, a systematic analysis of the literature can be used to track developments and show the initial impact of the pandemic on WFH in terms of women's careers. We include studies published before and since the pandemic in order to answer the following research questions:

- › What constructs can be found in the literature that help explain the relationship between WFH and career?
- › What implications of WFH on women's careers does the literature reveal?
- › What changes have resulted from the pandemic with regard to the assessment of WFH?

Our approach is as follows: We outline the methodology of the systematic literature review, followed by the presentation of our findings according to the developed categorization. In the subsequent discussion and implication, we reflect on our findings and develop a framework with practical implications for employers.

## 2 Methodology

In order to gain comprehensive, systematic, and relevant insights into the career prospects of women working from home, we conducted a systematic literature review between April and September 2022 (Moher et al., 2015; Torracco, 2016). In the first step, we deliberately did not include any explicit reference to women in our search string. Thus, we wanted to ensure we also covered articles that included effects on women as a minor topic without omitting relevant articles on WFH and career development. Based on our preliminary research on the topic, we decided on the following search string:

*(work from home OR teleworking OR flexible work OR remote working OR home office OR flex work) AND (career development)*

We chose Business Source Premier as our database, which initially produced 418 results. Then we applied the following two main filters in our research:

- › Peer-reviewed articles in academic journals: We filtered for peer-reviewed publications to ensure a high scientific standard.
- › Time window: 2010–2022. As the topic WFH has become more relevant due to the Covid-19 crisis, we aimed to include the most recent publications until and including 2022. At the same time, our research extended back to 2010 to take account of the digitization surge and working-from-home opportunities over the last decade.

This selection initially produced 83 results. We then screened the references according to their relevance by reading through all the abstracts, thus reducing the number of records to a total of 18. The selection criteria were research in the field of WFH, coupled with the subject of career and particular effects on women's careers. Afterwards, we checked the most relevant sections of each article to assess their relevance, leaving 14 articles in the final selection for this round.

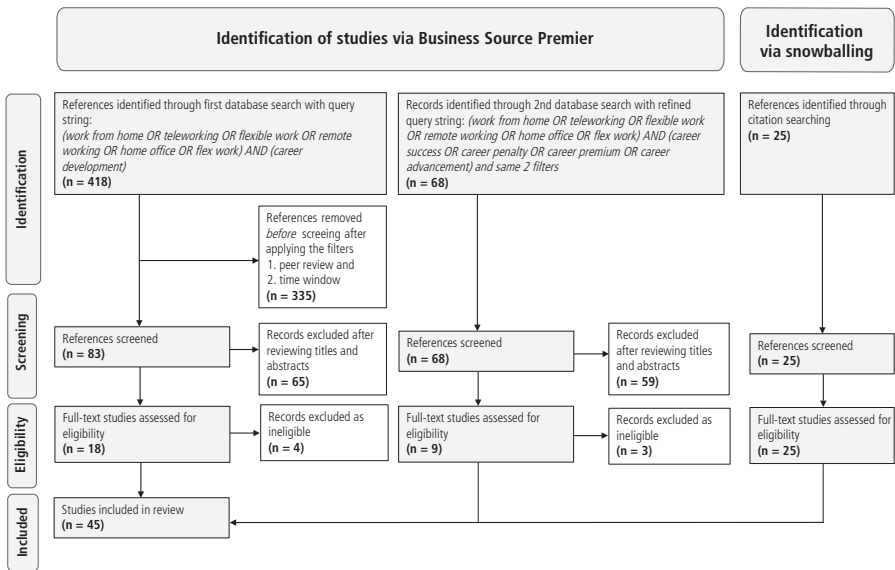
Based on the 14 relevant articles retrieved, a second step was taken, again using the Business Source Premier database, with a refined query string:

*(work from home OR teleworking OR flexible work OR remote working OR home office OR flex work) AND (career success OR career penalty OR career premium OR career advancement)*

On the basis of this approach and using the above-mentioned filters, we obtained 68 articles overall. In this round, 9 articles were selected based on their title and abstract. After checking if they met the aforementioned criteria, 6 articles were chosen for the final selection.

From the 20 selected articles, the topics on flexibility stigma, femininity stigma, and motherhood penalty in connection with flexible work and consequences for women stood out as being particularly relevant to the research questions. Therefore, in a third research step, we applied the snowball sampling method (Wohlin et al., 2022) to find suitable articles on the aforementioned topics listed in the references of previously evaluated relevant articles. Again, the titles were screened for eligibility, and then 25 selected articles were reviewed in more detail. A total of 45 articles (41 empirical studies and 4 literary works) were used for the subject of this research paper.

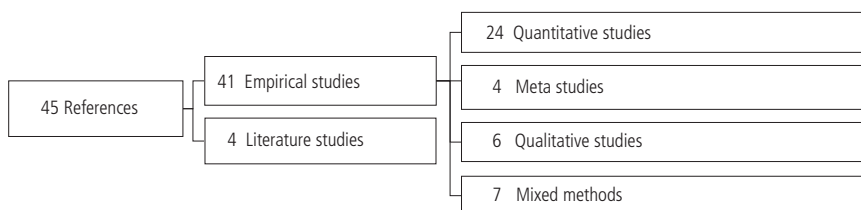
Figure 1 Systematic Review Protocol



The 41 empirical studies are composed of 24 quantitative studies, 6 qualitative studies, 4 meta studies, and 7 mixed-method studies.

The largest number of empirical studies, a total of 19 reports, relate to English-speaking countries (9 studies from the U.S., 5 studies from the U.K., and 5 studies from Australia, Canada, and Ireland), followed by other European countries and country comparisons amounting to 10 studies. The remaining empirical studies are from Israel (1), China (1), South Korea (1), and Indonesia (1), while further reports do not reference a specific country.

Figure 2 Composition of the Studies Included in the Review



To analyze the 45 studies, we used qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (2014). First, we defined major categories based on the research questions and the material and refined them through pilot coding. In the subsequent coding phase, we coded the entire material and assigned each article to one or more categories. In addition, we deepened the coding within the main categories and finally established connections between the categories. Table 1 shows the main categories and the assignment of each article.

Table 1 Overview of Records With Main Categories

| Authors, year                              | Title  | Categories                                       |
|--|--|--|
| Abendroth, Lott, Hipp, Müller et al., 2022 | Has the COVID-19 pandemic changed gender- and parental-status-specific differences in working from home? Panel evidence from Germany | WFH effects during Covid-19                      |
| Arntz, Sarra, Berlingieri, 2019            | Working from Home: Heterogeneous Effects on Hours Worked and Wages   | Gender related effects of WFH                    |
| Barhate, Hirudayaraj, 2021                 | Emerging Career Realities during the Pandemic: What Does it Mean for Women's Career Development?                                     | WFH effects during Covid-19                      |
| Bontrager, Clinton, Tyner, 2021            | Flexible Work Arrangements: A Human Resource Development Tool to Reduce Turnover   | Flexibility paradox, WFH effects during Covid-19 |
| Borgkvist, Moore, Crabb, Elliott, 2021     | Critical considerations of workplace flexibility "for all" and gendered outcomes: Men being flexible about their flexibility         | Motherhood penalty                               |
| Bornstein, 2013                            | The Legal and Policy Implications of the "Flexibility Stigma"  | Flexibility paradox, Motherhood penalty          |
| Brown, 2010                                | The relationship between motherhood and professional advancement   | Flexibility paradox                              |
| Cabrera, 2009                              | Fixing the Leaky Pipeline: Five Ways to Retain Female Talent   | Gender related effects of WFH                    |

*Continuation of Table 1 on the next page.*

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| Authors, year                                  | Title  | Categories                                     |
|--|--|--|
| Cech, Blair-Loy, 2014                          | Consequences of Flexibility Stigma Among Academic Scientists and Engineers   | Flexible work stigma                           |
| Chung, 2019                                    | 'Women's work penalty' in access to flexible working arrangements across Europe  | Gender related effects of WFH                  |
| Chung, 2020                                    | Gender, Flexibility Stigma and the Perceived Negative Consequences of Flexible Working in the UK   | Femininity stigma                              |
| Chung, Birkett, Forbes, Seo, 2021              | Covid-19, Flexible Working, and Implications for Gender Equality in the United Kingdom   | Femininity stigma, WFH effects during Covid-19 |
| Chung, van der Horst, 2018                     | Women's employment patterns after childbirth and the perceived access to and use of flexitime and teleworking                            | Gender related effects of WFH                  |
| Chung, van der Horst, 2020                     | Flexible Working and Unpaid Overtime in the UK: The Role of Gender, Parental and Occupational Status                                     | Gender related effects of WFH                  |
| Chung, van der Lippe, 2020                     | Flexible Working, Work-Life Balance, and Gender Equality: Introduction   | Gender related effects of WFH                  |
| Clark, McGrane, Boyle, Joksimovic et al., 2021 | "You're a teacher you're a mother, you're a worker": Gender inequality during COVID-19 in Ireland  | WFH effects during Covid-19                    |
| Crowley, Kolenikov, 2014                       | Flexible Work Options and Mothers' Perceptions of Career Harm  | Gender related effects of WFH                  |
| Delany, 2021                                   | What challenges will organisations face transitioning for the first time to the new normal of remote working?                            | WFH effects during Covid-19                    |
| Dijkers, van Engen, Vinkenburg, 2010           | Flexible work: ambitious parents' recipe for career success in The Netherlands   | Gender related effects of WFH                  |
| Fuller, Hirsh, 2019                            | "Family-Friendly" Jobs and Motherhood Pay Penalties: The Impact of Flexible Work Arrangements Across the Educational Spectrum            | Motherhood penalty                             |
| Frize, Lhotska, Marcu, Stoeva et al., 2021     | The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on gender-related work from home in STEM fields-Report of the WiMPBME Task Group                         | WFH effects during Covid-19                    |
| Gazit, Zaidman, van Dijk, 2021                 | Career self-management perceptions reflected in the psychological contract of virtual employees: a qualitative and quantitative analysis | Flexible work stigma                           |
| Golden, Eddleston, 2020                        | Is there a price telecommuters pay? Examining the relationship between telecommuting and objective career success                        | Flexibility paradox, Flexible work stigma      |
| Gonsalves, 2020                                | From Face Time to Flex Time: The Role of Physical Space in Worker Temporal Flexibility   | Flexibility paradox                            |
| Guillaume, Pochic, 2009                        | What Would You Sacrifice? Access to Top Management and the Work-life Balance   | Flexible work stigma                           |

*Continuation of Table 1 on the next page.*

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| Authors, year                                     | Title  | Categories   |
|---|--|--|
| Himawan, Helmi, Fanggidae, 2021                   | Negotiating Indonesian Married Women's Agency in a Career: Work From Home Arrangement as a Possible Solution   | WFH effects during Covid-19  |
| Ko, Kim, 2018                                     | Intention to use flexible work arrangements  | Flexibility paradox  |
| Kurowska, 2020                                    | Gendered Effects of Home-Based Work on Parents' Capability to Balance Work with Non-work: Two Countries with Different Models of Division of Labour Compared | Gender related effects of WFH  |
| Langner, 2018                                     | Flexible men and Successful Women: The Effects of Flexible Working Hours on German Couples' Wages  | Motherhood penalty, WFH effects during Covid-19                        |
| Leslie, Manchester, Park, Mehng, 2012             | Flexible Work Practices: A Source of Career Premiums or Penalties?   | Flexible work stigma   |
| Long, Kuang, Buzzanell, 2013                      | Legitimizing and Elevating Telework  | Flexibility paradox  |
| Lott, Abendroth, 2020                             | The non-use of telework in an ideal worker culture: why women perceive more cultural barriers  | Flexibility paradox, Gender related effects of WFH, Motherhood penalty |
| Maruyama, Tietze, 2012                            | From anxiety to assurance: concerns and outcomes of telework   | Motherhood penalty   |
| McDonald, Hite, O'Connor, 2022                    | Developing sustainable careers for remote workers  | WFH effects during Covid-19  |
| Menezes de, Kelliher, 2011                        | Flexible Working and Performance: A Systematic Review of the Evidence for a Business Case  | Gender related effects of WFH  |
| Noback, Broersma, van Dijk, 2016                  | Climbing the Ladder: Gender-Specific Career Advancement in Financial Services and the Influence of Flexible Work-Time Arrangements                           | Femininity stigma  |
| Oo, Lim, 2021                                     | Changes in Job Situations for Women Workforce in Construction during the COVID-19 Pandemic   | WFH effects during Covid-19  |
| Park, Jeong, Chai, 2021                           | Remote e-Workers' Psychological Well-being and Career Development in the Era of COVID-19: Challenges, Success Factors, and the Roles of HRD Professionals    | WFH effects during Covid-19  |
| Peetz, Baird, Banerjee, Bartkiw et al., 2022      | Sustained knowledge work and thinking time amongst academics: gender and working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic                                      | WFH effects during Covid-19  |
| Raišienė, Rapuano, Varkulevičiūtė, Stachová, 2020 | Working from Home—Who Is Happy? A Survey of Lithuania's Employees during the COVID-19 Quarantine Period  | Flexibility paradox  |
| Rudman, Mescher, 2013                             | Penalizing Men Who Request a Family Leave: Is Flexibility Stigma a Femininity Stigma?  | Femininity stigma  |

*Continuation of Table 1 on the next page.*

Continuation of Table 1.

| Authors, year                              | Title   | Categories                                       |
|--|---|--|
| Vandello, Hettinger, Bosson, Siddiqi, 2013 | When Equal Isn't Really Equal: The Masculine Dilemma of Seeking Work Flexibility                  | Femininity stigma, Flexibility paradox           |
| Williams, Blair-Loy, Berdahl, 2013         | Cultural Schemas, Social Class, and the Flexibility Stigma  | Femininity stigma, Flexible work stigma          |
| Yarberry, Sims, 2021                       | The Impact of COVID-19-Prompted Virtual/Remote Work Environments on Employees' Career Development | WFH effects during Covid-19                      |
| Yucel, Chung, 2021                         | Working from home, work-family conflict, and the role of gender and gender role attitudes         | Femininity stigma, Gender related effects of WFH |

The categories “flexible work stigma”, “motherhood penalty”, “femininity stigma”, and “flexibility paradox” refer to interrelated analytical approaches. They serve to answer our first research question on the constructs that help to explain the relationship between WFH and career in the literature.

The category “Women-related effects of WFH”, includes codes that address specific influences of WFH on women’s careers and relates to our second research question on the impact of WFH on women’s careers.

The category “WFH effects during Covid-19”, in turn, comprises both codes related to the concrete effects of the pandemic on women’s careers (e.g. greater involvement of fathers in caregiving) and codes related to the implications for the underlying concepts (e.g. the flexibility stigma), and relates to our third research question on pandemic-related changes in WFH assessment.

### 3 Findings

We present our findings according to the categorization and the corresponding research questions outlined above.

#### 3.1 Analytical Approaches to the Relationship Between WFH and Career

A large part of the corpus of literature deals with fundamental patterns of stigmatization. Here, reference can first be made to the general concept of the *flexibility stigma*. The flexibility stigma derives from an *ideal-worker stereotype*, i. e., the idea of an employee who is ready to work at any time, who does not shy away from overtime, and who is present in the office or at various other locations as needed (Acker, 1990; Kelly et al., 2010; Lott & Abendroth, 2020). This kind of constant availability serves as an alleged indicator of high-quality work, utmost commitment, and inner devotion to the job (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009). Hence, WFH is seen as a break with

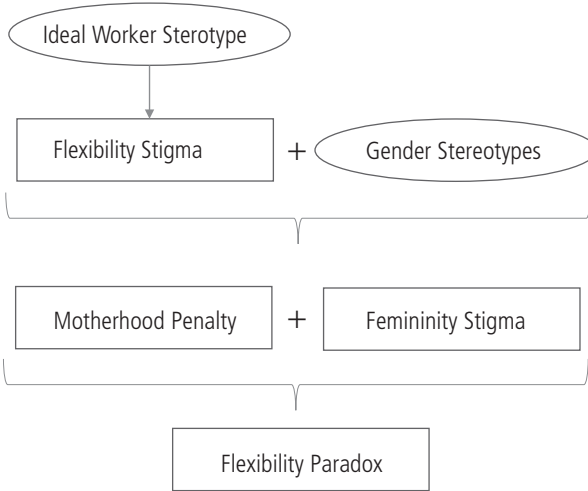
the ideal and a deviation from the supposed optimum. In this context, articles point out that the idea of an ideal worker is a cultural schema (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014) or moral norm, e.g., “moral convictions, not rational organizational concerns about merit and performance, define the social context” (Williams et al., 2013, p. 228). Measurable consequences of the flexibility stigma are, for example, a reduced bond between employees and managers (Gazit et al., 2021) and lower salary increases or promotions for people in WFH arrangements (e.g., Golden & Eddleston, 2020). The extent to which such negative consequences occur depends not least on the actual or even assumed reason for WFH. The decisive factor here is the “perceived commitment” (Leslie et al., 2012), depending on whether professional or private reasons are cited or assumed. For example, employees who prefer WFH for family reasons are assumed to have a lower commitment.

The flexibility stigma is, thus, inextricably linked to the so-called *motherhood penalty*: “the flexibility stigma stems primarily from maternal wall bias – that is, the negative workplace commitment and competence assumptions that are triggered by motherhood when ideals of a good worker and a good mother clash” (Bornstein, 2013, p. 399). Negative consequences of stigmatization do not only affect mothers; rather, the assumption that flexible forms of work are due to lower commitment and are associated with poorer performance also affect women in general. This includes both the aspect that access to WFH tends to be made more difficult for women (e.g., Fuller & Hirsh, 2019; Lott & Abendroth, 2020) and the fact that the salary and career development of women working from home is worse than that of their male counterparts (e.g., Langner, 2018; Maruyama & Tietze, 2012). In a similar vein, Borgkvist et al. (2021) conclude that, while companies communicate WFH and time flexibility as generally acceptable, managers often regard it as being “for women” and appropriate for lower-level, routinized roles. In contrast, they regard men to be “flexible about their flexibility”, i. e., able to suspend other commitments (such as caregiving) in order to maintain their status as an ideal worker.

Men, in turn, may be affected by what is known as the *femininity stigma* (Rudman & Mescher, 2013). This means that men may face stronger prejudice when using WFH and flexible schedule arrangements for care reasons, as they then deviate from the masculine breadwinner image (Chung, 2020; Chung et al., 2021; Vandello et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2013; Yucel & Chung 2021).

Actual repression as well as the fear of potential stigmatization lead to the so-called *flexibility paradox*, i. e., despite the potential of flexible work policies to increase both work-life balance and productivity, employees are often reluctant to use them for fear of career penalties (Bontrager et al., 2021; Ko & Kim, 2018; Lott & Abendroth, 2020; Raišienė et al., 2020; Vandello et al., 2013). Moreover, they understand or even accept negative career implications associated with the use of WFH or also part-time work as a logical and indispensable consequence of not fulfilling the ideal-worker stereotype (Bornstein, 2013; Brown, 2010). In this context, there are legitimization strategies that are used to avert or mitigate a (perceived) flexibility

Figure 3 Stereotypes and Their Effects



stigma such as deliberately seeking face-to-face-contact with the supervisor (Golden & Eddleston, 2020) or engaging in legitimation-elevation dialectics (Long et al., 2013). In this context, a study by Gonsalves (2020) on the crucial role of designing physical spaces when attempting to break the flexibility paradox is instructive. An office redesign from assigned cubicles to an unassigned mix of workspaces (originally intended to reduce costs) turned out to change taken-for-granted greeting practices, noticing practices, and evaluation beliefs, reducing fears of career penalties and leading to greater control over the timing and location of work.

Overall, this category provides us with a deep insight into the underlying stereotypes that result in career penalties for both men and women when working from home. Figure 3 shows the various stereotypes and their effects.

### 3.2 Women-Related Effects of WFH on Women’s Careers

Empirical studies from the pre-pandemic phase deal with the impact of WFH on women’s careers. First, we can draw on literature that identifies career prospects, particularly for mothers, that result from reducing commuting time and thus making it easier to combine work and care responsibilities. The focus of attention here is on increased opportunities for mothers to stay in employment as well as on mothers reducing the gender gap in working hours and monthly earnings (Arntz et al., 2019; Chung & van der Horst, 2018; Dikkers et al., 2010).

However, pre-pandemic literature also refers to various conditions that relativize or even question the positive effects on women's careers. For instance, Chung and van der Horst (2020) refer to the risk of unpaid overtime for mothers working part-time from home. In addition, several articles point out various aspects that affect the career development of women. For example, having time sovereignty when working from home is said to be both a success factor for career development and to be more available to men than to women (Cabrerá, 2009; Chung, 2019; Crowley & Kolenikov, 2014). In this context, differences in attributed commitment and perceived productivity are recognized. Accordingly, men working from home are considered by their employers to show a higher level of commitment and productivity than women (Chung & van der Horst, 2018; Lott & Abendroth, 2020).

Above all, tensions relating to domestic work and domestic norms lead to a differentiated and even pessimistic view on women's career advancement in WFH settings within pre-pandemic literature (Arntz et al., 2019; Chung, 2019; Chung & van der Lippe, 2020). Influenced by traditional role allocation, women are attributed to more likely combine WFH with domestic responsibilities, while men are more likely (and/or expected) to expand their work sphere when working from home (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020). The extent, however, is context-specific and varies depending on a more traditional versus egalitarian national culture or individual role attitudes (Kurowska, 2020; Yucel & Chung, 2021) and also regarding the size and culture of the company or organization (Menezes & Kelliher, 2011).

Altogether, this category provides us with insights into the ambiguous effects of WFH on career prospects and aspects influencing whether and to which extent there is a positive or rather negative connection. These aspects can be divided into structural aspects of the work environment (e.g., national or cultural context), which influence general role expectations, and individual aspects at the employee level (e.g., work scope, time sovereignty), which in turn are influenced by these general role expectations.

### 3.3 WFH Effects During Covid-19

Articles in the context of Covid-19 refer to a gradual erosion of the flexibility stigma (Abendroth et al., 2022; Delany, 2021; Oo & Lim, 2021). Although the gender gap in domestic labor is still prevalent and undermines career advancements for working mothers (Clark et al., 2021), the "new normal" of WFH during the pandemic has created a window of opportunity. Hence, a study by Abendroth et al. (2022) states that the flexibility stigma, as a reason for the non-use of WFH, was reported less often than before the pandemic, and independent of sex and parental status. Himawan et al. (2021) state, for the Indonesian context, that home-based work made available during Covid-19 was an opportunity for women to participate in the labor market at all. Further articles of the sample touch upon positive physi-

cal and psychological effects of WFH (Delany, 2021; Oo & Lim, 2021; Park et al., 2021), which also affect performance and career development. However, there is also a broad consensus that ensuring and fostering career progression requires further deconstruction of the ideal-worker stereotype and a change in domestic norms (Barhate & Hirudayaraj, 2021; Delany, 2021; McDonald et al., 2022; Peetz et al., 2022). Besides, further changes in corporate culture and leadership are considered necessary for a sustainable effect (Barhate & Hirudayaraj, 2021; Bontrager et al., 2021; Delany, 2021; Yarberry & Sims, 2021).

In addition to the generally increased acceptance of WFH, a second discussion thread deals with an increased acceptance of role diversity as well as an overlapping of roles during the pandemic. For instance, Frize et al. (2021) refer to the increased involvement of men in caring tasks during the pandemic going hand-in-hand with a shift in traditional roles that is changing the masculine image and expectations. Likewise, Chung et al. (2021) as well as Barhate and Hirudayaraj (2021) identify an increased spillover from home into work and vice versa during the pandemic and, with it, more role flexibility, particularly when men were working from home. However, the aforementioned authors emphasize that further steps are needed such as a reflection of the existing work culture and gender norms as well as actually closing the gender care gap.

#### 4 Discussion

Our literature review shows that both the ideal worker stereotype and prevailing gender stereotypes have been challenged during the pandemic. The experience of the crisis, with its heightened awareness of health and fundamental values, has created the conditions for questioning the all-encompassing focus on work in terms of the ideal worker stereotype. Moreover, the overlap between work and private life during the lockdown as well as increased role flexibility may serve as a starting point for changing gender stereotypes. Both would be an important prerequisite for WFH to have a more positive impact on women's careers in the future, as they may benefit from both changing expectations of the ideal worker and from greater role diversity, particularly with regard to their careers.

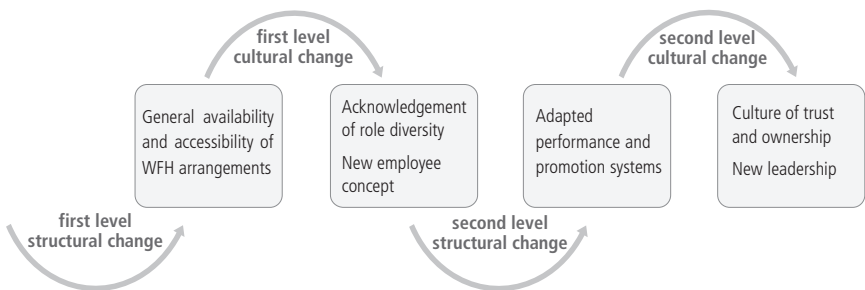
In our sample, the Covid-19 pandemic is seen as an accelerator for digitalization and the emergence of new forms of work; the availability and acceptability of flexible working arrangements increased for both women and men (e.g., Chung et al., 2021; Delany, 2021). However, the literature review also reveals that technical change with regards to working methods implies further changes in organizations with regard to leadership and cooperation, i.e., autonomy, distribution of power, centralization, control etc. (e.g., Barhate & Hirudayaraj, 2021; Bontrager et al., 2021). In settings where there is a gap between the technologically feasible and the culturally accepted reality, the ideal-worker stereotype is still deeply embedded in

minds and organizational structures (e.g., Brown, 2010; Lott & Abendroth, 2020). Our following implications, therefore, focus on potential steps to align the technological and the cultural dimensions of change.

## 5 Implications

We have identified a gap between the technical change with regards to digital tools and the basic availability of WFH models and a more fundamental cultural change within organizations regarding mindset and leadership support. Based upon this we have developed an ideal-typical change process (Figure 4) that systematizes the relationship between the outlined dichotomy as well as the related asynchrony. Moreover, we can use this process to develop practical implications for employers.

Figure 4 Flow of Structural Change and Cultural Change With Implications For Women’s Careers



### *First Level Structural Change: Technical Facilitation of Working From Home*

At the first level of structural change, WFH is anchored within formal organizational practices and the technical hurdles of accessibility have been overcome. At this level, traditional role expectations as well as an enduring ideal-worker stereotype may still occur (e.g., Lott & Abendroth, 2020; Peetz et al., 2022; Raišienė et al., 2020 from our sample). Therefore, change is restricted to technical accessibility and associated regulations regarding WFH within legislation and at the level of the individual employer.

### *First Level Cultural Change: Dissolving the Ideal-Worker Stereotype*

The first level cultural change is about dissolving the ideal-worker stereotype, which comes along with the acknowledgement of role diversity. This means that for working women and men, equal options for professional, family, and other private roles are

being acknowledged. Particularly, the overlapping of the private and work sphere during Covid-19 has raised awareness and visibility regarding the role diversity of employees (e.g., Chung et al., 2021; Frize et al., 2021 from our sample). With the first level cultural change, a new and comprehensive employee concept may develop that values the role diversity in the workforce. The traditional image of the “ideal worker”, who is completely devoted to work at the cost of family and personal needs is replaced. The fact that employees themselves are actively calling for a new employee concept is demonstrated not least by the current debate around the 4-day-workweek (Jahal et al., 2024) or post-pandemic labor shortages that are often connected to WFH arrangements (Liu, 2023; Ng & Stanton, 2023).

*Second Level Structural Change: Developing New Parameters to Measure Success and a New Approach to Face-Time*

General availability of WFH arrangements (first level structural change) and a changed perception of the ideal worker (first level cultural change) prepare the way for a second level structural change. With this second level structural change, new parameters to measure success and a new approach to office presence time can be developed. Being physically present in the office certainly remains of value. Informal and social exchange is a key component of professional interaction. However, it is important that the evaluation of work results is explicitly distinguished from the informal process of “showing face” and integrated into a structured process (e.g., Cabrera, 2009; Fuller & Hirsh, 2019; Gonsalves, 2020 from our sample).

But even within the post-pandemic development, face-time is still considered as an indicator of engagement and performance (Moller et al., 2024) and there are still strategies for WFH employees that are in place to mimic face-time behavior (Afota et al., 2023). Likewise, recent studies on engagement and performance in hybrid settings (e.g., Allen et al., 2024; Naqshbandi et al., 2024) indicate that a potential engagement deficit is still assumed. However, there is a paucity of studies that specifically address performance evaluation in hybrid work contexts, although individual target agreements have long played a role in the HR literature (Wadhera et al. 2023).

The second level structural change is therefore about establishing structured ways for employees to present their results, regardless of whether they work from home or in the office, and transparent systems for managers to evaluate these results and decide on career development and promotion. In addition, the adaptation of the performance and promotion systems may also affect the selection and promotion criteria. For example, skills that were developed outside the paid job could systematically be recognized. In this sense, a recent study by Gartzia (2024) argues that the idea of family-work enrichment should be made fruitful for leadership research and identifies parenting as a major, previously unaddressed antecedent of leadership effectiveness.

*Second Level Cultural Change: Preparing Managers and Employees to Succeed Within the Second Level Structure of WFH*

Finally, the second level structural change of working from home provides the basis for but also requires further cultural change, namely the confident handling of the work situation that has been reached with the second level of structural change by all players involved. In this context, leadership on the part of managers and self-management skills on the part of employees play an essential role. Managers are required to ensure the alignment with the goals of the company, while their employees are more self-directed in their work. While studies in our sample call for a new management culture (e.g., Barhate & Hirudayaraj, 2021; Chung, 2020), there is an ongoing debate in leadership literature on how this new culture could look like. Therein, the concept of trust is crucial (e.g., da Silva et al., 2022; Newman & Ford, 2021), just as different alternatives to hierarchical leadership, such as post-heroic leadership (e.g., Škerlavaj, 2022) or servant leadership (e.g., Zada et al., 2022), are being discussed. Employees, in turn, are faced with the great challenge of moving within this new freedom. Employee health and wellbeing has been a topic within our sample, e.g., with regard to psychological challenges (Park et al. 2021) or the double burden of parents and especially mothers (e.g., Clark et al., 2021; Frize et al., 2021). With regard to the continuation of WFH, a second level cultural change leads to employees taking more responsibility for their work organization, work methods, and also their work results, while at the same time developing their strategies to safeguard their mental and physical health by balancing the different areas of their lives. Organizations may support their employees in this regard by providing the necessary framework including appropriate training and coaching.

## 6 Conclusion

Based on a systematic literature review, this paper has examined existing literature on the relationship between WFH and career prospects, paying particular attention to effects for women on the one hand and recent changes due to Covid-19 on the other.

Our results show that the effect of WFH on careers is ambivalent. Answering our first research question “What constructs can be found in the literature that help explain the relationship between WFH and career?”, we can see a clearly negative relationship, which is explained by various stigmas. The flexibility stigma leads to negative perceptions of employees who work from home and refers in principle to women and men, while the motherhood penalty describes the negative consequences for women regardless of whether they actually provide care. This stigmatization affects women in the workplace in general but is particularly disadvantageous for women WFH. Finally, the femininity stigma describes the stigmatization of men who use flexible work arrangements such as WFH and who explicitly provide care.

Regarding to our second research question “What implications of WFH on women’s careers does the literature reveal?”, we can state that career implications depend on the organizational culture. In principle, many activities can be performed effectively and efficiently while working from home. In addition, the possibility of WFH holds great potential for reconciling different areas of life. However, this becomes problematic if the latter aspect is equated with a lack of commitment. If the stereotype of the omnipresent ideal worker persists, WFH is devalued, affecting primarily women.

This finding is also relevant to answering the third research question “What changes have resulted from the pandemic with regard to the assessment of WFH?”. We were able to show that the availability and acceptability of WFH increased during the pandemic, leading to an erosion of traditional stigmas. However, there are still gaps between what is technically possible and what is considered appropriate. To illustrate the sequence and interplay between the different dimensions of change and to provide practical implications for employers, we developed an ideal-typical change process.

Our literature review acknowledges several limitations with regard to the comprehensiveness and generalizability of the findings. Our sample includes publications until 2022 – this can only grasp the first impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Both the actual effects of the pandemic and research on the topic are still ongoing. Moreover, our choice of database may introduce bias by excluding valuable studies published in journals not included in the database. In addition, language restrictions limited the inclusion of non-English studies that could have enriched the review. The studies reviewed used a variety of research methods and were sometimes limited to specific populations or settings, which may make it difficult to synthesize findings and apply them to different contexts.

Based upon the limitations and research gaps outlined before, further research should include, for example, follow-up literature reviews as well as longitudinal studies to be able to map actual changes in structure and culture. Moreover, the comparison of first and late movers in the area of WFH and women’s career developments also seems promising. Finally, it will be important to examine the effects of possible new structures of performance measurement in terms of their impact on employee satisfaction and employee health, so that a shift away from the old stereotype of the ideal worker is not replaced by a new but equally restrictive stereotype.

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## Digitales Präsenzverhalten: Konzeptvorstellung und erste explorative Analysen

Anja-Kristin Abendroth\*, Yvonne Lott\*\*, Lena Hipp\*\*\*, Sandra Dummert° und Tanja Carstensen°°

*Zusammenfassung:* Dank digitaler Technologien können Beschäftigte auch dann „präsent“ sein, wenn sie nicht vor Ort arbeiten. Der vorliegende Beitrag schlägt das Konzept des digitalen Präsenzverhaltens mit den theoretisch hergeleiteten Facetten digitale Verfügbarkeit, Sichtbarkeit, Vortäuschung, Multitasking und Teilhabe vor. Deskriptive Ergebnisse auf Basis von repräsentativen Daten von Beschäftigten im Homeoffice illustrieren die Ambivalenz und Ungleichheiten, die mit digitalen Technologien und ihrer Nutzung zur Herstellung von digitaler Präsenz verbunden sind.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Digitalisierung, Homeoffice, Präsenzkultur, körperliche Präsenz im Betrieb, digitales Präsenzverhalten

### Digital Presence Behavior: Concept Presentation and First Explorative Analyses

*Abstract:* Thanks to digital technologies, employees can be “present” even when they are not working on site. This article proposes the concept of digital presence behavior with the theoretically derived facets of digital availability, visibility, faking, multitasking and inclusion. Descriptive results based on representative data from employees working from home illustrate the ambivalence and inequalities associated with digital technologies and their use to establish digital presence.

*Keywords:* Digitalization, work from home, presence culture, physical presence in the company, digital presence behavior

### Comportement de présence numérique: présentation du concept et premières analyses exploratoires

*Résumé:* Grâce aux technologies numériques, les employé-es peuvent être « présent-es » même lorsqu'ils et elles ne travaillent pas sur place. Le présent article propose le concept de comportement de présence numérique avec les facettes théoriquement dérivées de la disponibilité numérique, de la visibilité, de la dissimulation, du multitâche et de la participation. Des résultats descriptifs basés sur des données représentatives de salarié-es travaillant à domicile illustrent l'ambivalence et les inégalités liées aux technologies numériques et à leur utilisation pour établir une présence numérique.

*Mots-clés:* Numérisation, home office, culture de la présence, présence physique dans l'entreprise, comportement de présence numérique

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## 1 Einleitung

Digitale Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologien haben in den vergangenen Jahren vermehrt Einzug in die Sphäre der Erwerbsarbeit gehalten und ortsunabhängiges Arbeiten technisch ermöglicht (Homberg et al., 2023; Messenger & Gschwind, 2016). Die zunehmende Verbreitung des „Homeoffice“ ist jedoch auch auf gesellschaftliche Veränderungen zurückzuführen (Homberg et al., 2023): Arbeitnehmer:innen möchten mit Hilfe von orts- und zeitflexiblem Arbeiten Erwerbsarbeit und Privatleben vereinbaren (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020) – das gilt nicht nur, aber insbesondere für Mütter, deren Erwerbsbeteiligung in den letzten Jahrzehnten deutlich angestiegen ist (Adams & Golsch, 2021). Außerdem wächst auch das Interesse von Arbeitgeber:innen an einem orts- und zeitflexiblen Zugriff auf Arbeitskräfte angesichts globaler und unsicherer Märkte (Breen, 1997; Cha & Weeden, 2014) und einer vielfach dokumentierten höheren Produktivität von Beschäftigten im Homeoffice (Bloom et al., 2015; Hipp & Konrad, 2022). Einen enormen Schub erhielt das Homeoffice während der Covid-19-Pandemie, als es zur Eindämmung des Virus zum Teil sogar verpflichtend und flächendeckend eingeführt wurde (Arntz et al., 2020). Seither hat es einen festen Platz in vielen Organisationen und im Alltag von Beschäftigten eingenommen (Abendroth et al., 2022; Felstead, 2022).

Mit der Verbreitung des „Homeoffice“ und der damit eingeschränkten physischen Präsenz am regulären Arbeitsort, stellt sich die Frage, ob und wie Präsenz mit Hilfe von digitalen Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologien hergestellt wird: Was tun Beschäftigte, um „da“ zu sein, wenn sie nicht vor Ort sind? Ziel dieses Beitrags ist, das Konzept des „digitalen Präsenzverhaltens“ anhand von fünf Verhaltensweisen – digitale Verfügbarkeit, digitale Sichtbarkeit, digitale Vortäuschung, digitales Multitasking und digitale Teilhabe – theoretisch herzuleiten und empirisch zu erfassen. Die verschiedenen Dimensionen digitalen Präsenzverhaltens leiten wir anhand der – zumindest zum Teil – divergenten Flexibilitätsinteressen von Arbeitnehmer:innen und Arbeitgeber:innen ab. Ob und inwiefern die unterschiedlichen Facetten digitalen Präsenzverhaltens tatsächlich den Arbeitsalltag unterschiedlicher Arbeitnehmer:innengruppen prägen, überprüfen wir anhand originärer Daten aus dem High-Frequency Online Personal Panel (IAB-HOPP, Welle 8, Volkert et al., 2022), welche vom Institut für Arbeitsmarkt und Berufsforschung (IAB), der Forschungseinrichtung der Bundesagentur für Arbeit in Deutschland, von Ende März bis Anfang Juni 2021 deutschlandweit erhoben wurden.

Ortsunabhängiges Arbeiten geht einerseits mit einer erhöhten Arbeitsintensität und längeren Arbeitszeiten einher (Felstead, 2022): Die Nutzung digitaler Kommunikationsmittel hat zu einer „24/7-Verfügbarkeit“ beigetragen (Täht & Mills, 2012), welche auch als „konstante Konnektivität“ (Wajcman & Rose, 2011, S. 959) oder „elektronische Leine“ für Arbeitnehmer:innen beschrieben wird (Arnold, 2003, S. 243; Duxbury et al., 2014; Piszczek, 2017). Damit ist *digitale Verfügbarkeit*

eine zentrale Facette digitalen Präsenzverhaltens, welche arbeitgeber:innenseitige Flexibilitätswünsche im digitalen Raum abbildet. Digitale Informations- und Kommunikationsmöglichkeiten können außerdem dazu genutzt werden, Anwesenheit in digitalen Meetings und Chatprogrammen herzustellen und Leistung und Engagement – beispielsweise in Form digitaler Statusupdates – sichtbar zu machen. So kann der Mangel an physischer Präsenz während und außerhalb der regulären Arbeitszeit, welche gemeinhin als Signale für Engagement und Leistung gelten (Chung, 2020; Williams et al., 2013), kompensiert werden. Vor diesem Hintergrund argumentieren wir, dass die Konzeptualisierung digitalen Präsenzverhaltens auch die Realisierung *digitaler Sichtbarkeit* von Arbeitsleistung und Engagement beinhaltet.

Andererseits kann ortsunabhängiges Arbeiten auch die Vereinbarkeit von Erwerbsarbeit und Privatleben verbessern (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020). Dank des Homeoffice können Beschäftigte Arbeitszeiten flexibel an familiäre und private Bedürfnisse anpassen und gleichzeitig erwerbstätig und für die Familie da sein. Diese Flexibilität ermöglicht es vielen Menschen – insbesondere Müttern – überhaupt erst einer Erwerbstätigkeit nachzugehen. Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologie machen damit *digitale Teilhabe* möglich. Beschäftigte können von zu Hause aus an Meetings und Veranstaltungen teilnehmen, von denen sie sonst ausgeschlossen wären. Gleichzeitig provozieren sie *digitales Multitasking*, also die zeitgleiche Erledigung anderer Dinge, ganz gleich ob beruflicher oder privater Art, während digitaler Meetings und Veranstaltungen.

Diese unterschiedlichen Facetten digitalen Präsenzverhaltens und deren zugrundeliegenden Motive und Erwartungen legen nahe, dass sich digitales Präsenzverhalten auch zwischen Beschäftigtengruppen, insbesondere zwischen Frauen und Männern und Personen mit und ohne Sorgeverpflichtungen, unterscheidet. Angesichts fortbestehender Geschlechterstereotype und großen Ungleichheiten bei der Verteilung unbezahlter Sorgearbeit (Steinbach & Schulz, 2022) fragen wir nicht nur, wie weit verbreitet die unterschiedlichen Facetten digitalen Präsenzverhaltens bei Beschäftigten im Homeoffice sind, sondern auch inwiefern es Unterschiede zwischen Beschäftigten gibt. Inwiefern nutzen Frauen, insbesondere Mütter, im Vergleich zu Männern beispielsweise digitale Technologien und Kommunikationsmittel, um ihre Arbeit im Digitalen sichtbar zu machen und an Besprechungen teilzunehmen, von denen sie aufgrund von Careverpflichtungen bisher eher ausgeschlossen waren? Ist digitales Multitasking aufgrund fortbestehender Doppelbelastungen insbesondere bei Müttern verbreitet?

Mit der Beantwortung dieser Fragen und der konzeptionellen Entwicklung des Phänomens des digitalen Präsenzverhaltens erweitern wir das Wissen um die Auswirkungen ortsunabhängigen Arbeitens. Erstens erarbeiten wir eine theoretische Herleitung der Ambivalenz digitalen Präsenzverhaltens und damit eines differenzierten Verständnisses zu Möglichkeiten und (gefühlten) Verpflichtungen, die mit *new work*, insbesondere mit digitaler Technologie und Homeoffice, verbunden sind. Zweitens zeigen wir empirisch, wie verbreitet die unterschiedlichen Facetten

digitalen Präsenzverhaltens sind und welche Unterschiede es nach Geschlecht und Elternschaft gibt und damit, dass bestehenden Ungleichheitsstrukturen auch in *new work* Strukturen fortbestehen. Nicht zuletzt können die Ergebnisse unserer Studie für die Praxis genutzt werden, damit Entscheidungsträger:innen in Unternehmen die Nutzung von Homeoffice und digitalen Technologien so organisieren können, dass auch ortsunabhängiges Arbeiten integrativ und nicht gesundheitsschädlich ist und die Vereinbarkeit von Berufs- und Privatleben fördern kann.

## 2 Ortsunabhängiges Arbeiten und seine Folgen: Die Situation in Deutschland

In vielen Branchen und Tätigkeitsfeldern ist physische Präsenz Voraussetzung zur Ausführung der Arbeit. Das gilt insbesondere für Jobs im Handwerk, der Produktion, im Reinigungsgewerbe, aber auch für körpernahe Dienstleistungen (z. B. Pflege) sowie für die Gastronomie und den Einzelhandel. Daneben gibt es etliche Arbeitsbereiche, in denen Tätigkeiten im Wesentlichen am Schreibtisch und am Computer ausgeübt werden und die damit zumindest zum Teil zu Hause erledigt werden können. Vor der Covid-19-Pandemie waren dies in Deutschland in etwa 40 Prozent aller Jobs (Brenke, 2016).

Jedoch herrschte bis zur Covid-19-Pandemie selbst in den Jobs mit Homeoffice-Potenzial eine Kultur physischer Präsenz vor (Brenke, 2016); Homeoffice war in Deutschland im europäischen Vergleich relativ wenig verbreitet (Chung, 2017). Ein wesentlicher Grund dafür waren neben technischen auch kulturelle Barrieren (Lott & Abendroth, 2020). Vor allem Führungskräfte bestanden vor der Pandemie oft auf physischer Anwesenheit am Arbeitsplatz, weil sich ihrer Meinung nach nur so die Arbeitsleistung der Beschäftigten kontrollieren ließe (Brenke, 2016; Lott & Abendroth, 2020).

Kulturelle Barrieren drückten sich auch in dem sogenannten Flexibilitätsstigma (Chung, 2020) aus, demzufolge Beschäftigte, die flexible Arbeitsarrangements für außerberufliche Verpflichtungen und Aktivitäten nutzen, mit Stigmatisierung und beruflichen Nachteilen zu rechnen haben. Im Einklang mit der weit verbreiteten Ansicht, dass physische Präsenz am Arbeitsplatz ein Signal für hohes Arbeitsengagement sei und Verstöße gegen diese Norm stigmatisiert wurden (Acker, 1990; Chung, 2020; Williams et al., 2013), werden diejenigen Arbeitnehmer:innen belohnt, die unbelastet von außerberuflichen Anforderungen stets für ihre Erwerbsarbeit verfügbar sind (Cristea & Leonardi, 2019; Feldman et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2013) Dazu gehören bessere Leistungsbeurteilungen, schnellere berufliche Aufstiege und Gehaltserhöhungen (Feldman et al., 2020; McDonald et al., 2008). Beschäftigte, die nicht vor Ort arbeiteten, waren hingegen oftmals mit Stigmatisierung konfrontiert (Chung, 2019) und mussten Nachteile bei Einkommen (Glass & Noonan, 2016), Beförderungen (Bloom et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2021) und Weiterbildungen (Martin et al., 2021) in Kauf nehmen. Die empirische Evidenz, dass die Stigmatisierung ins-

besondere Frauen bzw. Mütter betrifft, denen allgemein weniger Arbeitsengagement zugeschrieben wurde als Männern, ist jedoch nicht eindeutig (Leslie et al., 2012; Lott & Abendroth, 2020).

Mit dem Ausbau digitaler Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologien in Folge der Covid-19-Pandemie hat sich die Nutzung ortsunabhängigen Arbeitens sprunghaft ausgedehnt (Felstead, 2022; Mergener, 2020). Die Anschaffung von Zoom- und Teams-Lizenzen oder Laptops reduzierte die technischen Barrieren, die die Möglichkeit von zu Hause aus zuarbeiten zuvor deutlich eingeschränkt hatten (Emmler & Kohlrausch, 2021; Lott & Abendroth, 2020). Durch die Verbreitung von Homeoffice während der Pandemie begannen auch in Deutschland die kulturellen Barrieren für die Nutzung von Homeoffice zu bröckeln. Damit stellt sich die Frage, wie Beschäftigte mit eingeschränkter physischer Präsenz am regulären Arbeitsplatz umgehen.

### 3 Digitales Präsenzverhalten und seine Facetten

Digitale Technologien bieten den Beschäftigten Möglichkeiten, digitale Präsenz herzustellen, wenn sie zu Hause arbeiten und so nicht immer physisch am regulären Arbeitsplatz präsent sind. Um dieses Phänomen und die Verhaltensweisen von Beschäftigten zur Herstellung von und dem Umgang mit Präsenz beim ortsunabhängigen Arbeiten zu beschreiben, schlagen wir den Begriff des „digitalen Präsenzverhaltens“ vor. Ausgehend von existierenden Theorien und Forschungssträngen leiten wir fünf miteinander verknüpfte Facetten, d. h. Formen und Ausdrucksweisen digitalen Präsenzverhaltens, ab: *digitale Teilhabe*, *digitale Sichtbarkeit*, *digitale Verfügbarkeit*, *digitales Multitasking* und *digitales Vortäuschen*.

#### *Digitale Teilhabe*

Digitales Präsenzverhalten in Form *digitaler Teilhabe* lässt sich durch das Flexibilitätsinteresse von Beschäftigten begründen, Zeit und Ort von Erwerbsarbeit und Privatleben flexibel aufeinander abzustimmen. *Ressourcentheoretische Perspektiven*, wie das Job-Demands-Resources-Modell (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), die Work/Family-Border-Theorie (Clark, 2000) oder die Boundary-Management-Theorie (Kossek et al., 2006) deuten darauf hin, dass örtlich und zeitlich flexibles Arbeiten im Homeoffice eine Ressource sein kann, um Teilhabe in der Sphäre der Erwerbsarbeit als auch der Familie zu realisieren. Dies bestätigt sich in empirischen Befunden, die zeigen, dass gerade Erwerbstätige mit hohen familiären Anforderungen mehr Zeit für Erwerbsarbeit haben und in höheren beruflichen Positionen bleiben, weil berufliche und familiäre Anforderungen flexibler aufeinander abgestimmt werden können (Abendroth, 2022; Chung & van der Horst, 2018; Fuller & Hirst, 2019; Lott, 2020). Digitale Teilhabe kann bedeuten, dass sich Beschäftigte, die von zu Hause aus arbeiten, flexibel per Videokonferenz „einklinken“ (Carstensen, 2023).

Insbesondere Frauen, die wegen Kinderbetreuung kürzere Anwesenheitszeiten im Büro haben, nutzten bereits vor der Pandemie die digitalen und mobilen Tools, um nachmittags noch an den Arbeitsprozessen beteiligt und nicht „komplett raus“ zu sein (Carstensen, 2023). Vor diesem Hintergrund gehen wir davon aus, dass gerade Mütter digitales Präsenzverhalten in Form digitaler Teilhabe zeigen.

### *Digitale Sichtbarkeit*

Verhaltensweisen, die *digitale Sichtbarkeit* herstellen, lassen sich durch das Interesse an der Sicherung des Zugangs zu Ressourcen wie Informationen, Anerkennung, Weiterbildung, Status oder Einkommen, die in Betrieben verteilt werden, begründen. *Signaling-Theorien* gehen davon aus, dass Arbeitgeber:innen Produktivität und Engagement von Beschäftigten, die in der Regel nicht direkt beobachtbar sind, anhand unterschiedlicher „Signale“ festmachen (Afota et al., 2022; Cristea & Leonardi, 2019; Spence, 1973). Ein solches Signal kann beispielsweise die physische Präsenz während und außerhalb der regulären Arbeitszeit sein. Das haben Arbeiten rund um das Stereotyp der „idealen Arbeitskraft“ und betrieblicher Mikropolitik wiederholt gezeigt (Cha & Weeden, 2014; Cornils et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2013). Da Beschäftigte im Homeoffice aus dem direkten Blickfeld von Vorgesetzten und Kolleg:innen verschwinden, können sie versuchen, mit Hilfe digitaler Kommunikationstechnologien auch digital präsent und sichtbar zu sein, um so auf ihr Arbeitsengagement und ihre Arbeitsleistungen aufmerksam zu machen. Dies korrespondiert mit digitalen Selbstdarstellungs- und Inszenierungspraktiken, die auch in vielen anderen Lebensbereichen mit der Verbreitung von Social Media Technologien zu beobachten sind (Carstensen, 2014).

Die Möglichkeiten, Sichtbarkeit und damit Wertschätzung und Anerkennung im Digitalen zu sichern oder zu verbessern, kann aber auch insbesondere für Gruppen von Beschäftigten von Interesse sein, die tendenziell schlechteren Zugang zu betrieblichen Ressourcen, aber ausgeprägte Flexibilitätsbedürfnisse haben. Dazu zählen unter anderem Frauen, die seltener Vollzeit arbeiten und seltener in höheren Positionen vertreten sind als Männer. Sie könnten von den digitalen Möglichkeiten, Sichtbarkeit herzustellen besonders profitieren.

### *Digitale Verfügbarkeit*

Digitales Präsenzverhalten in Form *digitaler Verfügbarkeit* lässt sich vor dem Hintergrund der in *sozialen Austauschtheorien* implizierten Gleichzeitigkeit von arbeitnehmer- und arbeitgeber:innenseitigen Flexibilitätsinteressen ableiten. Austausch-theoretische Perspektiven (Chung, 2017) auf flexible Arbeitsformen legen nahe, dass Arbeitgeber:innen von Arbeitnehmer:innen im Gegenzug zur Gewährung von Homeofficeoptionen Flexibilität und Verfügbarkeit erwarten, während und gegebenenfalls auch außerhalb der regulären Arbeitszeiten. Dass sich Beschäftigte im Homeoffice tatsächlich digital verfügbar zeigen, spiegelt sich in Forschungsergebnissen zu Auswirkungen flexibler Arbeitsformen wider: Zeitliche und räumliche Flexibilität

bei Erwerbsarbeit geht sowohl mit einer Intensivierung als auch Extensivierung von Erwerbsarbeit einher (für einen Überblick siehe Chung & van der Lippe, 2020).

Da Frauen und insbesondere Mütter aufgrund der bestehenden Muster geschlechtsspezifischer Arbeitsteilung weniger Möglichkeiten haben diesen neuen Erwartungen der digitalen Verfügbarkeit zu entsprechen, erscheint es plausibel, dass diese in geringerem Ausmaße digital verfügbar sind als andere Gruppen von Beschäftigten. In der Konsequenz bedeutet das auch, dass digitales Präsenzverhalten Geschlechterungleichheiten am Arbeitsmarkt möglicherweise sogar verstärken könnte.

### *Digitales Multitasking*

Multitasking, also die zeitgleiche Erledigung mehrerer Aufgaben und das kontinuierliche Priorisieren konkurrierender Anforderungen (Xie et al., 2018), ist ein Ausdruck von gestiegenen Flexibilitätsanforderungen. Ergebnisse arbeitssoziologischer Studien zeigen, dass Arbeitsdichte und Arbeitsintensität gestiegen sind und Beschäftigte immer mehr Aufgaben in immer kürzerer Zeit erledigen müssen (Trinczek, 2011, S. 610f.). Digitale Technologien und ortsunabhängiges Arbeiten begünstigen ein solches Multitasking: Eine qualitative Studie aus Island, bei der Führungskräfte interviewt wurden, zeigt beispielsweise, dass die Zeit mit Kindern am Wochenende nach Möglichkeit für Erwerbsarbeit genutzt wird. Die Interviewten beschreiben, wie sie sonntags, während sie Zeit mit den Kindern verbringen, erwerbsarbeitsbezogene E-Mails beantworten, da sie sonst die Arbeitsmenge nicht bewältigen können (Rafnsdóttir & Júlíusdóttir, 2018). *Digitales Multitasking* umfasst insbesondere auch die Möglichkeit, *während* bestimmter Tätigkeiten der Erwerbsarbeit andere erwerbsarbeitsbezogene Aufgaben auszuführen, z. B. während eines Online-Meetings, E-Mails zu beantworten. Die empirische Evidenz zu den Auswirkungen von Multitasking weist vor allem auf negative Folgen hin, wie Überlastung und gesundheitliche Probleme (Xie et al., 2018). Daraus lässt sich ableiten, dass digitales Multitasking eher ein Ausdruck von Arbeitsüberlastung und zu vielen unterschiedlichen Anforderungen ist. Auch beim digitalen Multitasking könnten es vor allem wieder die Mütter sein, auf die aufgrund von Doppelbelastungen und Mehrfachanforderungen diese Facette des digitalen Präsenzverhaltens zutrifft.

### *Digitales Vortäuschen*

Den Annahmen der Prinzipal-Agenten Theorie folgend (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Laffont & Martimort, 2002; Mas & Palais, 2020), haben Arbeitnehmer:innen die Tendenz, sich vor Arbeit zu drücken und sich leicht ablenken zu lassen, wenn sie nicht formal oder sozial kontrolliert werden – wie das im Homeoffice beispielsweise der Fall ist. Beschäftigte können an Online-Meetings teilnehmen, nur um „dabei“ zu sein. Auch kann über kollaborative Tools Aktivität suggeriert werden, ohne dass tatsächlich wesentliche Leistungen erbracht werden, z. B. indem in gemeinsamen Dokumenten unaufwändige Änderungen vorgenommen werden, nur damit der eigene Name bei „zuletzt bearbeitet von“ auftaucht. Während eine solche vorgetäuschte

Anwesenheit bei gleichzeitiger geistiger Abwesenheit auch ein Merkmal der analogen Arbeit (Harju & Hakanen, 2016; Kahn, 1992) ist, ist ein solches Vortäuschen im digitalen Raum einfacher und unaufwändiger umzusetzen. Beschäftigte können sich beispielsweise von zu Hause in ein Online-Meeting einklicken, ohne dafür reisen zu müssen. Dies kann beruflich von Vorteil sein, etwa wenn die Anwesenheit den Vorgesetzten wichtig ist. Die bloße Anwesenheit ohne substantielle Beiträge zu Arbeitsprozessen kann allerdings auch Entscheidungsprozesse verlangsamen, den Informationsfluss unnötig behindern und den Austausch von Wissen und Know-how hemmen (Shumski et al., 2018).

Ähnlich wie beim digitalen Multitasking, welches mutmaßlich aufgrund ausgeprägter Belastungen und Anforderungen bei manchen Beschäftigtengruppen häufiger vorkommen sollte als bei anderen, erwarten wir auch beim Ausmaß digitalen Vortäuschens Unterschiede: Gelingt es Beschäftigten beispielsweise aufgrund familiärer Verpflichtungen nicht neuen Flexibilitätsanforderungen im digitalen Raum nachzukommen und verfügbar zu sein, kann digitales Vortäuschen von Anwesenheit eine Möglichkeit der Reaktion sein. In diesem Fall könnte auch digitales Vortäuschen elternschaftsspezifisch strukturiert sein und eher das Verhalten von Beschäftigten mit familiären Anforderungen charakterisieren.

## 4 Illustration der Facetten digitalen Präsenzverhaltens

### 4.1 Empirische Strategie

Um herauszufinden, ob und bei welchen Beschäftigtengruppen die verschiedenen Facetten digitalen Präsenzverhaltens tatsächlich vorkommen, haben wir ein Befragungsmodul für das hochfrequente Online-Personenpanels „Lebens- und Arbeitssituationen in Zeiten der Corona-Pandemie“ (IAB-HOPP, Welle 8, 2021, Volkert et al., 2022) des Instituts für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung (IAB) entwickelt. Beim IAB-HOPP handelt es sich um eine geschichtete Zufallsstichprobe nach Region, Alter, Geschlecht und Erwerbsstatus, die aus den Integrierten Erwerbsbiografien (IEB) des IAB gezogen wurden. Befragt wurden Personen, die im Jahr 2018 erwerbstätig, arbeitslos oder arbeitssuchend gemeldet waren und am 01. Mai 2020 oder früher ihr 18. Lebensjahr vollendet hatten (Bellmann et al., 2021; Haas et al., 2021; Volkert et al., 2024). Die hier verwendeten Daten stammen aus der achten Welle des IAB-HOPP und wurden zwischen Ende März und Anfang Juni 2021 erhoben.

Unsere Analytestichprobe umfasst Personen, die in Welle 8 abhängig beschäftigt waren ( $N = 4831$ ) und zumindest einen Teil ihrer Erwerbsarbeit von zu Hause aus erledigten ( $N = 2961$ ). Aufgrund von Antwortausfällen (Item-Non-Response) umfasst unsere Analytestichprobe 2733 Personen, davon 1400 Männer und 1333 Frauen, mit einem Durchschnittsalter von 44,6 Jahren (Standardabweichung von 11,3 Jahre).

Bei 37 Prozent der Befragten lebten Kinder unter 18 Jahren im Haushalt, wobei das jüngste Kind im Haushalt im Durchschnitt knapp über acht Jahre alt war. Da zu unserer Stichprobe nur Personen gehören, die (auch) von zu Hause aus arbeiten, hat der überwiegende Anteil der Befragten erwartungsgemäß einen höheren Bildungsabschluss (58 Prozent) (siehe auch Kleinert et al., 2020a; 2020b).

Die Befragten wurden mithilfe einer fünfstufigen Antwortskala um Einschätzungen zu fünf Aussagen gebeten, die sich auf ihre Erreichbarkeit und Arbeitsweisen zu Hause beziehen. Die Items wurden anhand der zuvor beschriebenen Theorien und Forschungsstränge entwickelt. Diese sind überblicksartig in Tabelle 1 dargestellt und werden im Ergebnisteil deskriptiv ausgewertet. Vor der Feldphase wurden die einzelnen Fragen einem kognitiven Pretest unterzogen und im Anschluss daran weiter modifiziert (mit Beispielen versehen). In der Befragung wurde die Reihenfolge der Items randomisiert. Für die Analysen wurden die Variablen in umgekehrter Reihenfolge skaliert (von 1 „trifft gar nicht zu“ bis 5 „trifft sehr zu“).

Tabelle 1            Operationalisierung unterschiedlicher Aspekte digitalen Präsenzverhaltens

| Facette digitalen Präsenzverhaltens | Frage­text und Variablenbezeichnung  | Mittelwert<br>(Standardabweichung) |
|-------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| Digitale Verfügbarkeit              | Ich bin außerhalb der Büroarbeitszeiten für meine Kolleg:innen, Kund:innen oder Vorgesetzte erreichbar.                            | 2,97 (1,41)                        |
| Digitale Sichtbarkeit               | Ich bemühe mich, meinen Kolleg:innen, Kund:innen oder Vorgesetzten zu zeigen, woran ich gerade arbeite und was ich geschafft habe. | 3,06 (1,15)                        |
| Digitales Vortäuschen               | Ich nehme manchmal nur deshalb an Besprechungen teil, um meine Anwesenheit zu signalisieren.                                       | 1,72 (1,03)                        |
| Digitales Multitasking              | Während der Teilnahme an digitalen Besprechungen mache ich manchmal andere Dinge.  | 2,59 (1,28)                        |
| Digitale Teilhabe                   | Dank digitaler Technologien nehme ich an Besprechungen teil, zu denen ich ansonsten nicht gehen würde.                             | 2,53 (1,33)                        |

Anmerkung: Eingeleitet wurden die Fragen zum digitalen Präsenzverhalten mit folgendem Wortlaut: „Nun geht es im Allgemeinen um Ihre Erreichbarkeit und Arbeitsweise, wenn Sie von zu Hause aus arbeiten. Bitte geben Sie für die folgenden Aussagen jeweils an, ob diese ‚sehr zutreffen‘, ‚eher zutreffen‘, ‚teils/teils‘, ‚eher nicht zutreffen‘ oder ‚gar nicht zutreffen‘.“ 5-Punkte-Antwortskala (von 1 „trifft gar nicht zu“ bis 5 „trifft sehr zu“), gewichtete Werte.

Quelle: Welle 8 des IAB-HOPP (2021), N = 2,733.

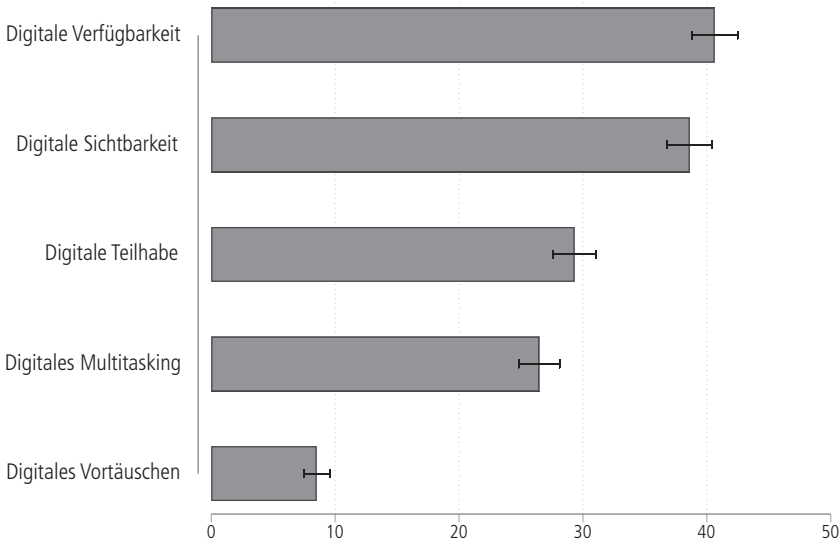
## 4.2 Ergebnisse

Im Folgenden zeigen wir deskriptive Befunde zur Verbreitung der unterschiedlichen Facetten digitalen Präsenzverhaltens und unterscheiden in diesen Auswertungen nach Geschlecht und Elternschaft. Um Aussagen über die im Homeoffice arbeitende Erwerbsbevölkerung in Deutschland treffen zu können, präsentieren wir gewichtete Ergebnisse.

### *Verbreitung der Facetten digitalen Präsenzverhaltens*

Abbildung 1 gibt zunächst einen Überblick über die Verbreitung der unterschiedlichen Facetten digitalen Präsenzverhaltens insgesamt. Digitale Verfügbarkeit und digitale Sichtbarkeit sind die verbreitetsten Facetten des digitalen Präsenzverhaltens. Mehr als 40 Prozent derjenigen, die zu Hause arbeiteten, waren außerhalb der üblichen Büro- und Geschäftszeiten für Kolleg:innen, Kund:innen und Vorgesetzte erreichbar (digitale Verfügbarkeit) und knapp 39 Prozent bemühten sich Kolleg:innen, Kund:innen oder Vorgesetzten zu zeigen, woran sie gerade arbeiten und was sie

Abbildung 1 Verbreitung der unterschiedlichen Facetten digitalen Präsenzverhaltens



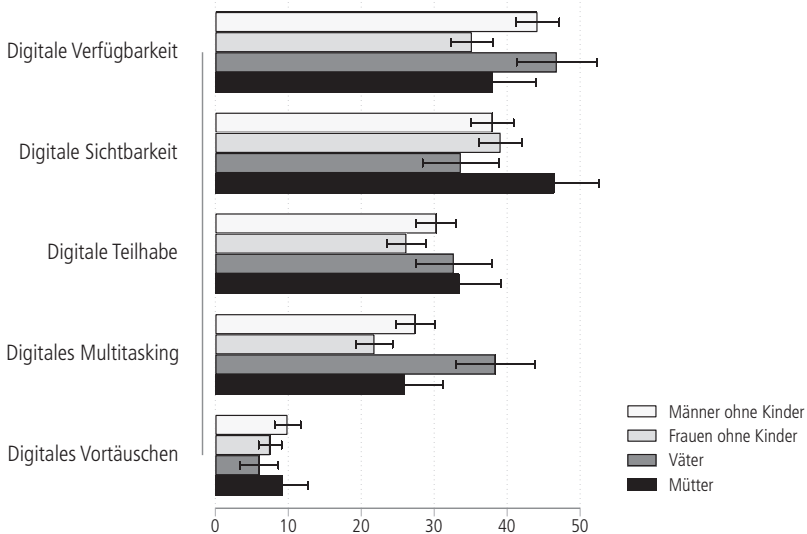
Anmerkung: Gezeigt werden die gewichteten Anteile von Beschäftigten die zum Teil oder ausschließlich im Homeoffice gearbeitet haben und angegeben haben, dass die jeweilige Verhaltensweise „eher“ oder „sehr“ auf sie zutrifft

Quelle: Welle 8 des IAB-HOPP (2021), N = 2,733.

geschafft haben (digitale Sichtbarkeit). Die Möglichkeiten digitaler Teilhabe und digitalen Multitaskings werden von etwas weniger als einem Drittel der Beschäftigten im Homeoffice wahrgenommen (29 Prozent und 26 Prozent). Digitales Vortäuschen scheint hingegen weniger verbreitet zu sein (knapp neun Prozent).

Abbildung 2 stellt die Unterschiede in den Facetten digitalen Präsenzverhaltens nach Geschlecht und Elternstatus dar. Auffällig ist, dass sowohl kinderlose Frauen als auch Mütter seltener digital verfügbar sind als Männer ohne Kinder und Väter (35 bzw. 38 Prozent vs. 44 bzw. 47 Prozent). Allerdings stellen Mütter häufiger als Männer und Frauen ohne Kinder digitale Sichtbarkeit her. So liegt der Anteil derjenigen, die sich um Sichtbarkeit im Digitalen bemühen, bei Müttern bei 46 Prozent, bei Frauen ohne Kinder jedoch nur bei 39 Prozent und bei Männern ohne bzw. mit Kindern bei 38 bzw. 34 Prozent. Die Möglichkeiten digitaler Teilhabe werden am häufigsten von Müttern und Vätern genutzt (mit jeweils 33 Prozent) und in einem etwas geringeren Maße von Männern und Frauen ohne Kinder (30 Prozent bzw. 26 Prozent). Digitales Multitasking gehört, entgegen unserer Erwartung, vor allem bei Vätern (38 Prozent) zum Arbeitsalltag und ist bei kinderlosen Männern und

Abbildung 2 Verbreitung digitalen Präsenzverhaltens nach Geschlecht und Elternschaft



Anmerkung: Gezeigt werden die gewichteten Anteile von Beschäftigten die zum Teil oder ausschließlich im Homeoffice gearbeitet haben und angegeben haben, dass die jeweilige Verhaltensweise „eher“ oder „sehr“ auf sie zutrifft.

Quelle: Welle 8 des IAB-HOPP (2021), N = 2,733.

Frauen (27 und 22 Prozent) sowie Müttern (26 Prozent) deutlich weniger verbreitet. Digitales Vortäuschen ist, ebenfalls entgegen unserer Erwartung, am häufigsten bei kinderlosen Männern – im Ausmaß insgesamt jedoch sehr gering – verbreitet.

## 5 Zusammenfassung und Schlussbetrachtungen

Ortsunabhängiges Arbeiten und die Nutzung digitaler Technologien und Kommunikationsformen ist mit der Covid-19-Pandemie fester Bestandteil des Arbeitsalltags vieler Beschäftigter geworden. Angesichts der Chancen und Risiken, die das Homeoffice und die fehlende Präsenz vor Ort sowohl für Beschäftigte als auch für Unternehmen birgt, sind wir in diesem Beitrag der Frage nachgegangen, was Beschäftigte tun, um „da“ zu sein, wenn sie nicht vor Ort sind? Und welche Unterschiede gibt es bei der Herstellung einer solchen „digitalen Präsenz“ zwischen verschiedenen Beschäftigtengruppen? Zur Beantwortung dieser Fragen haben wir anhand bestehender Theorien und Forschung das Konzept des digitalen Präsenzverhaltens entwickelt und fünf Facetten digitalen Präsenzverhaltens identifiziert: digitale Verfügbarkeit, digitale Sichtbarkeit, digitales Vortäuschen, digitales Multitasking und digitale Teilhabe. Grundlage für die theoretische Herleitung dieser Facetten war das Zusammenspiel der zumindest zum Teil divergenten Flexibilitätsinteressen und Zugang zu Ressourcen seitens der Beschäftigten einerseits und den Arbeitgeber:innen andererseits.

Um die Verbreitung der unterschiedlichen Facetten digitalen Präsenzverhaltens zu erfassen, haben wir auf Basis der IAB-HOPP-Daten (Welle 8, 2021) ausgewertet. Unsere Ergebnisse zeigen: Digitales Präsenzverhalten war unter Beschäftigten im Homeoffice während der Covid-19-Pandemie weit verbreitet – in erster Linie digitale Verfügbarkeit und digitale Sichtbarkeit. Digitale Teilhabe und digitales Multitasking waren etwas weniger verbreitet, digitales Vortäuschen eher selten. Des Weiteren zeigen unsere Befunde auch Unterschiede nach Geschlecht und Elternschaft auf. Vor allem Mütter scheinen darum bemüht zu sein, Sichtbarkeit im Digitalen herzustellen, möglicherweise auch, um Stigmatisierungen durch die Nutzung von Homeoffice entgegenzuwirken (Lott & Abendroth, 2020). Die Möglichkeiten digitaler Teilhabe nutzen in erster Linie Eltern, und zwar anders als vermutet, unabhängig vom Geschlecht. Digitale Verfügbarkeit und Multitasking sind ebenfalls Verhaltensweisen, die Mütter seltener an den Tag legen als kinderlose Frauen oder Männer. Insgesamt legen unsere Ergebnisse nahe, dass nicht alle Beschäftigtengruppen – insbesondere, wie hier gezeigt Mütter – die neuen Flexibilitätsmöglichkeiten im digitalen Raum nutzen bzw. den neuen Flexibilitätsanforderungen im digitalen Raum entsprechen können.

### *Forschungsdiesiderate*

Mit diesen Ergebnissen liefert unsere Studie erste wichtige Erkenntnisse zu einer bislang wenig beachteten Konsequenz des ortsunabhängigen Arbeitens. Die unserer

Studie zugrunde liegenden Daten wurden während der Pandemie erhoben, als viele Eltern Erwerbsarbeit mit Kinderbetreuung und Homeschooling vereinbaren mussten, da Kitas und Schulen geschlossen waren und die Großeltern als Betreuungspersonen ausfielen. Damit bilden sie eine Ausnahmesituation ab. Zukünftige Forschung sollte digitales Präsenzverhalten im neuen Alltag ergründen, wenn Unternehmen eine post-pandemische Praxis von mobiler bzw. hybrider Arbeit geschaffen haben und die Kitas und Schulen im Normalbetrieb sind.

Der vorliegende Beitrag ist ein erster Schritt in der Konzeptionalisierung und quantitativen Erfassung von digitalem Präsenzverhalten. Künftige Forschung sollte sowohl das Konzept als auch seine Erhebungsinstrumente weiterentwickeln, sie schärfen und gegebenenfalls um zusätzliche Elemente ergänzen. Beispielsweise indem etwa der Widerstand der Beschäftigten gegen die Kontrolle der Arbeitgeber als zusätzliche Facette aufgenommen wird. Denn im Zuge der digitalen Transformation wird die Frage, auf welche vielfältige Art und Weise Beschäftigte mit digitalen Technologien bzw. Homeoffice umgehen und welche Folgen dies für sie hat, an Relevanz zunehmen. Auch bedarf es weiterer Forschung, die die Facetten digitalen Präsenzverhaltens und ihre Erfassung in anderen gesellschaftlichen Kontexten überprüft.

Letztlich ist es auch Aufgabe der zukünftigen Forschung, die geschlechts- und elternschaftsspezifischen Muster des digitalen Präsenzverhaltens weiter zu untersuchen. Insbesondere ist den Ergebnissen, dass Väter mit Abstand am häufigsten digitales Multitasking betreiben und Männer mit bzw. ohne Kinder am häufigsten digital verfügbar sind, weiter auf den Grund zu gehen. Hierfür bieten sich Forschungsdesigns wie eine Triangulation an, in der die quantitativen Ergebnisse anhand qualitativer Datenerhebung und -analyse erklärt werden.

### *Theoretische Implikationen*

Das Ergebnis, dass digitale Verfügbarkeit eine der verbreitetsten Facetten digitalen Präsenzverhaltens ist, legt nahe, dass auch im digitalen Raum die Vorstellung fortbesteht, dass sich die „ideale Arbeitskraft“ (Williams et al., 2013) dauerhaft und rund um die Uhr bereit hält und Erwerbsarbeit priorisiert. Während sich Arbeitsformen also wandeln, ändern sich die Vorstellungen und Erwartungen an Beschäftigte nicht oder nur wenig. Das deutet darauf hin, dass die digitale Transformation soziale Ungleichheiten reproduzieren und verschärfen kann, wenn etwa Erreichbarkeit in der Freizeit monetär oder mit beruflichem Aufstieg belohnt wird (Breen, 1997; Cha & Weeden, 2014; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Wenn Verfügbarkeits-erwartungen und -anforderungen nicht abgebaut, sondern sich lediglich ins Digitale verlagern, werden bestimmte Beschäftigtengruppen, z. B. solche mit Sorgeverpflichtungen, systematisch ausgeschlossen und benachteiligt. Die Verbreitung von digitalem Multitasking deutet darüber hinaus auf ein hohes Maß an Arbeitsintensivierung hin und illustriert, im Falle der gleichzeitigen Erledigung von privaten und erwerbsbezogenen Tätigkeiten, fehlende Grenzen zwischen Erwerbs- und Familienleben. Das Ergebnis, dass vor allem Mütter digitale Sichtbarkeit herstellen, verweist einerseits auf die nach wie vor

vorherrschende Stigmatisierung von Frauen, die flexible Arbeitsarrangements nutzen. Andererseits kann dieser Befund auch als Hinweis darauf gelesen werden, dass gerade bislang benachteiligte Beschäftigtengruppen Interesse an digitaler Sichtbarkeit haben. So können sie Nachteile, die ihnen aufgrund fehlender Präsenz entstehen, reduzieren.

Insgesamt illustrieren die empirischen Befunde unserer Untersuchung die Ambivalenz digitalen Präsenzverhaltens. Zum einen zeigen wir, dass digitale Technologien die Teilhabe an Erwerbsarbeit für Eltern und die Sichtbarkeit der Arbeitsleistungen und -erfolge vor allem für Eltern bzw. Mütter erhöhen können. Der digitale Wandel hat also das Potenzial, das berufliche Fortkommen von Beschäftigten mit Sorgeverantwortung zu erleichtern. Neben der individuellen Kompensation fehlender Ressourcen, die für die Bewältigung der Arbeit notwendig sind, können also auch Teilhabeinteressen ein wesentlicher Grund dafür sein, dass Beschäftigte digitale Technologien für die Extensivierung und Intensivierung der Arbeit nutzen. Beschäftigte arbeiten nicht nur deshalb aus eigenem Antrieb länger oder außerhalb der vertraglichen Arbeitszeit, weil sonst ein zufriedenstellendes Arbeitsergebnis nicht erreicht werden kann, sondern auch, weil sie sich für die Einhaltung von Terminen und den Erfolg von Projekten verantwortlich fühlen (Kratzer, 2020). Zum anderen sollte jedoch an dieser Stelle auch angemerkt werden, dass digitale Teilhabe auch mit Kosten für die Beschäftigten einhergehen kann, wenn etwa Beschäftigte Arbeitskontakte in ihrer Freizeit herstellen und damit eine Doppelbelastung bei gleichzeitiger Sorgearbeit mit möglichen negativen Folgen für die Gesundheit und das Wohlbefinden in Kauf nehmen (z. B. Derks et al., 2014; Gombert et al., 2018; Lott & Wöhrmann, 2022; Xie et al., 2018).

### *Praktische Implikationen*

Unsere Studie liefert wichtige Hinweise dafür, wie Betriebe ortsunabhängiges Arbeiten so organisieren können, dass es integrativ und effizient ist. Zum einen stehen Arbeitsschutz und -sicherheit vor der Herausforderung, die Risiken für die Beschäftigten, die mit digitalem Präsenzverhalten einhergehen können, zu minimieren. Diese Risiken haben während der Pandemie bereits zugenommen und werden sich angesichts der digitalen Transformation in der Zukunft noch weiter verstärken. Dies betrifft nicht nur die Herstellung von Verfügbarkeit in der Freizeit, sondern auch die Anforderung für Beschäftigte, Sichtbarkeit von Arbeitserfolgen und Arbeitsengagement im Digitalen zu zeigen, was eine Arbeitsbelastung sein und zu Stress und Belastungen führen kann. Hierauf müssen Unternehmen reagieren und auch die Politik – z. B. mit Vorschlägen zu einer Arbeitszeiterfassung, die zerfaserten Tagesabläufen im Homeoffice Rechnung trägt. Zum anderen zeigt unsere Forschung, dass digitale Technologien und Homeoffice zur Teilhabe von Beschäftigten, insbesondere von Eltern, beitragen können und dass Arbeitnehmer:innen außerhalb ihrer vertraglichen Arbeitszeit arbeiten wollen, um weiterhin in Arbeitsprozesse eingebunden zu sein. Auch dieses legitime Bedürfnis muss berücksichtigt werden, wenn es um die Durchsetzung von

Maßnahmen zum Schutz von Gesundheit und Sicherheit am Arbeitsplatz geht. Anstatt bestimmte Handlungen wie z. B. Arbeitskontakte außerhalb der regulären Arbeitszeit zu verbieten, sind Arbeitgeber:innen und Betriebsräte gut beraten, sich zu fragen, mit welchen anderen Mitteln die Eingliederung von Beschäftigten mit außerberuflichen Verpflichtungen in laufende Arbeitsprozesse besser gefördert werden kann. Denkbar wäre z. B. eine Betriebspraxis, bei der wichtige Meetings nicht am späten Nachmittag terminiert werden, wenn Eltern etwa ihre Kinder nach der Kita oder Schule betreuen und bei manchen digitalen Meetings explizit gesagt wird, dass ein Einschalten der Kamera nicht notwendig ist.

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## An Investigation into Teleworking and its Relationships with Gender, Mobility, and Paid-Work-Life Balance

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*Abstract:* This paper addresses gender differences in dealing with teleworking and their effects on everyday mobility by means of a cross-sectional survey. The results show gender-based differences in dealing with teleworking, attitudes to it, and the use of time saved by not commuting. Frequent teleworking is associated with longer commuting times to main offices and accentuates gender differences. Research should address that teleworking is highly interwoven with the gendering of mobility and paid work-life balance.

*Keywords:* Teleworking, mobility, paid work-life balance, new work, gender

### Une analyse du télétravail et de ses liens avec le genre, la mobilité et avec l’équilibre entre la vie professionnelle et la vie privée

*Résumé:* Cet article traite des différences de genre dans le télétravail et ses effets sur la mobilité quotidienne au moyen d’une enquête par questionnaire. Les résultats montrent des différences de genre en ce qui concerne le télétravail, les attitudes et l’utilisation du temps gagné en évitant les trajets domicile-travail. Le télétravail est associé à des temps de trajet plus longs et accentue les différences de genre. La recherche doit aussi considérer que le télétravail est étroitement lié avec les dimensions de genre de la mobilité et de l’équilibre entre travail et vie privée

*Mots-clés:* Télétravail, mobilité, équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée, nouvelles formes de travail, genre

### Eine Untersuchung über flexible Formen der Arbeit und die Zusammenhänge mit Gender, Mobilität und Paid-Work-Life Balance

*Zusammenfassung:* Der Beitrag untersucht geschlechtsspezifische Unterschiede in der Nutzung von Telearbeit und deren Auswirkungen auf die Alltagsmobilität anhand einer Befragung. Die Ergebnisse zeigen geschlechtsspezifische Unterschiede in der Nutzung von Telearbeit, in der Einstellung dazu und in der Nutzung der eingesparten Zeit. Häufige Telearbeit ist mit längeren Pendelzeiten verbunden und verstärkt die Geschlechterunterschiede. Die Forschung sollte berücksichtigen, dass Telearbeit mit geschlechtsspezifischer Mobilität und der Vereinbarkeit von Beruf und Privatleben zusammenhängt.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Telearbeit, Mobilität, Paid-Work-Life Balance, New Work, Gender

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## 1 Introduction

The term “New Work” has been used to describe new ways of working in the global and digital age (Helmold, 2023). Early concepts date back to Bergmann (1990), who emphasized the need for meaningful paid work. One aspect of the new work concept is teleworking (Niebuhr et al., 2022). Teleworking is understood as paid work activities that are done outside the traditional workplace boundaries of an employer’s office or production space (Morganson et al., 2010). Possible workplace locations that are covered by the term “teleworking” are the home, on the move, and/or third locations like a coworking space or cafés (Ravalet & Rérat, 2019, p. 584). In general, digitalization and the expansion of knowledge-based activities (Krasilnikova & Levin-Keitel, 2022) have made employment more spatially and temporally flexible (Ravalet & Rérat, 2019) and enable a more self-determined paid work organization (Niebuhr et al., 2022).

Telework is widely practiced in Switzerland because the Swiss labour market is characterized by a high degree of flexibility in the form of self-determined arrangements of daily and annual worktimes, and a spatial flexibility provided by high participations in teleworking (Wöhner, 2022). Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic boosted the widespread adaption of teleworking (Edelmann et al., 2021; Fischer et al., 2020; Moser et al., 2021). These dynamics accelerate the significance of examining the impact of teleworking on gender dynamics in academic debates (Steinmetz et al., 2022).

There is a complex relationship between gender, teleworking, everyday mobility practices, and paid work-life balance (WLB). Teleworking changes the allocation of time saved by not commuting. Saved time can be used for other private activities such as social interactions, housework, or care work (Pabilonia & Vernon, 2022). Thus, teleworking is seen as a way of improving workers’ WLB (Haddad et al., 2009; Mokhtarian & Salomon, 1997; Ravalet & Rérat, 2019). The WLB references the ability to be well in different aspects of life and to feel well about the connection between one’s paid work and one’s non-work life (Brough et al., 2020; Como & Domene, 2023). Teleworkers report their ability to coordinate their paid work better with their private needs as a main reason for teleworking (Sullivan & Lewis, 2001; Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2016). Other benefits of teleworking are autonomy, efficiency, performance, and productivity (Vayre et al., 2022).

Some empirical studies have examined the influence of teleworking in general on WLB with mixed results (Vayre et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2020). On the negative side, telework may blur the boundaries between paid work and private life and increasingly extend into free time, with teleworkers working outside regular working hours (Thulin et al., 2019). The effects depend on the employee’s circumstances (Como & Domene, 2023). Individuals play multiple roles simultaneously in their

daily lives, which can lead to conflicts between paid work and private life or family relations (Sirgy & Lee, 2016; Zhang et al., 2020). This sort of conflict is especially significant for women when they take on a larger share of household-related, unpaid work (Best & Lanzendorf, 2005).

Within this stream of literature, gendered perspectives on the triangle of teleworking, mobility, and WLB have so far been under-researched, notably in Switzerland. Against this background, we ask the following research questions: How is teleworking applied and interwoven into the various spheres of life from a gender perspective (e.g. use of time saved, commuting)? What differences are apparent in the frequency of teleworking, the reasons why, or the advantages and challenges of teleworking by gender? The study is based on an empirical investigation using a quantitative survey carried out with city administration's employees in Switzerland. We analyse gender differences in the use of telework, in attitudes towards telework, and in the use of the time saved by not commuting.

The remainder of the paper provides an overview of the state of research and the literature in the next section. Section 3 outlines the study background, and the methodology used, namely the cross-sectional survey, while section 4 presents the key results. Section 5 discusses and summarizes the overall findings considering the research question and reflects upon their implications for further research.

## 2 Theoretical Considerations and Literature

### 2.1 Gender Perspectives and Space-Time Geography

First academic conceptions made a distinction between the biological classification “sex” and socially constructed forms of “gender”, which are reproduced through social interactions and practices. However, such simplistic binary categories became more and more obsolete in recent years. According to Richardson (2022) the definition of sex is contextual (“sex contextualism”). In this understanding, “sex” may not be seen as a fixed or universal attribute, rather as a variable that should be pragmatically defined based on the needs and conditions of a (empirical) study (Richardson, 2022).

From our perspective, practice theory is useful to understand gender as a context-dependent concept. Relying on West & Zimmermann (1987) gender is defined by psychological, cultural, and social attributions and constituted through interactions (“doing gender”). Based on everyday practices, society directs expectations and roles towards individuals. Gender role is used to describe these culturally and socially influenced expectations of the behaviour and characteristics of people (Eagly, 1987). One aspect is the gender-specific division of paid work and family responsibilities, including e.g. the prioritization of the breadwinner role or women's

participation in paid employment (Davis & Greenstein, 2009). These practices can result in contradictory and incompatible expectations and role conflicts that cause stress and require management by the individual (Biddle, 1986). Particularly in the context of teleworking, when the question arises as to how telework affects gender roles. To learn from this, we try to analyse gender in the context of their associated roles. These roles are operationalized in a highly simplified way, following Pape et al. (2024), by using certain categories in survey data (e.g. gender, parenthood).

In order to conceptualize the gender difference in practices, the space-time geography according to H agerstrand (1970) can be used. Space-time geography defines an individual's activity space as limited by three constraints: capability, coupling, and authority (H agerstrand, 1970). Within this spatial radius people can move for daily activities, limited by their available time and access to resources ("capability constraints"). The "coupling constraints" relate to interdependence, the demands of others, and resources within a household (H agerstrand, 1970). These two constraints define people's activity spaces based on their resources and roles in the household and society, as shown in different commuting distances or allocations of time (Gil Sol a, 2016). Finally, the "authority constraints" include rules about who is allowed to do what, e.g. legal rules or in relation to the built environment and accessibility given by the transportation infrastructure (H agerstrand, 1970).

## 2.2 Teleworking, WLB, and Gender

There are many theories interpreting the relationship between paid work and (family) life (Zhang et al., 2020). The role theory posits that individuals must fulfil different tasks and expectations contingent on their position and status (Martin & Wilson, 2005). Additionally, roles may emerge from gender or parenthood. In everyday life, individuals assume a multitude of roles, including those of employee, parent, or partner. The pursuit of these disparate roles may be in conflict with one another (Collatz & Gudat, 2011). Therefore, paid workers have certain resources of time (capability constraints) at their disposal and have different roles in paid work and (family) life (Frone, 2003), which links to coupling constraints according to H agerstrand (1970).

The concept of WLB addresses the division of employees' resources of time and energy between paid work and private life, with a particular emphasis on the necessity for achieving an appropriate equilibrium (Collatz & Gudat, 2011). The term "work" is typically reserved for remunerated activities (Ransome, 2007, p. 377). "Life" is used to refer to all activities that occur outside the realm of formal paid employment (Ransome, 2007, p. 377). Therefore, less time spent on paid work may result to more time for "life" and non-work tasks (Kurowska, 2020). The dimension of "life" encompasses a range of factors, including partnerships, children, activities, and personal values (Collatz & Gudat, 2011). Other aspects, such as care responsibili-

ties, housework, or voluntary work also belong to “life” (Collatz & Gudat, 2011), in contrast to other studies in which care work is explicitly included in the work dimension (Kurowska, 2020; Ransome, 2007). We define “paid work-life balance” as the distinction between paid work and private life, acknowledging that care work and housework are frequently also unpaid labour. Teleworkers may attempt to align their paid work and familial lives in accordance with their gender and familial roles (Sullivan & Lewis, 2001).

In Switzerland, the average time spent on paid work, housework, and care work in the year 2021 is practically the same for women and men, at 57 hours per week, and for parents at around 75 hours (mothers 75, fathers 74) (BFS, 2021, p. 35–37). The division of labour between gender is evident in the division between paid work and housework and care work. Woman and especially mothers are more frequently engaged in part-time employment and, assuming a greater burden of housework and childcare (BFS, 2021).

WLB is often discussed in the context of teleworking (e.g. Como & Domene 2023; Zhang et al. 2020). Improving the WLB has been cited as one of the most important drivers of teleworking (Aguilera et al., 2016; Haddad et al., 2009; Mokhtarian & Salomon, 1997). The actual results are not clear whether teleworking affects the WLB positively or negatively (e.g. Anderson et al., 2015; Beckel & Fisher, 2022; Song & Gao, 2020). Teleworking provides more flexible paid working arrangements, which benefits the WLB and reduces conflicts (Allen et al., 2015). But teleworking may also blur the spatial boundaries between paid work and home and therefore potentially increases paid work-family conflicts (Mann & Holdsworth, 2003; Russell et al., 2009). During the Covid-19 pandemic, achieving a satisfactory WLB was challenging and the potential for work-life conflicts was particularly high given the necessity of childcare and teleworking simultaneously (Como et al., 2021). Additionally, there is a discourse on the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on the distribution of household and care work between heterosexual couples, whereas some scholars propose a convergence, while others suggest a divergence (Steinmetz et al., 2022).

Reichelt et al. (2021) show that the response to unemployment differed between genders. For example, women tended to be more affected to fall back into traditional gender roles (McPhail et al., 2024; Reichelt et al., 2021). Women tended to revert to more traditional gender role attitudes and responsibilities after being released, taking on a greater share of household-related work and care. Conversely, when the father becomes unemployed (and the mother remains equally employed), men tend to express more egalitarian gender role attitudes. This led to new gender inequalities in the case of crisis, such as a pandemic.

The effects on WLB can also be very individual, depending on one’s own personality or situation (e.g. parenthood; Como & Domene, 2023). Golden et al.

(2006) examined the extent to which teleworking impacts on paid work to produce family conflicts, including conflicts over paid work. Therefore, the more teleworking is done, the less likely one is to experience office-based interruptions and strain, leaving more time and emotional energy for family activities, and reducing the extent to which paid work interferes with the family. However, trying to balance paid work and the family on teleworking days increases the likelihood of the family interfering with paid work (Golden et al., 2006). Vayre et al. (2022) demonstrate the adverse consequences of teleworking. As the boundaries between paid work and personal life become increasingly indistinct, teleworkers tend to experience elevated levels of stress, increased work demands, and a greater prevalence of paid work-family conflicts.

### 2.3 Teleworking, Mobility, and Gender

In the context of teleworking research, aspects of mobility such as commuting distances or duration and the time allocation are central. Teleworkers commute longer distances in Switzerland than non-teleworkers (Balthasar et al., 2024; Ravalet & Rérat, 2019). Gender-specific results for teleworkers are unknown thus far. In general, studies have uncovered gender differences in travel time and/or distance from paid work (Parnell et al., 2022; Schwanen et al., 2002), travel patterns, and the links between trips and the reasons for taking them (Rosenbloom, 2004). In particular, women have shorter and more complex travel patterns despite the greater number of trips (Kawgan-Kagan, 2015; Scheiner, 2016; Sovacool et al., 2018), which are partly due to gender roles and partly to the fact that women take on more care work (Best & Lanzendorf, 2005; García-Mainar et al., 2011; Konrad, 2016).

Key events in the life course, such as parenthood, have different effects on the activity patterns of men and women (Scheiner, 2016). Furthermore, flexible working hours tend to result in women being more likely to escort children to school (Motte-Baumvol et al., 2017). Teleworking changes the allocation of time by eliminating some commuting trips. It is often argued that the time saved can be used for other activities (Hostettler Macias et al., 2022; Pabilonia & Vernon, 2022: 6). Trips on teleworking days are more likely to involve transporting children to school or additional activities such as shopping or leisure (Ravalet & Rérat, 2019, p. 594). Vovsha et al. (2004) show that travel patterns and the choice of household activities depend on the availability of time. Teleworking makes more time available, and consequently more activities can be undertaken.

So far, however, no explicit analysis has incorporated mobility, teleworking, and individual WLB into a holistic approach that includes a gender perspective. Since research on this topic is rare in Switzerland, this work attempts to shed light on those interdependencies based on the following own empirical study and findings.

### 3 Study Background and Methodology

#### 3.1 Study Background

The study is based on an empirical investigation of the administration of Schaffhausen, a Swiss city of 37 000 inhabitants. Public administration is relevant as an empirical basis because the implementation of teleworking had been rather slow in comparison to other economic sectors. The Covid-19 pandemic boosted teleworking even in public administrations (Edelmann et al., 2021; Fischer et al., 2020; Moser et al., 2021). Thus, many employees of Schaffhausen city administration found themselves regularly working from home for the first time during the Covid-19 pandemic.

A standardized questionnaire was developed and discussed with the city administration. They wrote directly to 516 employees inviting them to participate in the survey. This corresponds to over a third of all employees. The employees who were contacted had an official personal mailing address of the city administration and were eligible for teleworking in view of their (partial) office activity. The survey ran between September 2022 and November 2022. During this time, the city administration emailed two reminders to its employees. During this period 278 people fully completed the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 54 percent.

For data-preparation purposes, the responses from the Unipark survey tool are imported into the SPSS statistical tool. Data preparation include coding the data (e.g. analysis of missing values), a plausibility check on the data, and labelling the variables and their characteristics. The analytical framework focuses on a differentiated analysis regarding female and male and a further differentiation between those with or without children. The empirical analysis of this study is based on frequency tables, cross-tabulations, mean values, and share comparisons. Bivariate statistical analysis is used to detect for significant differences within the groups.

#### 3.2 Description of the Sample

The survey involved 61 percent women and 39 percent men; a third option for gender was provided but not selected (Table 1). The average age of participants was 44 years, with female employees averaging 43 years, male employees 46 years. 40 percent of the surveyed employees had a university degree, 51 percent a professional apprenticeship or a higher vocational school qualification. The majority of respondents were employees without a management function (64 percent), though 36 percent were group or team leaders. On average, female employees have a 69-percentage workload (approx. 29 hours), male employees 84 percentage (approx. 35 hours). 46 percent of respondents had direct customer contact. 55 percent

Table 1 General Description of the Sample

| Variable                | Categories  | n   | Shares/Means |
|-------------------------|---|-----|--------------|
| Gender                  | Female  | 170 | 61 %         |
|                         | Male  | 107 | 39 %         |
|                         | Diverse   | 0   | 0 %          |
| Age (Categories)        | Younger than 30 years   | 36  | 13 %         |
|                         | 30–39 years   | 62  | 22 %         |
|                         | 40–49 years   | 65  | 23 %         |
|                         | 50 years and older  | 115 | 41 %         |
| Average age             | Male  |     | 46           |
|                         | Female  |     | 43           |
|                         | Total   |     | 44           |
| Education               | Compulsory schooling  | 7   | 3 %          |
|                         | Vocational apprenticeship and baccalaureate, higher vocational school (federal diploma) | 158 | 57 %         |
|                         | University degree   | 110 | 40 %         |
| Professional position   | Employee without management function  | 179 | 64 %         |
|                         | Employee with management function   | 99  | 36 %         |
| Job percentage          | 0–20 percent  | 2   | 1 %          |
|                         | 21–40 percent   | 14  | 5 %          |
|                         | 41–60 percent   | 50  | 18 %         |
|                         | 61–80 percent   | 61  | 22 %         |
|                         | 81–100 percent  | 148 | 53 %         |
| Average job percentage  | Male  |     | 84 %         |
|                         | Female  |     | 69 %         |
|                         | Total   |     | 75 %         |
| Direct customer contact | Yes   | 129 | 46 %         |
|                         | Partial   | 101 | 36 %         |
|                         | No  | 48  | 17 %         |
| Household               | One-person household  | 37  | 13 %         |
|                         | Couple household  | 100 | 36 %         |
|                         | Family household (couple parents, single parents)                                       | 123 | 45 %         |
|                         | Others (e.g. shared apartment, respondents who live with their parents)                 | 16  | 6 %          |
|                         | Persons with child(ren)   | 123 | 45 %         |
| Analysing categories    | Female without children   | 96  | 35 %         |
|                         | Female with child(ren)  | 74  | 27 %         |
|                         | Male without children   | 58  | 21 %         |
|                         | Male with child(ren)  | 49  | 18 %         |

Source: own data and calculations, n = 278.

Table 2 Gender Perspective on Teleworking

| Children  | Total | Male |     | Female |     | Test-Statistic |
|---|-------|------|-----|--------|-----|----------------|
|   |       | No   | Yes | No     | Yes |                |
| How often do you do teleworking?  |       |      |     |        |     |                |
| 1 Never   | 27%   | 34%  | 24% | 23%    | 27% |                |
| 2 Vary rarely (2-3 per year)  | 20%   | 24%  | 18% | 21%    | 18% |                |
| 3 Rarely or irregularly (approx. 1 per month)   | 14%   | 14%  | 18% | 11%    | 16% |                |
| 4 Often (about 3-4 times per month)   | 8%    | 10%  | 6%  | 8%     | 7%  |                |
| 5 Regularly (at least 1 time per week)  | 22%   | 12%  | 29% | 26%    | 22% |                |
| 6 Very often (several times per week)   | 8%    | 5%   | 4%  | 10%    | 11% |                |
| Average (1-6) (ANOVA-Test, n=142)   | 3.0   | 2.6  | 3.1 | 3.3    | 3.1 | 0.12           |
| How do you generally arrange teleworking in terms of working time and days? (ANOVA-Test, n = 142)   |       |      |     |        |     |                |
| The same working days   | 92%   | 86%  | 82% | 98%    | 93% | 0.08           |
| The same paid labour time   | 85%   | 91%  | 79% | 81%    | 89% | 0.47           |
| Attitudes towards reason for teleworking (1-4 Likert scale; 1 does not apply, 2 does not apply very much, 3 strongly agree, 4 fully agree; ANOVA-Test; n = 124) |       |      |     |        |     |                |
| Efficiency aspects  |       |      |     |        |     |                |
| I can efficiently work on pending issues in between.  | 3.5   | 3.2  | 3.5 | 3.7    | 3.7 | 0.07           |
| I can do tasks that I normally can't do as well in the office.  | 3.1   | 2.5  | 3.2 | 3.4    | 2.9 | 0.02 *         |
| I appreciate the privacy there.   | 3.5   | 3.3  | 3.4 | 3.7    | 3.5 | 0.18           |
| Autonomy aspects  |       |      |     |        |     |                |
| I can organize my work there according to my needs.   | 3.0   | 2.7  | 3.1 | 3.0    | 3.2 | 0.28           |
| I appreciate the autonomy in time and place.  | 3.4   | 3.2  | 3.2 | 3.5    | 3.5 | 0.39           |
| I can do the work independently of place.   | 3.3   | 3.1  | 3.7 | 3.2    | 3.1 | 0.17           |

*Continuation of Table 2 on the next page.*

*Continuation of Table 2.*

| Children  | Total | Male |     | Female |     | Test-Statistic |    |
|---|-------|------|-----|--------|-----|----------------|----|
|   |       | No   | Yes | No     | Yes |                |    |
| Attitudes towards reason for teleworking (1-4 Likert scale; 1 does not apply, 2 does not apply very much, 3 strongly agree, 4 fully agree; ANOVA-Test; n = 124) |       |      |     |        |     |                |    |
| Coordination of paid work and life aspects  |       |      |     |        |     |                |    |
| Teleworking saves time, since travel time is eliminated.  | 3.4   | 3.3  | 3.4 | 3.6    | 3.4 | 0.62           |    |
| I am more motivated at work.  | 2.4   | 1.7  | 2.6 | 2.5    | 2.3 | 0.09           | .  |
| I can better coordinate paid work and private life.   | 3.0   | 2.6  | 2.8 | 3.0    | 3.3 | 0.11           |    |
| Teamwork and collaboration aspects  |       |      |     |        |     |                |    |
| My colleagues or my team expect teleworking.  | 1.1   | 1.5  | 1.1 | 1.1    | 1.0 | 0.00           | ** |
| I do telework out of habit.   | 1.4   | 1.4  | 1.7 | 1.3    | 1.3 | 0.07           | .  |
| Challenges in dealing with teleworking (1-4 Likert scale, 1 very low, 2 low, 3 rather high, 4 very high; ANOVA-Test; n = 146)                                   |       |      |     |        |     |                |    |
| Distraction   | 1.9   | 2.3  | 2.2 | 1.7    | 1.7 | 0.03           | *  |
| Self-discipline   | 1.7   | 2.4  | 1.9 | 1.5    | 1.5 | 0.00           | ** |
| Motivation to paid work   | 1.6   | 2.0  | 1.5 | 1.4    | 1.6 | 0.02           | *  |
| Separation of paid working time and free time   | 2.0   | 2.3  | 2.2 | 1.8    | 1.9 | 0.29           |    |
| Paid work planning and organization   | 1.7   | 1.9  | 1.7 | 1.6    | 1.6 | 0.59           |    |
| Dealing with digital tools  | 1.7   | 1.5  | 2.1 | 1.7    | 1.7 | 0.12           |    |
| Cooperation and exchange within the team  | 2.5   | 2.7  | 2.9 | 2.5    | 2.2 | 0.13           |    |
| Cooperation with the supervisor   | 2.0   | 2.0  | 2.3 | 1.9    | 1.8 | 0.22           |    |

Source: own data and calculations, Bivariate test-statistics for p-value: ANOVA-Test, critical values: \*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; .  $p < .10$ .

of employees lived in a household without children (single or couple household, other household types), and 45 percent had children. The sample is representative of the target population and can be generalized to comparable work fields. In line with Richardson (2022) “sex” is understood as context-dependent concept within an empirical study. The categories, female and male with and without children, are important for the analysis in context of mobility and WLB. These categories are

distributed as follows and can be analysed within the gender discourse: 35 percent are women without children and 27 percent with children, and 21 percent are men without children and 18 percent with children.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Gender Perspective on Teleworking

For many employees within the city administration, teleworking is a new way of organizing their work in comparison to other work domains. 74 percent of the supervisor's report that their employees did not regularly telework before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 2 shows that overall, 73 percent of employees practice teleworking. 22 percent of employees telework regularly, i. e. at least once a week, 8 percent very often, i. e. several times per week. The frequency of teleworking is most pronounced for women and men without children (average 3.3 vs. 2.6); if there are children, there is no difference between female and male employees ( $\emptyset$  3.1). However, based on an ANOVA analysis, these differences are statistically not significant on a p-level smaller than 10 percent ( $p=0.69$ ).

Table 2 shows also that teleworkers generally work at home on the same days as in the main office (92 percent), and there are statistically significant differences between the groups on a p-level smaller than 10 percent ( $p=0.08$ ). They have more time flexibility, as 85 percent of the employees work at the same paid labour time. There is a descriptive difference among gender and parenthood, more mothers work at the same paid labour time (89 percent) than childless women (81 percent), while conversely less fathers work at same paid labour times (79 percent) than childless man (91 percent). However, these differences are statistically not significant, which may be due to the size of the sample.

The reasons for teleworking are the ability to work more efficiently on pending issues in between (average 3.5 on Likert scale ranging from 1 to 4), the privacy while teleworking ( $\emptyset$  3.5) greater independence in terms of time and location ( $\emptyset$  3.4), and the time saved by eliminating travel time ( $\emptyset$  3.4). Statistically significant differences between the groups based on ANOVA tests regarding the scale averages are seen for efficiency, work motivation, teamwork, and collaboration: female teleworkers consider efficiency ( $\emptyset$  3.7) and the lack of disruption ( $\emptyset$  3.4 childless woman /  $\emptyset$  2.9 mothers) to be more important. The reasons for better coordination of paid working and private lives ( $\emptyset$  3.0/3.3) and organization of paid work according to own needs ( $\emptyset$  3.0/3.2) are more important for female teleworkers (see Table 2). For male teleworkers, the ability to work from any location is an important reason for teleworking ( $\emptyset$  3.1/3.7). In the case of paid work motivation fathers state that

they are less motivated ( $\emptyset$  1.7) than females ( $\emptyset$  2.5/2.3). This difference is significant at the p-level smaller than 10 percent.

The results show in general that, in the specific context of the administration, teleworking is not done because of the expectations of others ( $\emptyset$  1.1) or out of habit ( $\emptyset$  1.4). Group differences between the four categories are significant on a p-level smaller than 10 percent ( $p=0.00$ ;  $p=0.07$ ).

There are descriptive differences between gender which may give rise to gender-specific reasons why an individual might choose to telework. It is interesting to note that the differences between childless female and mother teleworkers tend to be smaller than those between male teleworkers. Female teleworkers consider household-related and family reasons to be more important, such as better coordination of paid work and private lives and paid work organization according to own needs. For male teleworkers, the important reasons are more work-related such as working efficiently and from any location.

The challenges of teleworking are collaboration and interaction within the team ( $\emptyset$  2.5). Male teleworkers tend to have a greater challenge than female teleworkers. In general, the individual challenges for the teleworkers are relatively low. Statistically significant differences between the groups based on ANOVA tests regarding the scale averages are seen for distraction, self-discipline, and motivation to paid work at the p-level smaller than 5 percent. Although teleworking blurs spatial boundaries and thus increases the potential for paid work-family conflicts (Mann & Holdsworth, 2003; Russell et al., 2009), this seems to be of little concern to teleworkers. However, there are some company-specific challenges, such as teamwork ( $\emptyset$  2.5).

#### 4.2 Teleworking, Mobility, and Gender

Table 3 shows the commuting times by gender and teleworking. The average daily commute (round trip) is approximately 30 minutes, with female employees traveling for a shorter duration, on average at 29 minutes and male employees traveling slightly longer at 31 minutes (no statistically significant difference). This is slightly higher than the Swiss average of 26 minutes (BFS & ARE, 2023, p. 47).

The analysis of the duration of the commute, shown in Table 3, taking parenthood into account, reveals a descriptive gender difference, although it is not statistically significant. A differentiation by gender shows that mothers commute shorter durations than fathers. It can also be observed that fathers accept longer commutes than non-fathers, although the effect is reversed for women.

When differentiating between employees who frequently teleworking and those who never or rarely telework, frequent teleworkers commute an average of 35 minutes per day, with gender differences becoming more evident and statistically significant on the p-level smaller than 5 percent. This may indicate that teleworkers are accepting longer commutes because they commute less often. The correlation shows a small

Table 3 Teleworking, Mobility, and Gender

|   | Total |     | Male |     | Female |     | Test-Statistic |
|---|-------|-----|------|-----|--------|-----|----------------|
| How long does it usually take you to get there and back from your home to your main place of work ? |       |     |      |     |        |     |                |
| 0–15 minutes  | 31%   |     | 29%  |     | 33%    |     |                |
| 16–30 minutes   | 31%   |     | 36%  |     | 28%    |     |                |
| 31–60 minutes   | 30%   |     | 25%  |     | 34%    |     |                |
| 61+ minutes   | 8%    |     | 10%  |     | 6%     |     |                |
| Average commuting time (in minutes)   | 30    |     | 31   |     | 29     |     | 0.60           |
| Commuting time by parenthood (having children no/yes)   | No    | Yes | No   | Yes | No     | Yes |                |
|   | 30    | 30  | 28   | 35  | 31     | 27  | 0.35           |
| Commuting time by teleworking (no/yes, in minutes)  | No    | Yes | No   | Yes | No     | Yes |                |
|   | 27    | 35  | 27   | 39  | 26     | 33  | 0.02 *         |

Source: own data and calculations,  $n = 277$ ; Bivariate test-statistics for p-value: ANOVA-Test, critical values: \*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; .  $p < .10$ .

positive relationship between the frequency of teleworking and commute time which is significant on the p-level smaller than 5 percent (Pearson  $r = .2$ ).

The analysis of commute times is crucial for understanding the impact of the allocation of time. The duration of the commute serves to quantify the amount of time saved.

#### 4.3 Teleworking, WLB, and Gender

The next step is to analyse what employees do in the time saved from not commuting and then their attitude towards teleworking as an indication of whether teleworking is beneficial. Employees were asked in an open question what they do in the time saved by teleworking. 93 respondents (62 female, 31 male) named an average of 1.6 activities, in total 143 responses. Eleven respondents answered that their commute is too short to save time, of whom four persons stated that commuting is useful, e. g., in working on the way or for separating paid work and private life. This refers to the boundary theory, as commuting helps to separate (Ashforth et al., 2000).

Three analytical clusters were defined: paid work-related time use, coordination of paid work and life, and WLB (see Table 4). Most of the time saved is used to coordinate paid work and life tasks, like housework (15 percent of responses), social interactions (11 percent), and leisure time (15 percent). Other relate to work-related tasks such as more paid work (14 percent) and to WLB tasks like sport (9 percent)

Table 4 Use of Saved Time

|   | Total      | Male      | Female    |
|---|------------|-----------|-----------|
| No saved time   | 11 (8%)    | 4 (8%)    | 7 (7%)    |
| Commuting is beneficial   | 4          | 2         | 2         |
| Paid work-related   | 31 (22%)   | 10 (20%)  | 21 (22%)  |
| More work   | 20         | 6         | 14        |
| Earlier work, finished  | 7          | 2         | 5         |
| Flexible work   | 1          | 1         | 0         |
| Education (Uni, etc.)   | 3          | 1         | 2         |
| Coordination of paid work and life                                  | 68 (48%)   | 23 (47%)  | 45 (48%)  |
| Private affairs, medical visits, etc.                               | 8          | 3         | 5         |
| Household-related tasks<br>(childcare, household work,<br>shopping) | 22         | 2         | 20        |
| Social interactions, friends,<br>family                             | 16         | 8         | 8         |
| General leisure, hobbies  | 22         | 10        | 12        |
| Work-life balance   | 33 (23%)   | 12 (24%)  | 21 (22%)  |
| Sport   | 12         | 6         | 7         |
| Sleeping  | 4          | 1         | 3         |
| Work-life-balance   | 4          | 2         | 2         |
| Personal care   | 12         | 3         | 9         |
| Total   | 143 (100%) | 49 (100%) | 94 (100%) |

Source: own calculations based on coded quotes in an open question. 93 of the respondents (62 female, 31 male) named an average of 1.6 activities, in total 143 responses.

or personal care (8 percent). Male teleworkers use the time they save differently from female teleworkers. Men are more likely to use it for socializing (16 percent), leisure activities (20 percent), and sport (12 percent). Female teleworkers are more likely doing household-related work (21 percent). This serves to illustrate the existing imbalance in the distribution of labour between gender.

The results on time use are consistent with the reasons for teleworking (see Table 2). For male teleworkers, efficiency and spatial and time independence are important reasons for teleworking, as they spend more time for socializing or sport. For female teleworkers, their greater independence in time and location, the savings of time, and the better coordination of paid work and private life are particularly important. These reasons are consistent in that they use the time saved for household-related

Table 5 Attitudes Towards Teleworking and Gender

| Children   | Total | Male |     | Female |     | Test-Statistic |
|--|-------|------|-----|--------|-----|----------------|
|  |       | No   | Yes | No     | Yes |                |
| What is your attitude towards teleworking?   |       |      |     |        |     |                |
| 1 Very sceptical   | 4%    | 10%  | 9%  | 1%     | 1%  |                |
| 2 Rather sceptical   | 10%   | 10%  | 7%  | 10%    | 11% |                |
| 3 Rather positive  | 38%   | 38%  | 35% | 48%    | 28% |                |
| 4 Very positive  | 47%   | 41%  | 50% | 41%    | 59% |                |
| Average (1–4)  | 3.3   | 3.1  | 3.3 | 3.3    | 3.5 | 0.10           |
| How would you like to work in the future?  |       |      |     |        |     |                |
| I'd like to continue teleworking regularly.  | 35%   | 24%  | 33% | 34%    | 47% |                |
| I'd like to telework primarily for special tasks.  | 33%   | 36%  | 29% | 35%    | 30% |                |
| I'd like to work mainly in the main office.  | 17%   | 24%  | 18% | 18%    | 11% |                |
| Teleworking is not possible in my function or work tasks.  | 9%    | 14%  | 12% | 6%     | 5%  |                |
| Others   | 6%    | 2%   | 8%  | 6%     | 7%  |                |
| How relevant is the possibility for you to be able to telework in a next job? (1–4 Likert scale) |       |      |     |        |     |                |
| 1 Absolutely important   | 20%   | 10%  | 22% | 22%    | 23% |                |
| 2 Rather important   | 41%   | 43%  | 27% | 42%    | 49% |                |
| 3 Rather not important   | 26%   | 24%  | 33% | 26%    | 23% |                |
| 4 Not important  | 13%   | 22%  | 18% | 9%     | 5%  |                |
| Average (1–4)  | 2.3   | 2.6  | 2.5 | 2.2    | 2.1 | 0.01 *         |

Source: own data and calculations, n=274–276; Bivariate test-statistics for p-value: ANOVA-Test, critical values: \* p < .05; . p < .10.

work. However, it is not possible to determine whether activities are shifted from another day to the teleworking days or whether these are additional activities.

The attitudes toward teleworking and the importance of teleworking for future jobs are indicators that teleworking is beneficial for WLB. Attitudes toward teleworking are generally very positive ( $\bar{x}$  3.3, see Table 5). However, women have more positive attitudes than men ( $\bar{x}$  3.4 resp. 3.2). Furthermore, employees with children are significantly more positive towards teleworking than those without ( $\bar{x}$  3.4 resp. 3.2). Mothers have the most positive attitudes ( $\bar{x}$  3.5), while childless men are more sceptical about teleworking ( $\bar{x}$  3.1). Employees want to be able to telework regularly (35 percent), or at least when needed or for special tasks (33 percent). The desire for teleworking is greater among female than male employees and increases

with parenthood. Employees also consider the possibility of teleworking to be an important criterion when looking for a new job (61 percent). These statistically significant results indicate that teleworking is beneficial to female employees and those with children for coordinating paid work and family.

In summary, the reasons for and advantages of teleworking are in line with other studies (Moser et al., 2021; Sullivan & Lewis, 2001; Vayre et al., 2022). Limitations must be considered for company-specific factors, as gender differences appear constant at the company level. The frequency of teleworking is influenced by the company and the prevailing work culture (Krasilnikova & Levin-Keitel, 2022). Public administrations often differ from private companies (Boyne, 2002). The rise of teleworking in public administrations was rather slow until the Covid-19 pandemic (Edelmann et al., 2021; Fischer et al., 2020; Moser et al., 2021).

## 5 Discussion and Research Outlook

The rise of New Work such as teleworking have stimulated debates over its impact on WLB and on commuting. Since research on this topic is rare in Switzerland, this work attempts to shed light on those interdependencies using the study of a city administration.

It is assumed that changes in commuting may influence WLB. Our study shows that teleworker commute longer than non-teleworkers, also male teleworkers commute longer than female teleworkers. Commuting duration defines the extent to which teleworkers save time by not commuting, and thus teleworking can facilitate the coordination between paid work and life. The length of the commute can have a negative impact on WLB, with long commutes often perceived as an obstacle for WLB (BFS, 2021). The results show that women and teleworkers with children consider avoiding commuting to be more important than men and teleworkers without children.

In summary our results show statistically significant gender differences in dealing with teleworking. Female teleworkers consider efficiency and the lack of disruption to be more important while teleworking. Challenges such as distraction, self-discipline, or motivation are greater for male teleworkers. Attitudes towards teleworking and the importance of teleworking for future jobs are viewed positively, especially by women and employees with children. Consequently, it can be concluded that teleworking is beneficial for WLB.

Regarding the gender perspective, the aspect of coordination of paid work with (family) life is an important reason for teleworking, with women also using the time saved by teleworking for household-related tasks. However, it can be stated that teleworkers work similar hours to those on regular workplace. The literature shows that teleworking also has an impact on time allocation during the day. Teleworking results in a shift from paid work activities to unpaid work and leisure activities dur-

ing core working hours (Giménez-Nadal et al., 2020). Using time diaries, Pabilonia and Vernon (2022) found differences in paid work patterns by gender and parental status: e. g. mothers spend more time working in the presence of children than fathers do and spend more time on household production activities and sleeping. Female teleworkers tend to combine paid work and family more frequently, as shown in this study, as they use saved time for household-related work, while male teleworkers separate paid work more frequently from family time. However, it is not possible to draw conclusions from this study about the total amount or the distribution of housework and care responsibilities within the household. The distribution of housework and parenting is an essential issue to overcome the predominance of traditional role expectations among female teleworkers and their partners and to ensure that gender inequalities are not reproduced and not reinforced (Sullivan & Lewis, 2001). Further research is required to examine this issue in greater detail in conjunction with mobility behaviour.

It is not only gender that mainly explains the differences, but socially assigned roles and their associated activities (Rosenbloom, 2004). Due to the influence of socially constructed gender roles, we controlled the variables regarding parenthood in our bivariate statistic. The results often show gender-specific differences, particularly depending on parental status. The differences in dealing with teleworking between fathers and mothers become smaller, with the greatest differences being observed between childless men and mothers. Effects may also depend on the spatial context, e. g. residential location (Scheiner, 2016, p. 640) as an indication of the partnership and family model people live by (Ettema & van der Lippe, 2009). It may therefore be useful to consider the impact of teleworking and mobility from a gender perspective by taking lifestyles into account.

The impact of teleworking on mobility patterns and individual WLB requires further research. Ettema and van der Lippe (2009, p. 114) point out that little is known about how household members allocate tasks and activities over longer periods of time. The present study is also unable to ascertain whether the activities undertaken during the time saved by not commuting were carried out over from another day or whether they constituted additional activities. Daily individual activity patterns are allocated in the household (Ettema & van der Lippe, 2009). Moreover, longer periods of analysis during the life course, are useful as daily activity patterns are part of weekly or monthly patterns. This allows for an analysis of mandatory and non-mandatory activities (Viana Cerqueira & Motte-Baumvol, 2022) and a holistic view of mobility with different purposes like care work, household-related tasks, and leisure time (Parnell et al., 2022). Activity-travel diaries recording mobility and individual time allocation can be useful for this purpose.

In summary, various recent debates are more critical towards teleworking, and some companies go back to traditional forms of paid work in physical co-presence at a regular working place. The decision to bring all employees back into the office should be carefully discussed based on our empirical findings, considering the ben-

efits of different working locations in the light of the needs of employees. A good mix of possibilities for work locations could serve as allow for the utilization of the benefits of different working models (Z'Rotz et al., 2021), that are in line with the needs of various gender practices.

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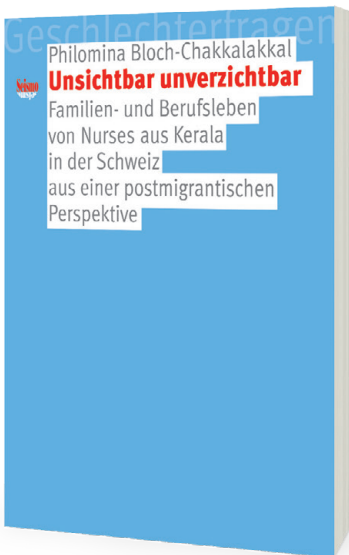
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Philomina Bloch-Chakkalakkal

**Unsichtbar  
unverzichtbar**  
Familien- und Berufsleben  
von Nurses aus Kerala  
in der Schweiz aus  
einer postmigrantischen  
Perspektive

Reihe  
Geschlechterfragen

ISBN 978-3-03777-295-9  
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Ab den 1960er-Jahren migrierten junge Christinnen aus Kerala (Indien) nach Europa. Sie waren als diplomierte Pflegefachkräfte überall auf der Welt dringend benötigt, auch in der Schweiz. Dieses Buch leistet einen Beitrag zur Aufarbeitung dieser frauengeführten Migrationsgeschichte. Auf der Basis von Interviews mit Malayali Nurses umreißt es den historischen Kontext in Kerala und in der Schweiz und fokussiert auf das Berufs- und Familienleben der Nurses. Welche Herausforderungen und Chancen stellten sich ihnen bei ihrer Ankunft in der Schweiz? Welche Wünsche und Sorgen begleiten sie in der Kindererziehung? Wie finden sie Zufriedenheit im Beruf? Was bedeutet für sie Heimat?

Ohne die Arbeit von Migrant:innen wäre die Gesundheitsversorgung in der Schweiz nicht gewährleistet. Dennoch erfährt insbesondere die Arbeit von migrantischen Frauen im Care-Sektor mehrfache Unsichtbarmachung. Die Lebensgeschichten der interviewten Pflegefachkräfte zeigen, dass sie über die Jahrzehnte hinweg verschiedene Strategien entwickelt haben, um Diskriminierungen zu trotzen und sich, ihre Familien und ihre Nachfolgerinnen durch die Komplexitäten der Pflegemigration zu navigieren.

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## Gender Inequality Through *Gender-Blindness*? Family-Friendly Employers in Switzerland During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Lucia M. Lanfranconi \*

*Abstract:* The study, based on a 2021 survey of 31 family-friendly Swiss employers, highlights how a *gender-blind equal-treatment* approach during the Covid-19 pandemic unintentionally deepened gender inequality within the organizations. While employers recognize gender-specific risks, they largely see no obligation to address them. We recommend adopting a *gender-conscious (equity)* approach in designing family-friendly measures within organizations for future crises and beyond.

*Keywords:* Gender inequality, gender-blindness, Covid-19 pandemic, family-friendliness, employer

### Inégalités de genre par un *aveuglement au genre*? Employeurs favorables à la famille en Suisse pendant la pandémie de Covid-19

*Résumé:* L'étude, basée sur une enquête réalisée en 2021 auprès de 31 employeurs suisses favorables à la famille, montre qu'une approche de *traitement égalitaire aveugle au genre*, pendant la pandémie de Covid-19 a involontairement aggravé les inégalités de genre au sein des lieux de travail. Bien que les employeurs reconnaissent les risques spécifiques au genre, ils ne se sentent généralement pas responsables de les traiter. Il est recommandé d'adopter une *approche de conscience de genre* dans la conception de mesures favorables à la famille au sein des organisations pour les crises futures et au-delà.

*Mots-clés:* Inégalités de genre, aveuglement au genre, pandémie de Covid-19, mesures favorables aux familles, employeur

### Geschlechterungleichheit durch *Geschlechterblindheit*? Familienfreundliche Arbeitgebende in der Schweiz während der Covid-19-Pandemie

*Zusammenfassung:* Die Studie, basierend auf einer Umfrage unter 31 familienfreundlichen Schweizer Arbeitgebenden im Jahr 2021, zeigt auf, wie ein *geschlechtsblinder* Ansatz der *Gleichbehandlung*, während der Covid-19-Pandemie ungewollt die Geschlechterungleichheit verstärkt hat. Obwohl die Arbeitgebenden geschlechtsspezifische Risiken erkennen, sehen sie sich meist nicht in der Verantwortung, diese anzugehen. Wir empfehlen einen geschlechterbewussten Ansatz bei der Gestaltung familienfreundlicher Maßnahmen für zukünftige Krisen und darüber hinaus zu verfolgen.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Geschlechterungleichheit, Geschlechterblindheit, Covid-19 Pandemie, Familienfreundlichkeit, Gleichstellung, Arbeitgebende

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## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The Covid-19 pandemic rapidly changed working conditions globally. After the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 a “Public Health Emergency of International Concern” on January 30, 2020 (WHO, 2020), many countries implemented drastic measures, such as closing borders, limiting travel, and implementing nationwide lockdowns. Social distancing, mask mandates, school closures, and remote work became common globally and changed the realities of work for everyone. In Switzerland, unemployment rates and job seeker numbers rose sharply, with a 36% increase in unemployed people in 2020 compared to 2019 (SECO, 2022, p. 5). By mid-March 2020, about 190 000 Swiss employers applied for short-time work compensation<sup>2</sup> for 1.94 million people, or 37% of employees (SECO, 2021), within which women were overrepresented (Dubois et al., 2022; Stutz et al., 2022).

The pandemic affected not only the economy but also numerous educational and care institutions (such as childcare, care for the elderly or disabled). On March 16, 2020, all schools and most childcare facilities in Switzerland were closed. They were gradually re-opened after May 11, 2020 (Oesch et al., 2020). Between March and at least May 2020, looking after children, elderly people, or people with disabilities often had to be carried out (again) within the families. In addition, school-age children had to be supervised and schooled at home. Whilst childcare institutions could apply for compensation for lost parental contributions, parents on the other hand were fully and solely responsible for arranging childcare during this period, without receiving extra (e.g. public) support in terms of time or money, placing pressure on both the parents and their employers.

Studies indicate that pandemic-related changes in work and caregiving *impacted people with and without care responsibility and by gender differently*. A representative Swiss study found that women with caregiving responsibilities were four times more likely to lose their jobs than women without caregiving responsibilities (the effect was much smaller for men, Fuchs et al., 2021). Balancing paid and unpaid work became harder for 55% of women and 50% of men with children and additional caring responsibility for elderly or disabled family members (Fuchs et al., 2021). During the first 2020 lockdown, mothers reduced work about twice as often as fathers due to caregiving, while experiencing more conflicts and less emotional support, such as institutional support, though fathers also faced restrictions (Lanfranconi et al., 2021). Steinmetz et al. (2022) concluded that overall changes in unpaid work time among Swiss dual-earner couples were driven more by work availability shifts than

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1 Many thanks to all the companies that filled out the survey, to the two organizations that distributed the survey, as well as to Gena Da Rui who conducted the descriptive analyses.

2 Short-time work compensation means that the unemployment insurance temporarily covers part of the respective employees' wages during work stoppages. Employers can apply for short-time compensation if their business reduces or halts operations temporarily while employment contracts remain active, due to economic factors, government measures, or other uncontrollable developments (Die Schweizer Eidgenossenschaft, o.J.).

by gender. However, work availability, such as remote work, is also highly gendered, as higher earners (60%) had more home-office access than lower earners (28%) where women are overrepresented (Stutz et al., 2022). Home-office and mobile work increased flexibility and aid in emergencies (e.g., child illness) but led to unpaid overtime (Carstensen, 2020). Despite both men and women working more from home, women did two-thirds of unpaid care work, adding 1.7 hours weekly compared to men's 0.6 hours (Samtleben et al., 2020).

Other studies focus on the changes towards family-friendliness and potentially towards gender equity in *work organizations from the employer's perspective* since the pandemic. Several studies show how employers have increasingly adopted flexible models like home office and mobile work (Carstensen, 2020; Kös & Schäfer, 2020), and many plan to continue them, which could potentially support gender equity by helping e.g. mothers stay in well-paid jobs (Chung et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2021). However, countertrends suggest some employers still expect constant availability, which can undermine these benefits (Chung et al., 2021; Field, 2023). A Serbian study notes that whilst flexible work may support employees to balance work and life, it often overlooks family members' needs, such as reducing parental stress and limiting after-hours work, and thus question even the true family-friendly effects of more flexible work (Krstić & Sladojević Matić, 2020). Additionally, there is a gap in the literature of studies focusing on the gender perceptions of employers in the construction of family-friendly measures.

Finally, very few studies have explicitly focused on *organizations with explicitly pre-pandemic family-friendly structures*, but those that do suggest these employers benefited during the crisis by being more efficient in the crisis management. A study of eight certified family-friendly SMEs in Germany identified three success factors for flexible work: appropriate technical equipment, clear process regulations, and a culture of trust and teamwork (Kaczynska & Kümmerling, 2021). Another study found the job-sharing model in Germany to be highly resilient during the crisis, with job sharers benefiting in efficient crisis management, from shared flexibility, support, and strategic tandem coordination (Krzywdzinski & Christen, 2020).

No research has yet focused on how pre-pandemic family-friendly employers perceive gender differences in the changing work conditions during the pandemic, and who they hold responsible to ensuring gender equity. The current study contributes to better understanding family-friendly employers' perspective on gender equity in their organization by answering the following two research questions:

(1) What gender differences in the changing working conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic are perceived by family-friendly employers?

(2) Who do these family-friendly employers perceive as responsible for ensuring gender equity during and beyond the pandemic?

The study is based on an online survey of 31 employers from two German-speaking Swiss regions, known for conservative gender norms. The selected employers can be considered as particularly "family-friendly" as they are – at least at the mo-

ment of the study – members of regional associations focusing on family friendliness and social responsibility. Many of these organizations had already implemented family-friendly policies such as extended parental leave and flexible working hours before the pandemic. While this limited sample is far from being representative of Switzerland as a whole, we can argue that effects on gender of the changing working conditions observed among these committed employers may also be present in less committed employers.

Our research adds to the existing literature in the following ways: *Firstly*, with this contribution we expand the literature on the question of how pre-pandemic family friendliness in organizations can be a way to combat the negative consequences of a crisis regarding effects on gender and beyond. *Secondly*, this specific sample allows us to explore if and how gender inequalities in changes in the working conditions during and after the pandemic are perceived and addressed by pre-covid family friendly organizations.

Based on the concept of *gender-blind* organizations, meaning organizational policies and practices that assume that treating all gender the same is sufficient for fairness (Fuchs et al., 2019; Thun, 2019), our study will show that these family-friendly and engaged employers applied a *gender-blind* approach of equality during the pandemic, thereby unintentionally exacerbating gender inequality. For the future, these organizations recognize some gender-specific risks but do not see it as their responsibility to address them. Thus, we *thirdly* contribute to the concept of *gender-blindness* in organizations and its prevalence in Switzerland: If gender-blind practices and policies are applied by organizations who specifically identify as family-friendly, we can assume to find similar patterns in other organizations as well. Our contribution finally also expands the literature on the question of who is perceived *responsible for gender equity in organizations* by the employers. Despite the limited sample, we cautiously recommend that in future crises (and beyond), organizations and policymakers adopt a gender-aware (equity) approach.

## 2 Swiss Context and Regional Differences Within Switzerland

In an international comparison, Switzerland can be characterized as a liberal-conservative welfare state historically shaped by traditional gender roles (Lanfranconi, 2014). Although conservative values are declining, they are still prevalent: around a quarter of the Swiss working population believes that women should be willing to reduce their employment in favor of the family (Fuchs et al., 2021). There are major regional differences: While in the so called “Espace Mittelland”<sup>3</sup> (central west

3 This is the official regional classification by “major regions” of the Swiss statistic office. Details can be found here: <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/querschnittsthemen/raeumliche-analysen/raeumliche-gliederungen/analyseregionen.html>

of Switzerland), only 18% agree with the statement, in “Eastern Switzerland” 33% agree with it and 27.4% in “Central Switzerland” (Fuchs et al., 2021). The data analyzed in this paper originates from organizations located in the two regions Central (RI) and Eastern (RII) Switzerland, where more conservative gender norms prevail.

While more women in Switzerland are entering the paid labor market, unpaid work remains highly gendered. In a representative survey of all Switzerland (Fuchs et al., 2021), a majority of the women report being solely responsible for tasks such as laundry (67%) and caring for sick/elderly/disabled family members (56%). Conversely, men predominantly view their sole responsibilities as private administrative tasks (59%) and minor repairs and gardening (43%; Fuchs et al., 2021). The OECD has classified Switzerland as one of the countries with the worst working conditions for families (Chzhen et al., 2019). Examples include the short maternity leave of 14 weeks, the late introduction of two-week paternity leave since 2021, and the lack of parental leave. In an OECD comparison, parents in Switzerland bear the highest childcare costs. The design of family-friendly measures in the workplace—such as flexible working hours or the possibility of reducing working hours or working from home—primarily lies within the competence of employers (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2018; Chzhen et al., 2019; Lanfranconi et al., 2021).

### 3 Research Concepts: *Gendered Organization, Gender Blindness, Equity and Equality, Family Friendliness, and Responsibility for Gender Equity*

The perspective of *gendered organization* is based on the idea that gender inequalities become entrenched through norms, regulations, and principles in institutions, such as work organizations (cf. Acker, 1990; 1992; Lanfranconi, 2014). This concept highlights how seemingly neutral organizational processes, such as hiring, promotion, and work allocation are inherently gendered, often reinforcing traditional gender roles and maintaining male dominance. Gendered organizations may exhibit wage gaps, uneven career progression opportunities, and a lack of support for work-life balance, disproportionately affecting women and gender minorities (cf. Acker, 1990; 1992; 2006; Lanfranconi, 2014). *Gendered organizations* are always linked to the “inequalities surrounding society, its politics, history and culture” (Acker, 2006; Thun, 2019).

*Gender blindness* refers to the disregard of gender differences and inequalities within organizational policies and practices. This approach assumes that treating everyone the same, regardless of their gender, is sufficient for fairness. However, this can perpetuate existing inequalities because it ignores the distinct needs, experiences, and challenges faced by different genders. For instance, policies that do not account for caregiving responsibilities predominantly shouldered by women can disadvantage them. Gender blindness can lead to the maintenance of the status quo and hinder efforts toward achieving genuine gender equity (Fuchs et al., 2019; Thun, 2019).

*Equity and equality*, while often used interchangeably, have distinct meanings in the context of organizational practices and policies. *Equality* can be described as sameness of treatment and equity as fairness, where individual or group circumstances are taken into consideration (Espinoza, 2007; Lanfranconi & Basaran, 2023). Although achieving *equity*, resp. fairness can mean treating everyone the same in some cases, it can mean that different groups might get differential treatment based on their current or past inequities in other cases (Gooden, 2014; Lanfranconi & Basaran, 2023), such as e. g., being more burdened with caring responsibility.

*Family friendliness* in the workplace refers to policies, practices, and organizational cultures that support employees in balancing their work and family responsibilities. Family-friendly policies can include flexible working hours, remote work options, parental leave, childcare support, and initiatives promoting work-life balance (Lanfranconi et al., 2019).

*Responsibility for gender equity*: Swiss equality policy has also been described as a contested field of politics (Fuchs, 2018). Lanfranconi (2014) identified various interpretations of discourses of who should be responsible for implementing equality in Switzerland: the state with binding measures, companies with voluntary equality measures, and/or individuals.

## 4 Methodological Approach

### 4.1 Data, Data Limitation, and Sample Description

The *data* of this study is based on an online survey conducted by a team at the HSLU with Unipark in two regions of German-speaking Switzerland (Central (RI) and Easter Switzerland (RII)) on the pandemic related changes in working conditions and the perceived effects on family friendliness and gender equity. The survey was completed by 32 employers (16 each) between April 16 and May 23, 2021.<sup>4</sup> The survey targeted executives, HR managers, or specialists and covers the period from the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (February 2020) to the time of the survey (April/May 2021) and the time afterward. Thus, the following results present the perspective of employers (represented through executives, HR managers, or specialists) and will be interpreted as such. The results do not necessarily reflect actual organizational practices. The survey was distributed through one association on family friendliness and social responsibility per region, of which the participating organizations were members. The response rate was 88% in RI and 60% in RII.

*Data limitation*: The analysis is based on a small sample of family-friendly employers and therefore is limited in scale; the findings are not representative for

<sup>4</sup> Except for one employer, all employers agreed that their data could be used anonymously for further studies. Therefore, this contribution uses the statements of 31 out of the 32 employers.

Table 1 Employers by Industry and Company Size

| Industry   | Company Size                 |                                |                                     |
|--|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
|  | Small:<br>10–49<br>employees | Medium:<br>50–249<br>employees | Large:<br>250 and more<br>employees |
| Manufacturing, Production of Goods                               |                              | RI (1)                         | RI (1)                              |
| Trade, Maintenance, and Repair                                   |                              |                                | RI (1)                              |
| Transportation and Logistics                                     |                              | RII (1)                        |                                     |
| Hospitality/Accommodation and Food Service                       |                              | RII (1)                        |                                     |
| Provision of Financial and Insurance Services                    |                              |                                | RI (1)                              |
| Provision of Professional, Scientific,<br>and Technical Services | RII (2)                      |                                |                                     |
| Public Administration, Defense, Social Security,<br>Education    | RII (1)                      | RI (2)<br>RII (3)              | RI (5)                              |
| Health Care and Social Services                                  | RII (1)                      | RI (3)<br>RII (4)              |                                     |
| Other Services   | RII (1)                      | RI (1)<br>RII (1)              | RI (1)                              |

Switzerland. However, the findings are theoretically significant as all surveyed employers are notably engaged and family friendly. According to the argument of theoretical case selection (Flyvberg, 2001), we may thus hypothesize, that the gendered effects observed in this sample may also apply to less engaged employers, thus that the effects we find, are probably a lower bound.

The employers in the *sample* tend to be engaged in family-friendliness and social responsibility across various industries and are of different sizes (see Table 1). While the sample from RI includes more medium-sized ( $n=7$ ) and large employers ( $n=9$ ), the sample from RII exclusively consists of small ( $n=5$ ) and medium-sized employers ( $n=10$ ; see Table 1). Both regions have representation from the public sector (e.g., “Public Administration, Defense, Social Security, Education,” “Healthcare and Social Work”), as well as many private sector companies (e.g., “Manufacturing,” “Trade, Maintenance, and Repair,” “Transport and Logistics,” “Hospitality/Accommodation and Food Services”; see Table 1).

Table 2 Offers, Work Forms, or Measures in the Company Regarding Family Friendliness and Gender Equality (n = 31)

| Offers, Work Forms, or Measures Regarding Family Friendliness and Gender Equality | Already Present Before the Pandemic |              |                | Expanded Due to the Pandemic |              | Introduced Due to the Pandemic |              |
|---|-------------------------------------|--------------|----------------|------------------------------|--------------|--------------------------------|--------------|
|   | RI (n = 16)                         | RII (n = 15) | Total (n = 31) | RI (n = 16)                  | RII (n = 15) | RI (n = 16)                    | RII (n = 15) |
| Compliance/Verification of Pay Equity   | 15                                  | 14           | 29             | --                           | --           | --                             | --           |
| Flexible Working Hours  | 15                                  | 12           | 27             | 1                            | --           | --                             | --           |
| Family-Friendly Company Culture   | 11                                  | 13           | 24             | 1                            | --           | --                             | --           |
| Gender-Friendly Recruitment and Promotion   | 12                                  | 12           | 24             | --                           | --           | --                             | --           |
| Job-sharing, Part-Time, and Workload Reduction during Parenthood                  | 12                                  | 11           | 23             | 1                            | --           | 1                              | --           |
| Home-Office   | 12                                  | 9            | 21             | 7                            | 2            | 3                              | 4            |
| Corporate Health Management   | 10                                  | 7            | 17             | 1                            | --           | 1                              | --           |
| Maternity Leave – Longer than 14 Weeks  | 7                                   | 4            | 11             | --                           | --           | --                             | --           |
| More than Three Days Paid Leave for Care of a Dependent                           | 6                                   | 4            | 10             | --                           | --           | 1                              | --           |
| Contribution to Childcare   | 4                                   | 2            | 6              | --                           | --           | --                             | --           |
| Paternity Leave – Longer than Two Weeks   | 4                                   | 1            | 5              | --                           | --           | --                             | 1            |

As shown in Table 2 the surveyed employers all categorized as “family-friendly employers,” as they mostly had had family-friendly measures in place before the pandemic. Notably, measures such as equal pay monitoring (n = 29), flexible working hours (n = 27), family-friendly corporate culture (n = 24), and gender-inclusive recruitment practices (n = 24) were prevalent. Some employers also offered job-sharing, part-time options, and reduced workload during parenthood (n = 23), home-office options (n = 21), corporate health management systems (n = 17), more than the compulsory 14 weeks of maternity leave (n = 11), and paid leave for family illness (n = 10). Fewer employers provided in-house childcare or financial support for childcare costs (n = 6), and only a few offered more than the compulsory two weeks of paternity

leave ( $n = 5$ ). The pandemic did not lead to the elimination of any family-friendly or gender-related measures. Table 2 reveals that relatively few new measures were introduced or expanded due to the pandemic. Home-office options saw the most significant expansion, adapted by nine employers, and newly introduced by seven.

## 4.2 Questions of the Survey

In the first part of the survey, respondents were asked about the challenges and opportunities for employers concerning the effects of the pandemic on employees, specifically with respect to employees with caregiving responsibilities and by gender. These questions were designed as a scale (agreement/disagreement) with predefined answer categories. Additionally, an open-ended question was asked about the desired (e.g. government) support during the pandemic to in turn better support employees (with children).

In the next section, we asked a question assessing respondents' views on the positive influences of the pandemic on family friendliness / family policy in Switzerland (scale with predefined answer categories). The open, forward-looking final question asked for insights from the previous experiences for the post-pandemic period.

## 4.3 Methods

The results were analyzed using a mixed-method approach. *In the first step*, the closed survey questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics with Excel. The open-ended survey questions were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis (Mayring & Fenzl, 2014; results presented in section 5). *In the second step*, the descriptive results – both qualitative and quantitative – were contrasted with each other and analyzed through the lens of *gender-blind* organizations, *equity and equality*, as well as *responsibility for gender equity* (analysis presented in section 6).

## 5 Results of the Descriptive Statistical and Qualitative Content Analysis

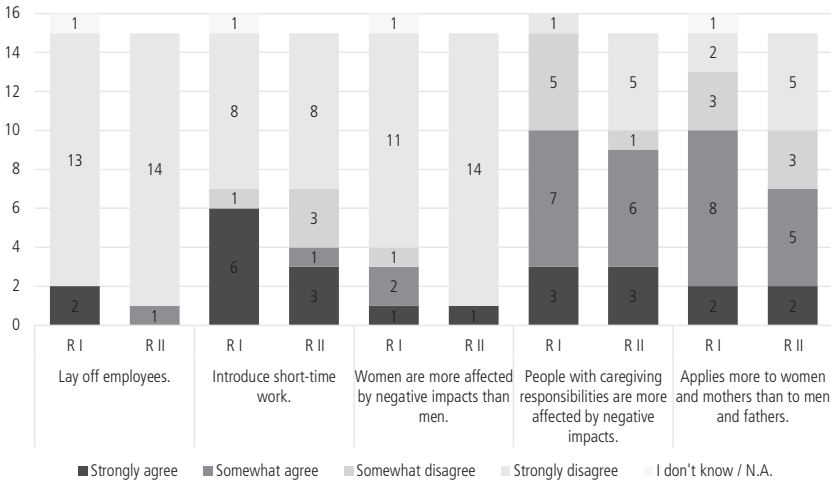
The results from the survey are presented in the following two paragraphs which relate to two research questions posed in the introduction.

### 5.1 Perceived Effects of the Pandemic on Organizational Family Friendliness and Gender

#### *Challenges Due to the Pandemic – Gendered Perception*

When employers were asked about challenges concerning their employees, only three out of the 31 surveyed employers indicated that they had to lay off employees (RI: 2, RII: 1). However, ten employers (RI: 6, RII: 4), thus around one-third of

Figure 1 Challenges in the Company Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic (n = 31)



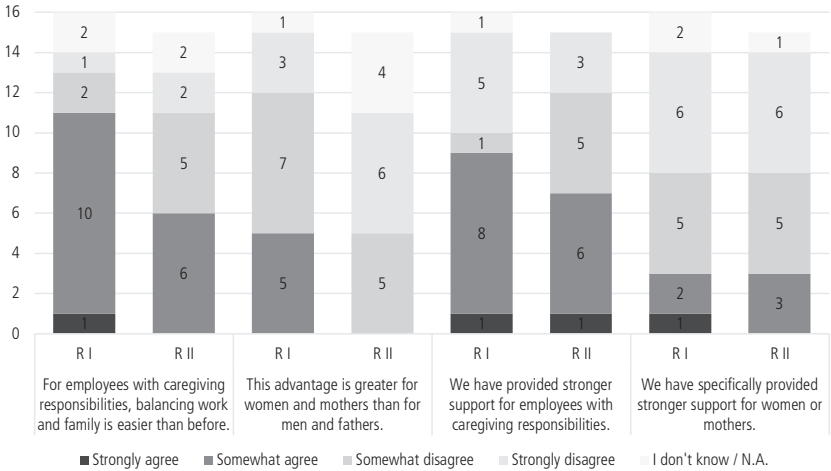
the sample, stated that they had introduced short-time work. Only four employers (RI: 3, RII: 1) agreed that women were more affected by these negative challenges than men. Thus, most of the respondents believe that either all genders were equally affected or that men were more affected (see Fig. 1).

However, when asked if individuals with caregiving responsibilities were more affected by the negative challenges of the pandemic, the picture changes. A total of 19 employers agreed with this statement (RI: 10, RII: 9), which is over 60% of the respondents. When asked further, whether women and mothers among employees with caregiving responsibilities were more affected by the pandemic-related challenges than men and fathers, seventeen employers, a majority of the total sample, agreed with this statement (RI: 10, RII: 7; see Fig. 1). Thus, employers do not see a gender effect, but rather a caregiving effect, which then appears to be gendered.

*Opportunities for Employees With Caregiving Responsibilities Due to the Pandemic – Gendered Perception*

We further asked if the employers see also opportunities for their employees with caregiving responsibilities (for children, dependent adults, seniors, or people with disabilities) due to the pandemic. Here a majority of 17 employers (RI: 11, RII: 6) agreed that the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities has become easier since the pandemic due to home-office or other changes in work conditions, such as time reduction or time flexibility. We again asked about any gender effect: A large majority of 26 employers (all from RII and a ten from RI) do not believe that this

Figure 2 Opportunities for Employees with Caregiving Responsibilities Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic (n = 31)



advantage is greater for women and mothers than for men and fathers. Contrary, 22 employers thus believe that this is to the disadvantage of women.

According to their own statements, 16 employers (RI: 9, RII: 7) have been providing more support to employees with caregiving responsibilities since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic compared to those without such duties. This corresponds to a slight majority of the total sample. Conversely, only three employers per region, thus a clear minority, stated that women or mothers were specifically more supported (see Fig. 2). This is particularly interesting, given that most employers see women, and mothers especially, as being more affected (see above).

*Desire for (Government) Support During the Pandemic*

The employers were further asked an open-ended question about what (government) support they would have wished for during the Covid-19 pandemic to better support employees (with children). Differences between the two regions emerged in the responses.

In RI, representatives from five companies explicitly opposed state measures. One organizational representative would have wished for more flexible working hours, such as extending or shifting work hours to evenings and weekends. Another emphasized the employees’ and especially mothers’ responsibility: “Employees had to organize themselves. Working mothers cannot afford to just stop working, stay with the children, and let others do their job. ... State support would not change much.”

The situation was different in RII. Here, eight of the 15 surveyed employers would have liked more state support. They requested, for example, assistance with homeschooling, simplified regulations for short-time work and quarantine for employees with caregiving duties. Explicitly mentioned was the need for childcare for healthcare staff. Challenges for children were also highlighted: “Basically, the question is whether schools and childcare facilities can simply be closed. Not all families can organize accordingly. The children usually suffer the most, with short- and long-term consequences.” Other comments included the desire for an earlier introduction of the shortened quarantine period, which was particularly challenging for working mothers, or the need for more flexible forms of childcare regardless of the pandemic. Finally, there was also a desire for increased financial state support, such as compensation for caregiving tasks due to school closures.

## 5.2 Future Scenarios by Family-Friendly Employers

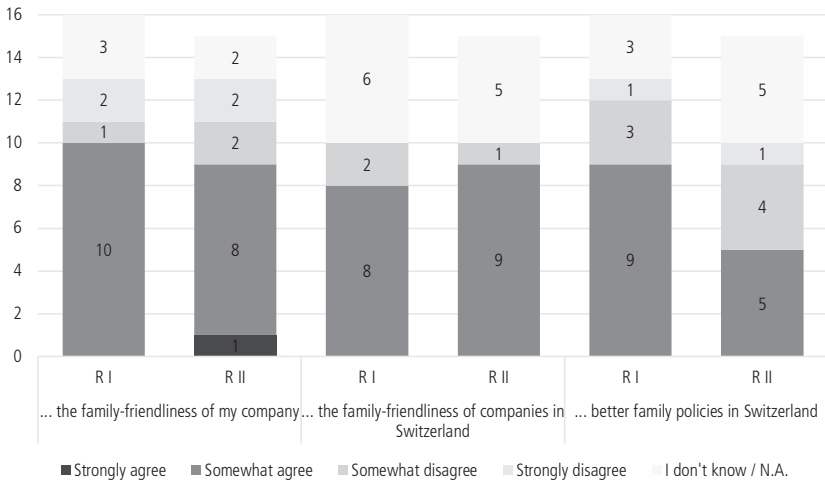
### *Possible Positive Impact of the Pandemic on Family-Friendliness*

Regarding the question of possible positive impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the family-friendliness of employers or family policy overall, a clear majority of the surveyed employers (Region I: 10, Region II: 9) agreed (somewhat) that the pandemic positively impacted the family-friendliness of their company. Seven respondents were (somewhat) not of this opinion. Additionally, a slim majority of respondents (Region I: 8, Region II: 9) believe the pandemic had a rather positive impact on the family-friendliness of employers in Switzerland overall, with three companies not agreeing with this statement. The statement that the Covid-19 pandemic had a positive impact on better family policy in Switzerland was somewhat agreed upon by 14 companies (Region I: 9, Region II: 5). Nine respondents did not (somewhat) agree with this statement.

### *Opportunities*

In an open-ended question, we asked the employers about their preliminary insights and conclusions from the pandemic-experiences, for the time after the pandemic. Employers from both regions plan to maintain location-independent and flexible working hours post-pandemic. Employers in RI noted increased trust in remote work and flexible hours, with one company representative supporting the trend towards flexible work forms like job-sharing in leadership positions. Similarly, RII employers highlighted the benefits of home-office and digital communication, emphasizing flexible schedules and family-friendly structures. They also stressed the importance of expanding open work models and job-sharing to retain employees, e.g.: “We have a lot of work ahead of us. And we should—where possible—work even more on open/flexible work models. Work-life reconsideration should become a central theme for every company.”

Figure 3 The Covid-19 Pandemic Has Had a Positive Impact On ... (n = 31)



Finally, many responses state that family-friendly measures in place before the pandemic benefited the organizations during the pandemic. For example, a respondent from RII mentioned that autonomous, self-organized teams have proven effective in many situations. Employer representatives from Region I explicitly point to the continuity in handling family-friendly measures, such as: “Our internal policy on family-friendliness has proven effective and should definitely be maintained.” Thus, the surveyed employers who were already committed before the pandemic seem to agree that these family-friendly measures proved their worth during the pandemic and should therefore be maintained or expanded.

*Challenges – From a Gender Perspective*

In addressing the question of insights and conclusions for the post-pandemic period, employers from both regions point to various challenges. Employers from RII warn of reproducing gender inequalities, especially in crisis situations: “When both parents are employed, I find that responsibility in a crisis is often delegated to the mother. Fathers and their employers need to be held more accountable here.” Additionally, they highlight potential new inequalities between employees who can work from home and those who cannot, which also can have gendered effects: “There is a risk that employees who cannot work from home will bear the negative consequences of decentralized working. This affects women more than men.”

In RI, the danger of working from home regarding employee’s health is discussed: “More flexible and family-friendly working hours through working from home promote less stressful working and employee’s motivation. Many employees

work more focused and exceed the agreed working hours. Therefore, it must be ensured that employees also take their breaks and have leisure time.” Additionally, the necessity of guaranteed childcare when working from home is emphasized: “Working from home leads to a strong flexibilization of working hours and location. This development is likely ‘family-friendly’. However, working from home should not be confused with childcare.”

In both regional contexts, it is mentioned that, alongside structural changes, cultural adaptation within the company is also necessary. Including employees and their needs in decision-making processes is often considered a central element.

## 6 Discussion of the Results Applying a *Gender Lens*

The presented study is based on a small-scale online survey of 31 family-friendly employers from two Swiss regions conducted in the spring of 2021, one year after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

As expected from previous studies (cf. Kaczynska & Kümmerling, 2021; Köß & Schäfer, 2020), many of the surveyed family-friendly employers introduced new measures during the pandemic, notably expanding or initiating remote work in over half of the companies. Additional measures, such as job-sharing, part-time options, reduced hours during parenthood, flexible working hours, corporate health management, and extended childcare during a child’s illness were also implemented or expanded. As expected from previous studies (Bonin et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2021), results further show that employers plan to maintain flexible, location- and time-independent working arrangements, having gained trust in these practices and recognizing their benefits during the pandemic. Thus, these employers who had family-friendly measures before the pandemic benefited in crisis management and plan to maintain and expand these structures in the future.

A clear majority of the surveyed employers agreed that the pandemic positively impacted the family-friendliness of their company. This assessment is more positive than that of the Swiss general population, which was surveyed on the same topic around the same time (Fuchs et al., 2021). When analyzing the data deeper with a gender lens, our results reveal interesting, gendered patterns even in engaged family-friendly work organizations. In what follows, we address and discuss our two research questions.

### 6.1 (Not) Perceived Gender Differences

Our study shows an interesting contradiction in the perception of the surveyed employers: While women and mothers were not perceived to be more affected by the challenges of the pandemic, most respondents believed that people with caregiv-

ing responsibilities were disproportionately affected. Among caregivers, women and mothers were perceived as bearing the brunt of these challenges. Studies show *first* that women were more affected from pandemical consequences such as short-time work (Dubois et al., 2022; Stutz et al., 2022) and *second* that caregivers, especially women and mothers, were more affected by the negative impacts of the pandemic (Fuchs et al., 2021; Kohlrausch & Zucco, 2020; Lanfranconi et al., 2021; Samtleben et al., 2020; Stutz et al., 2022).

How can this contradictory effect, that the family-friendly employers do not see a gender effect but rather a caregiving effect, which appears to be gendered, possibly be explained? This contradiction can be explained by the hypothesis that within the work organizations (even those that are family-friendly and engaged), there exists a strong *gender-blind* norm of *equal treatment* of all gender (*equality*). This norm may hinder employers from recognizing gender inequalities (at least when firstly asked if there are any gendered effects on employees during the pandemic). The reality in Switzerland, however, remains strongly gendered, especially in the unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work between women and men. This situation has worsened during the pandemic (Fuchs et al., 2021). A *gender-blind* approach in work organizations may thus contribute to these organizations reproducing existing gender inequalities.

A similar effect was found by Fuchs et al. (2019), who showed that unemployment insurance (ALV) in Switzerland is regulated in a *gender-blind* manner, with the handling of individual situations, such as motherhood, delegated to advisors. In a gender-structured society, this implicitly reproduces gender stereotypes. Another similar effect was found in a study of American welfare-to-work offices, where frontline workers acknowledged that it is more difficult for Black clients to enter and succeed in the welfare-to-work program. However, due to a strong *race-blind* norm of equal treatment (*equality*), they did not treat Black clients differently than other clients, thus reproducing inequalities (Lanfranconi & Basaran, 2023).

The above hypothesis of a *gender-blind* norm in the analyzed work organizations is supported by another finding of our study: A slim majority of the employers we surveyed indicated that they had supported employees with caregiving responsibilities more during the pandemic than others. However, only very few indicated that women and mothers were specifically supported. This finding is surprising at first sight, given that most employers believe it is particularly women with caregiving responsibilities who are most affected by the pandemic.

However, this finding can be explained by the hypothesis of *gender-blind* perception among employers who aim to treat all genders *equally*. It explicitly shows that although employers perceive gender effects, they do not act upon them. A more nuanced approach to gender *equity*, acknowledging the challenges faced by women and mothers and actively addressing them, would be appropriate. Specifically, during the pandemic, employers (especially HR and supervisors) could have paid special attention to the challenges that for instance mothers may have faced in

home-offices, which could have involved providing systematical emotional or other forms of support to them. Lanfranconi et al. (2019) shows that mothers – more than fathers lacked emotional support.

While we are not advocating for differential treatment of women and men in work organizations in general, we argue that it is crucial to always consider the potentially gendered outcomes of seemingly gender-neutral organizational decisions – such as in the case of the pandemic the mandatory home office requirement – given the gendered realities – in this case the disparate unpaid workloads. This approach would involve applying an *equity* approach to organizations practices and decisions rather than mere *equality* approach.

Returning to the example of welfare-to-work offices in the USA, the same study revealed that in other, more race-conscious organizations, black clients were treated differently due to the discrimination they commonly face in the US labor and rental markets, and even by doctors. Consequently, frontline workers in these organizations treated black clients differently from others, based on an *equity* norm (Lanfranconi & Basaran, 2023).

A final interesting finding here is that the surveyed employers believe that employees with caregiving responsibilities have experienced better work-family balance due to pandemic-related changes than before the pandemic; however, they do not believe that this holds stronger for women or mothers. Other and representative surveys from Switzerland show that this is not true: People with caregiving responsibilities (and especially single parents and/or those with caregiving duties for children and other dependents) found balancing work and family more challenging during the pandemic than otherwise. Conversely, those without caregiving responsibilities found the balance easier during the pandemic than otherwise (Fuchs et al., 2021; Lanfranconi et al., 2021).

## 6.2 Perceived Responsibility for Ensuring Gender Equity

Analyzing the open-ended responses regarding governmental support and future challenges with a gender lens, we observe that many respondents acknowledge gendered challenges but do not feel responsible for addressing gender equity issues themselves.

Especially in RI many employers spoke out against any state measures, often referring to the self-responsibility of employees, especially working mothers: “Working mothers cannot afford to just stop working, stay with the children, and let others do their job. ... State support would not change much.” This citation shows how the respondent does not see the responsibility for gender equity with employers or the state but places it exclusively on mothers, who should—if we take the statement literally—prioritize their work over their children. Employers in RII would have liked more governmental support to better support employees (with children) during a crisis like the pandemic. Specifically mentioned was the desire for an earlier shortening of the quarantine period, which was particularly challenging

for working mothers, or the need for more flexible forms of childcare regardless of the pandemic. Finally, there was also a desire for increased financial state support, such as compensation for caregiving tasks due to school closures.

Interestingly, another respondent sees the responsibility more with employers, but specifically with the employers of fathers. They stated, “When both parents are employed, I find that responsibility in a crisis is often delegated to the mother. Fathers and their employers need to be held more accountable here.” This approach suggests holding employers of fathers accountable for ensuring that fathers take on their share of caregiving responsibilities. In practical terms, this could involve allowing fathers to reduce their working hours and take family leave. During a crisis such as the pandemic (and probably beyond), this approach would mean a special focus of HR or supervisors on fathers when designing family-friendly measures, ensuring they can adequately care for their children.

A final interesting statement is: “Basically, the question is whether schools and childcare facilities can simply be closed. Not all families can organize accordingly. The children usually suffer the most, with short- and long-term consequences.” This citation does not solve the question of responsibility; however, it shifts the focus from the gender perspective to the perspective of the children, who are often overlooked in the debate of family-friendly working structures. The analysis by Krstić and Sladojević Matić (2020) constitutes a good starting point, by raising the question, “Should children become key stakeholders in designing family-friendly workplaces?” in their analysis of organizational changes due to the pandemic and the way children perceived those changes.

### 6.3 Conclusion

The present study is based on an online survey of 31 family-friendly employers from two Swiss regions, conducted in spring 2021, one year after the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. It reveals that, whilst pursuing a *gender-blind equal-treatment* approach during the pandemic, these employers unintentionally exacerbated gender inequality within the organizations. Although these organizations recognize some *gender-specific* inequalities and risks, they do not perceive it as their responsibility to address them. They instead largely place the burden on caregivers, predominantly on mothers.

The present study has *several limitations* and thus *suggests avenues for further research*: *Firstly*, the online survey is based on a small sample of engaged and family-friendly employers from two regions. Larger-scale studies should in the future trace whether the tendencies shown here also hold true for an extended sample. It would be interesting to expand the sample to employers of different branches, sizes, and regions. It would also be interesting to compare specifically committed and family-friendly employers with other employers. The regional differences shown above cannot be generalized from our very limited sample, however a larger sample would allow to support potential regional differences.

*Secondly*, the study exclusively reflects the perspective of employers (represented by management personnel, HR managers, or specialists in companies). It appears important, based on our findings (see, Krstić & Sladojević Matic, 2020), to include the perspective of employees and their families in a well-founded study.<sup>5</sup>

*Thirdly*, the results of this study primarily provide a snapshot of the situation during the pandemic and only sporadically include retrospective (before the pandemic) and future-oriented statements (after the pandemic). Therefore, there is a need for research on whether and to what extent family-friendly measures introduced or expanded during the pandemic will be retained post-pandemic and with which gendered effects.

While the survey sample is not representative of Switzerland and is limited in scale, it is theoretically significant as all surveyed employers are notably engaged and identify as family friendly. According to the argument of theoretical case selection (Flyvberg, 2001), we may thus hypothesize that the gendered effects observed in this sample may also apply to less engaged employers.

Based on our analysis, *we recommend a gender-conscious (equity) rather than gender-blind (equality) approach* when designing family-friendly policies within companies. Since mothers often handle most unpaid care work, companies should reflect this reality to avoid perpetuating gender inequality. This means companies should take some responsibility for addressing gender equity, not only in future crises but generally.

Lastly, the Swiss political system must also take responsibility. As previously discussed, Swiss family policy is one of the weakest in Europe, and childcare is more expensive than in any other European country. This increases e.g., the risk that remote work will lead to more parents, especially mothers, working from home while caring for their children. Therefore, it is crucial to invest in affordable childcare, parental leave, and robust family policies in Switzerland for future crises and beyond.

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5 The author currently works on a project that includes these different perspectives.

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## New Fathers—New Care—New Work: Leaving “Homo Academicus”?

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*Abstract:* The article asks about the potential of a care perspective for New Work in science. Care work is largely eliminated in the meritocratic performance system of science. Based on qualitative data, the article shows that fathers in the science through their experiences in the COVID-19 pandemic deal with heteronormative invocations and develop new practices and a changed self-image as caring scientists.

*Keywords:* Masculinity, science, fatherhood, care, COVID-19

### Nouveaux pères – nouvelle préoccupation – nouveau travail : un abandon de l’«homo academicus» ?

*Résumé:* L’article s’interroge sur le potentiel d’une perspective de *care* pour un nouveau travail dans le domaine scientifique. Le travail de soin est largement éliminé dans le système de prestations méritocratique de la science. Basé sur des données qualitatives, l’article montre que les pères en science se confrontent aux appels hétéronormatifs grâce à leurs expériences dans la pandémie COVID-19 et qu’ils développent de nouvelles pratiques ainsi qu’une perception modifiée d’eux-mêmes en tant que scientifiques bienveillants.

*Mots-clés:* Masculinité, science, paternité, care, COVID-19.

### Neue Väter – Neue Sorge – Neue Arbeit: eine Abkehr vom «Homo Academicus» ?

*Zusammenfassung:* Der Beitrag fragt nach dem Potential einer Careperspektive für New Work in der Wissenschaft. Sorgearbeit wird im meritokratischen Leistungssystem der Wissenschaft weitgehend eliminiert. Anhand qualitativer Daten zeigt der Beitrag, dass sich Väter in der Wissenschaft durch ihre Erfahrungen in der COVID-19-Pandemie mit heteronormativen Anrufungen auseinandersetzen und neue Praktiken sowie ein verändertes Selbstverständnis als sorgende Wissenschaftler ausbilden.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Männlichkeit, Wissenschaft, Vaterschaft, Care, COVID-19

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## 1 Introduction

The discussion about working conditions at universities was brought to the attention of the wider German public by #IchBinHanna (#IamHanna) and the pandemic. International studies also point to the occupational stress of employees at universities. Young academics below professorship level are increasingly asking themselves under what conditions they want to work in the future. However, the issues surrounding the new form of work at universities are rarely discussed. The desire to become a parent plays a particularly important role for many academics. Nevertheless, parenthood seems to contradict the academic professional ethos. Academia is still entrenched in the structures of old work and the narrative of “academia as a way of life”. In contrast, care work does not seem to fit in with this concept of an academic career. As many studies show, this is particularly true for mothers (e.g. Brandt & Spangenberg, 2022). The perspective of fathers in academia, however, remains largely unexplored (Haag & Gamper, 2022). This reproduces a homogeneous image of masculinity in the academic field, in which there is hardly any room for different masculinities. In this article, we want to explore the question of how fathers describe their care work during the different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, what narrative of “homo academicus” they construct in the process, what consequences this has for their concept of work-life balance and what opportunities this offers for a New Work approach.

We first give a short definition of New Work (section 2) and continue with Old Work and hegemonic masculinity as the dominant *conditio operandi* in science (section 3). Afterwards we reflect on parenthood in the scientific field (section 4) and take a deeper look at the pandemic as an impact factor on New Work (section 5). Based on interview excerpts from two research projects on experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic at German universities (Haag & Kubiak, 2022; Haag et al., 2024b), we describe how fathers balance academic careers and care work and what consequences they draw from it against the background of the New Work approach (section 6). In the discussion of the results, the myth of the independent scientific subject is questioned, and the care perspective is reconsidered as a resource for a process of change (section 7).

## 2 New Work—Beyond Traditional Gainful Employment

Before we address the issue of New Work in science using the example of parenthood with a special focus on fathers, it is important to look at the concept of New Work. In our paper, we mainly refer to Bergmann (2019), whose main argument is about questioning working methods, structures and gender roles that are taken for granted.

The concept focuses on factors for fulfilling individual needs and self-realization that place the individual in the spotlight: “The work should not drain and exhaust us, it should give us more strength and more energy, it should develop us into a fuller human being” (Bergmann, 2019, p. 3). New Work therefore includes aspects such as happiness, meaningfulness of work and, in particular, self-realization in professional and private life. Cornils and Reimers (2022) incorporate an expanded concept of work into the concept developed by Bergmann, which is particularly relevant for this article. The authors speak of an “expansion to include all socially necessary work. In addition to gainful employment, this includes educational, care and nursing work as well as all forms of work for the community and society”, so it is about “all unpaid and remunerated activities performed by people” (Cornils & Reimers, 2022, p. 3). With this perspective on work, the focus shifts from the classic definition of work as a productive activity with remuneration to the integration of reproductive practices such as care work. Derboven (2022b) emphasizes that only by expanding the concept of work beyond traditional gainful employment can total workload be identified. Parents are all-round workers (Derboven, 2022a). In particular, the double burden of parenthood (often motherhood) and employment often leads to excessive demands due to a combination of high demands, a lack of time, and a lack of mental strength and even personal stability (cf. Derboven, 2019, p. 79).

### 3 Old Work and Hegemonic Masculinity—*Conditio Operandi* in the Scientific Working World

New Work in science must be considered in comparison to traditional working conditions. This so-called Old Work can be expressed

*in the language of means and ends. In much of the past the task to be performed was the goal, the end, the purpose. The human being was used by others, or also by [themselves], as the tool, the instrument, the mere means for the achieving of this end. We, human beings, subordinate ourselves. We place ourselves into service of work that needed to be done* (Bergmann, 2019, p. 3).

Old Work is thus characterized by an instrumental character of the human resource and is visible, for example, through hierarchical structures with a lot of external control, competition, pressure, and subjugation to institutional guidelines. In this classic form of work, people and their needs are subordinated to profit, competitiveness, and growth, whereby, as Bergmann also illustrates, these subjugations and

constraints can vary depending on the field of work.<sup>1</sup> Studies on the field of science, for example, indicate that high workloads and stress have become part of everyday life (Ahmad et al., 2022; Winefield et al., 2003). This is particularly evident among junior researchers (Satinsky et al., 2021). The old ideal of the “homo academicus” (Bourdieu, 1988; Wagner et al., 2023) still applies: the ideal academic is white, male, childless and comes from an educated background (Zimmermann, 2022). He is available 24/7 (Engler, 2001) and works 60 hours a week, withstands enormous pressure to perform, is globally mobile and flexible in terms of space and time. Work thus becomes “omni-value” (Bergmann, 2019). As such, Old Work fits perfectly into the concept of work at universities, whose work processes are increasingly characterized by deregulation, competition, and output orientation at the structural level.

The academic personality (Engler, 2001) can be derived from the idea of focusing exclusively on university work. The qualities of appearing to be overshadow the actual skills or abilities (Beaufays & Kraiss, 2005, p. 89). This makes it clear that work in the academic field is not only linked to classic ideologies of Old Work such as individual performance, submission to the ideal of “homo academicus”, and hard work, but also to a traditional image of masculinity and a certain image of elites. Those who advance are those who, in Bergmann’s (2019) sense, submit to work and embody a “masculine habitus” (Bourdieu, 2002) in those “androcentric spaces”. “Interwoven with the heteronormative separation of the world of work and the private sphere, this reproduction of homosocial spaces leads to the exclusion of female academics” (Zimmermann & Weibel, 2020, p. 161), but—and this is a central argument of the paper—also to the disadvantage of masculinities in academia who do not or do not want to conform to this heteronormative image.

The seemingly neutral academic system has a highly gendered and gendering effect due to the requirements and the resulting closure and selection effects. According to theories of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Maihofer, 1995), masculinity manifests itself in practices of subordination, complicity, and marginalization. Such a self-image is based on an understanding of autonomy, independence, impermeability, and constancy, as Zimmermann (2022) points out. The heteronormative subject, which sees itself as omnipotent, always sees other subjects as a threat to its own autonomy. “From this follows the necessity to fend off the influence of the other on the self and to subjugate and devalue the other in order to secure one’s own dominance.” (Zimmermann, 2022, p. 59) In this arena of struggle, a form of self-discipline emerges that can be understood as “conditioning, disciplining and normalization, especially towards oneself” (Maihofer, 2021, p. 36) and thus also

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1 We would like to point out, for example, that the profession in science is highly flexible compared to band work. It is therefore important for us to clarify that the attributes Bergman uses to categorize Old Work must be weighted differently depending on the field of work. Nevertheless, an orientation towards usability in the sense of a standardized output orientation can also be identified for science without exception.

reproduces “old work”. Hegemonic masculinity and structures of “old work” are closely interwoven in the field of higher education.

## 4 Parenthood in the Arena of Scientific Giants

### 4.1 Discrimination Against Parents in Science

These working structures differ from the wishes of those working in the field of higher education, particularly when it comes to starting a family. In Germany, 73 percent of doctoral students would like to have children (women 72 percent; men 74 percent), although almost 50 percent of these doctoral students state that they do not want to have children during the career phase of their doctorate (Federal Report on Young Scientists, 2021). Doctoral students without children see difficulties in family planning primarily in the working conditions at universities. The main reasons are job insecurity, a lack of work-life balance, or low financial security. This is also reflected in the proportion of parents among early career researchers. Just 17 percent of doctoral students have children, which is below the general population average (also compared to people with a university degree). Many mothers (approx. 75 percent and fathers approx. 60 percent) consider abandoning their doctorate due to a (lack of) compatibility of family and career (Federal Report on Young Scientists, 2021). The “traditional working conditions” at universities, particularly regarding family-friendliness of the university structure, do not appear to be compatible with the strong desire to start a family (Melin et al., 2014). Parenthood is associated with clear disadvantages in science, especially for mothers (Bonache et al., 2022; Brandt & Spangenberg, 2022).

### 4.2 Old Work and the Blind Spot on Fatherhood in Science

Research shows that this also applies to young and family-oriented fathers who want to actively participate in care work and therefore have to avoid the anticipated availability in science (Lind, 2008; Neumann, 2012; Reddick et al., 2012; Reuter et al., 2008; Sallee, 2012). Men also perceive academic careers and fatherhood as competing spheres that are difficult to reconcile, because they do not correspond to the typical role expectations of Old Work and existing structures do not support the desire for parenthood (Sallee, 2012).

The little research that has been conducted over the years suggests that, in addition to the old working structures and patriarchal gender order in science, there is also a relationship of superiority and subordination between different masculinities and that there is by no means always solidarity among fathers (Lind, 2008). Rather, a large proportion of men follow the “rules of the game” (Meuser, 2006) of hege-

monic practices, for example by keeping family-related absences and duties secret and excluding the sphere of parenthood from their professional lives to conform to the ideal of work at universities. Many would not even know about the offspring of other colleagues because it may be kept secret (Liebig, 2008).

However, the scientific debate on family self-realization is still tied to the gender issue (Paulitz et al., 2015, p. 141). Men are not addressed in this discourse as potential caring fathers and are thus homogenized as a group. As a result, they are ascribed the role of *Hasardeuers*, who *must* feel committed to the ideal of Old Work in science without loss. Anyone who breaks with this role and does not fulfil expectations must also expect restrictions (Reuter, 2020). Old Work structures at universities therefore make it difficult for men to stand by their desire to take on parental responsibilities as part of their lifeworld (Liebig, 2008), but this is not the case for female academics. Thus, both are trapped in the structures of Old Work at universities, whereby the prison cell is designed differently for both and the consequences for self-realization as a parent and scientist differ for both.

## 5 The Pandemic as a Driver for New Work in Science?

With the COVID-19 pandemic, an unforeseen phenomenon appeared and led to far-reaching changes such as the increasing digitalization of teaching, a predominant shift of activities to working from home, and the temporary loss of research contexts and delays in qualification work, which has had far-reaching consequences, especially for financing positions (Federal Report on Young Scientists, 2021). The tense situation on the job market also proved to be a cause for concern for many young academics. Fears about the future and even leaving academia increased (Rigotti & Schielbach, 2020). While the amount of time spent on careers in essential fields such as publication, research, and third-party funding acquisition decreased, the proportion of working time spent on the digitalization of teaching and the pressure of constant availability increased. Early career researchers, especially those with short employment contracts or a high teaching load, were particularly affected by this due to their precarious employment conditions. However, the presence of children had a very negative impact on academic work (Shalaby et al., 2021; Wegrzyn et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the perspective on the compatibility issue in the discussion about science remained largely a gender issue, although family-oriented fathers also experienced restrictions (Haag & Gamper, 2022). However, initial results from studies about the situation of fathers in everyday working life under pandemic conditions reveal the first signs of change. Hans-Georg Nelles (2022), for example, decidedly examines the effects of COVID-19 on the division of labour within the family and the involvement of fathers in families. In the literature, there is discussion of “paradoxical simultaneities” regarding the distribution of family care work

(Peukert et al., 2022). This refers to retraditionalization at the expense of mothers. At the same time, however, the partnership-based division of labour has proven its worth during the crisis (Nelles, 2022). According to the British survey “Lockdown Fathers: The Untold Story” (Burgess & Goldman, 2021) by the Fatherhood Institute, positive influences of the pandemic working methods on fathers can be observed. For example, 48 percent of respondents stated that they perceived themselves as more competent in their role as parents after the lockdown, and 78 percent spent significantly more time with their children. The extent to which this also applies to fathers in science needs to be investigated.

## 6 Fatherhood, Pandemic and Science: Insights into Empirical Research

Against this background, the question arises as to what new practices fathers have developed during the pandemic to meet the ideal image of a scientist and what potential new types of work can be derived from this in relation to gender-specific expectations of the scientific persona. This question will be answered empirically. We will focus on: (6.2) changing working conditions in the pandemic, (6.3) negotiations on expectations of the “homo academicus” and (6.4) lessons learned in post-pandemic science.

### 6.1 Methodological Approach

The results are based on two studies conducted at the Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences. The German university context was considered for the survey. The first study examined the experience of the pandemic at universities (Haag & Kubiak, 2022) in three federal states. In three survey periods (May 2020, October 2020, and October 2021), students and academics from different status groups were interviewed about their experiences during the pandemic against the backdrop of changing work and study conditions. People interviewed included fathers with different academic status (doctoral students, postdocs, and professors). The interviewees were recruited through the researchers’ own networks and through the snowball principle. We initially made no stipulations regarding paternity about the sample. During the interview, the concept of fatherhood was negotiated discursively. It turned out that the respondents were challenged in their fatherhood by the pandemic, and they proactively made this a topic, without the group being put together per se about science and fatherhood. There were also women among the interviewees, including two mothers.

For this article, the interviewed fathers<sup>2</sup> (N=3) were selected from the first study and their statements are included in the analysis. Among them two hold a profes-

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2 There have been other male interviewees without fatherhood.

sorship and one was PhD candidate at the time of the interview. The second study, conducted in February 2023, builds on the results of the previous study<sup>3</sup> and focuses on the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups in higher education in six German federal states (Haag et al., 2024b). Different groups (including academics with care responsibilities) were interviewed (see Table 1). To recruit the interviewees, the study drew in part on its own networks and on multipliers (e.g. representatives of students with disabilities, advice centres). Due to the self-thematization of the previously interviewed fathers and their negotiation of fatherhood in science, we decided to select a group exclusively with fathers. Following the ongoing debate about precarization in academia, we focused on young academics (i.e. postdoctoral fathers of pre-school children, N = 3).

In both studies, the data was collected using group discussions (Bohnsack, 2000), which were analysed for this article using the grounded theory coding method (Glaser & Strauß, 1967).

Table 1 Interview Persons Considered in This Article

| Study I (three waves)                    | Study II (one wave 2023)                                       |
|--|--|
| Mr. M.: Professor, two children          | Mr. L.: Postdoc, two children (one of them with Down syndrome) |
| Mr. K.: Professor and Dean, two children | Mr. S.: Postdoc, one child                                     |
| Mr. B.: PhD, one child                   | Mr. N.: Postdoc, two children                                  |

## 6.2 Changed Working Conditions During the Pandemic

The fathers in both studies have noticed serious changes for themselves and their work, although these vary over time. The increasing digitalization of familiar practices and the simultaneous integration of these activities into previously outsourced care responsibilities (homeschooling, home daycare) are leading to an increasing blurring of boundaries in everyday working life, which is already perceived as blurred, as Mr. M., professor at a university of applied sciences and father of two children, explains. He refers to the home office as an expression of this process of dissolving boundaries:

*Working from home can really suck, you have to be honest. Yes, when you realize, okay, I've finished this now and look at the clock and think, yes, my wife's alarm clock is just going off in our bedroom, then you realize that something has gone wrong. (M., Professor, Study I, May 2020)*

3 However, the same people were not interviewed again.

Coherent work that needs to be carried out over several hours becomes increasingly difficult, especially when childcare must be done alone. “You can only work through a few non-demanding emails, then the morning is over” (K., Professor, First Study I, May 2020), as described by Mr. K., Professor University of Applied Sciences, Dean and father of two children, who took over childcare at the end of May 2020 due to his partner’s return to work. The online teaching situation is an enormous burden, “because I want to avoid my children somehow crawling on my lap” (K., Professor, Study I, May 2020). Both statements manifest the space and time problems of scientific work under the conditions of the pandemic measures, which result from the double burden of pandemic science and parenthood. The decisive factor is that old routines in the field of higher education and research must be continued, while the framework conditions have changed fundamentally.

### 6.3 Negotiations on the Expectations of the “Homo Academicus”

Due to changes in work routines, fathers question the expectations placed on them as scientific subjects and how these expectations fit in with their care practices, which have also changed because of the pandemic. This inevitably leads to a conflict: how much time should be spent on work and how much time should be reserved for the family? Mr. M. already addressed this issue very specifically in the first wave in May 2020 and once again clearly emphasized the great importance of the desire to be a father and underlined the opportunity:

*I now have my two children, who are five and seven, and I can carry on like this for another five years, but then at some point I will only see them from behind as teenagers, and I don't fancy that. And in that respect, I also see this as an opportunity to have them in front of my eyes. (M., Professor, Study I, May 2020)*

Looking back (in October 2021), in the second interview, the interviewee makes it clear that he is striving for a new work-life balance and wants to draw a line between work and private life. The emerging feeling of adapting to the old structural expectations and routines in the field of science is thus evident in the background:

*In retrospect, it was very, very good that this happened. ... For example, I've resolved, if possible, to only work in the office and no longer in the living room, in the kitchen and somehow in bed, and also to read emails on Sundays and no longer after 10 pm. And I hope that I can keep it up, that would be my greatest wish. (M., Professor, Study I, October 2021)*

Breaking out of expectations is not easy for all interviewees and must first be learned and fought for. Mr. K., for example, has learned to “do nothing at weekends” and

to do so “without a guilty conscience” (K., Professor, Study I, October 2021). On closer analysis, the ongoing conflict becomes clear: Free time must be fought for on the one hand and justified on the other, which shows the orientation towards the norm of the performance-oriented academic. Mr. K. also tries to adapt his working hours to care work and being a father/spouse. Unlike Mr. M., however, he adopted a different strategy during the pandemic. Firstly, he is trying to distance himself from the prescribed workload, which he believes can never be fully managed anyway, and secondly, he is shifting his working hours to the evenings to satisfy his desire for care work:

*It's impossible for work to be finished. I now approach things differently. For example, I explicitly stick to saying that I work at home in the evenings because it's best compatible with the family ... and I find it more relaxing when I know that I'm doing it then and I'm not working until six in the evening, so to speak, and then I'm home at, I don't know, half past six and then the children are in bed at eight, and then I miss it—so I prefer to postpone it until the evening.* (K., Professor, Study I, October 2021)

This reveals an active confrontation with the norm of being always available. By explicitly demanding time for the family, the interviewee succeeds in increasingly withdrawing. However, breaking out of the self-imposed expectation is a lengthy process and must first be achieved.

While the previous statements come from professors who already hold an established position in academia (e. g. W2 or W3 salary, two types of salary for professors in Germany with civil servant status), the descriptions of Mr. B., a doctoral candidate and father of a 20-month-old son, illustrate the interplay between care work and academic career planning. Unlike the professors, Mr. B. is in a precarious employment relationship, which is clearly reflected in the interviews. For him, the demand to be a good father, husband, and scientist and the actual practice for an academic career path were far apart. The time he refers to career-enhancing activities such as third-party funding applications or peer-reviewed:

*Last week, for example, my wife also had seminars all day, so I was able to work during the windows from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m., and then again from 4:00 p.m. until the evening, after I somehow managed the childcare and was pretty worn out from it. And of course I'm constantly failing because of my own productivity demands, because I've internalized the fact that I actually have time to write now, and of course it's very rare to have the peace and quiet.* (B., PhD, Study I, May 2020)

One year later, in Fall 2021, the interviewee left academia and decided against a career in science and in favour of his family and fatherhood. In the interview, Mr. B.

reflects above all on the question of pressure in combination with the demand for productivity in the scientific field and the pandemic:

*So maybe I would have worked more productively without the pandemic and would now have one or two journal articles that I would have somehow pushed forward better, but I don't actually think that would have changed the fact that I see my academic career as very difficult to reconcile with—with my small child and the way I want to do it and also the limits of my resilience, so to speak. (B., PhD, Study I, October 2021)*

This statement also manifests the conflict with high performance requirements as the basis of scientific work, which have increased once again due to the pandemic. The “normal” tasks for a successful career must continue to be completed, while new challenges arise with childcare. The limits of resilience are thus exceeded or—more likely—only become apparent as a result, although they were also repeatedly mentioned in the interviews beforehand. Crossing boundaries, as exceptional conditions, acted like a magnifying glass, which led to previous difficulties of normal everyday life being brought into sharper focus.

In all quotes, there is a process of negotiation with the norm of academic lifestyle as an implicit orientation and, for the most part, also as a guiding maxim from which—against the background of the pandemic experiences in the sense of a “wake-up call”—more and more distance is being maintained. As these interviews show by way of example, the concept of the hegemonic image of masculinity resonates in all of them as an implicit guiding principle of the “right scientist”, without it being explicitly addressed in a gendered way. Unlike in the interviews we conducted with women and mothers, men do not emphasize the gendered invocation; it seems to be part of scientific normality for them. Although the fathers interviewed change their practices or question the old ones, they do not tie this back to hegemonically effective ideas of a male scientist.

#### 6.4 Lessons Learned? Fathers in Post-Pandemic Science

In the follow-up study conducted in 2023 (see above), the fathers we interviewed<sup>4</sup> learned new practices of everyday life and work management during the pandemic, sometimes even in the face of resistance from the organization to which they belong. Mr. L., a post-doc at a university of applied sciences and father of two children, including a child with Down syndrome, describes:

*Somehow, the department always wanted me to be present, take part in the culture and so on, that was always the department's credo, and with COVID,*

4 This is no longer a longitudinal section, but a new sample.

*like everywhere else, that disappeared and that also, well, for me personally, it was maintained with other colleagues that you work at home as much as you can (L., Postdoc, Study II, February 2023)*

As we can see, COVID led to the development of new ways of working. Though the amount of work has not yet been reduced, work and family have been intertwined. Mr. S., a postdoc at a university research institute and father of one child, describes the post-pandemic situation in a similar way.

*And here at the institute, now that the restrictions have been lifted, the management is pushing for everyone to come into the office a bit more, to show a bit more presence, because everyone has really got used to working from home a lot. I wouldn't have thought that I would be working from home several days a week after all. I'm in the office two days a week. (S., Postdoc, Study II, February 2023)*

Through their experiences during the period of absence, the two fathers gained awareness of the way they want to work in the future. The statements show a resistance to a return to the status quo ante as a learning effect from the pandemic period.

The third interviewee, Mr. N., a postdoc at a non-university research institute and father of two children, talks about the difference between scientists with and without care obligations and notes a development over the course of the pandemic for consideration:

*At the beginning, there were so many emails: take care of yourselves first. It's clear that you can't do everything now, especially those with children or other care work and so on. But at some point, that eased off. And at some point, the same workload was expected as before and sometimes even more. So somehow my perception was that it sometimes became even busier than it was before COVID and that having a child and being a father was always a good reason to say, yes, but I also need a break. Like this. And that's for those who weren't involved in care work, they didn't have the excuse, that's the wrong word, they didn't have the reason they could give as to why they had to stop working. (N., Postdoc, Study II, February 2023)*

Care work is now used as an argument to minimize the significance of the tasks addressed to the “homo academicus” by the institution of higher education and to withdraw from them. Taking on the role of father is one way of no longer having to conform to the ideal and thus challenging the hegemonic notion of masculinity of the available work subject. However, this still requires a legitimate motive, in this case care work, which has also increased among male colleagues due to the pandemic

and has also gained recognition. Unlike in the first study *during* the pandemic, care work is now proactively referred to post-pandemically, thus deconstructing the classic image of men. The caring masculinities are thus confronting entrenched structures in science and negotiating spaces for development.

In terms of spatial flexibility and the autonomous working subject, fathers are also working off the narrative of the “ideal academic worker”, which has consequences for everyday life. For example, after the pandemic, they are finding it difficult to travel to conferences or apply for jobs that involve an increased commute or even a family move. They realize that they want and need to invest more in care work. Conferences or applications to distant universities are seen as a burden. They are an obstacle to being a father and partner, which the pandemic has once again brought into sharper focus for the interviewees, as Mr. S. points out:

*I think the pandemic has shown me what the limits of what is possible are. Somehow, the child was already there before the pandemic. It was always clear that you have to negotiate, you have to distribute the resources somehow and it's not all that easy anymore, but I think the pandemic has made it even stronger, it's somehow clearer, it's just more resources that are needed. In terms of my time and energy alone, that has to be distributed. (S., Postdoc, Study II, February 2023)*

The question arises as to why they continue to adhere to the performance maxim of “homo academicus”, although at the same time the compatibility issue is becoming increasingly urgent. Mr. L. reveals:

*When I ask myself, yes, I don't yet have the feeling that I've somehow reached a stable, secure state where I think, okay, I'm safe for the foreseeable future, but I always have the feeling that I still have to put in at least 40 hours or more to reach a secure state. And that means, theoretically in this system it would mean something like, I have to work as a professor now, but it doesn't even mean that. It just means that you want to work towards a position that is reasonably reliable. (L., Postdoc, Study II, February 2023)*

The precarious working conditions in academia, from which they suffer greatly in contrast to the professors interviewed in the first study, and the hegemonic image of the ideal academic create fear and pressure. Extra work in the form of weekend work or evening shifts continues to be accepted to balance both care work and the narrative of the “homo academicus”. Their vulnerability as junior academics becomes clear in comparison to the group of established academics from the first survey, who can at least grant themselves freedom through the privilege of a permanent professorship. Although a feeling of “still having to do more” is initially subjectivized,

the interviewees increasingly came to structural aspects such as the expectation to work on qualification work outside of working hours. It is the lack of a “feeling of having achieved a stable, secure state” (L., Postdoc, Study II, February 2023) that extrinsically drives junior academics in mid-level academic positions to work harder. However, the necessity and, above all, their own desire to become more involved in care work has led them to partially avoid the demands of the “homo academicus”. It is an oscillation between autonomy and dependence, which creates tensions that cannot be resolved precisely because of the status passage of the qualification.

## 7 Discussion

We were able to show that employment relationships in academia still follow the concept of Old Work (Bergmann, 2019) and that these structures are linked to a hegemonic ideal of masculinity. Studies show that those working in science follow the concept of “omni-value” (Bergmann, 2019). In a working world that functions according to Old Work and androcentric structures, in which temporary employment is the norm and employees are constantly confronted with job insecurity, parenthood becomes an insecurity factor that runs counter to the ideal of “omni-value”. It is precisely the idealization of permanent productivity that is criticized by supporters of New Work. This carefree attitude and independence are necessary to meet the demands of academia. As studies have shown, the simultaneous burden of private or family demands in the form of reproductive work is a barrier to the required dedication to academic work for academics (Pestel et al., 2014). This applies not only to mothers—as most research assumes—but also to fathers who become more involved through the pandemic and being at home.

The desire for parenthood is seen as something that hinders and disrupts productivity and availability, even though most academics would like to be parents. Even if the respondents criticize these requirements, our results show that the guidelines linked to the concept of Old Work are still used as an evaluation template for their own work. Fathers work off the academic worker as a hegemonic doctrine that has internalized the maxims of Old Work. Furthermore, the Old Work guidelines are reproduced by the fathers using this ideal as a template for good work. They thus follow the Old Work discourse and do not invent alternative narratives and practices. No new ideal of New Work is designed, but why one does not want to conform to the ideal of “homo academicus” is mainly argued.

If we turn to the idea of New Work according to Bergman (2019), the increasing awareness of care relationships appears to be an opportunity to question the existing dysfunctional and sometimes destructive structures. As a normative concept, care thus forms a counterproposal to ideas of subjective autonomy in science (Haag et al., 2024a; Zimmermann, 2022). In this conception, however, care also becomes

a motor for transforming society, which has so far focused on the gender-hierarchical division of labour, capitalist modes of production and work as omni-value (Gerhard, 2014, p. 71). Like a magnifying glass, the pandemic has made visible the dependencies and needs that could previously remain hidden. This is also because some of them were picked up outside of academia or the role of the father was interpreted as an adapted “homo academicus” in the sense of the classic father or partner role: he is hardly ever at home, has no time and pursues paid work alone. Until now, academia has only been able to function through the reproductive work of others and their own “exploitation”, which is not recognized (Haag et al., 2024a).

According to our study, parenthood should therefore no longer be subordinated to the concept of Old Work and treated as an individual challenge. It is a structural task for universities to implement new ways of working that run counter to the ideal of academic work as omni-value. New ways of thinking about parenthood and academic careers are needed to break away from the “old homo academicus” and integrate New Work concepts. In future research, this perspective needs to be deepened. For example, a longitudinal design could be used to investigate the long-term consequences of the pandemic for fathers in academia and new practices they develop in terms of New Work. It should also be noted that the group of fathers is not a homogeneous group, and there are differentiations along different categories that need to be looked at more closely.

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Luca Bossi

## **Governare la diversità religiosa in Italia e nel Vaud**

### Stato e religioni alla prova del riconoscimento

**Collana Presente e storia**

ISBN 978-3-03777-300-0  
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La pluralità religiosa è un tratto caratteristico delle società europee contemporanee. Tuttavia, le istituzioni pubbliche spesso faticano ad elaborare misure adatte alla piena inclusione delle organizzazioni confessionali non maggioritarie, o di più recente formazione. Muovendo dai rispettivi quadri storico-giuridici e approdando alla contemporaneità, il volume propone una comparazione sociologica delle legislazioni in Italia e nel Vaud, mettendo in luce potenzialità e limiti dei meccanismi di riconoscimento giuridico delle organizzazioni confessionali. L'autore ricorre alla storica legislazione italiana e alla più recente innovazione vodese per mostrare come i sistemi normativi, pensati per fornire allo Stato gli strumenti per tutelare e valorizzare la libera espressione religiosa, possano invece agire quali meccanismi di disciplinamento e controllo, dando luogo a sistemi piramidali profondamente discriminanti.

Ciò che occorre, con evidenza e urgenza, sono leggi generali sulla libertà religiosa che concedano a tutti il diritto ad un'esistenza priva di discriminazioni.

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## (E)quality Workplaces for Women? Gender Dynamics in Collaborative Workspaces in Rural and Peripheral Areas in Austria

Alexandra Wrbka \*

*Abstract:* Collaborative workspaces (CWS) are gaining popularity as alternatives to traditional offices, yet their gender dynamics remain underexplored. While CWS claim to offer a more egalitarian, open work atmosphere, prior research suggests workplaces are rarely gender-neutral. Drawing from ethnographic research of CWS in rural Austria, including one women-focused, this contribution provides insights about existing gender dynamics and reveals how organizational structure and workspace design may influence gender inequalities, emphasizing the importance of inclusive CWS in non-urban areas.

*Keywords:* Gender inequality, women, collaborative workspaces, non-urban areas, Austria

### Des lieux de travail égalitaire pour les femmes? Dynamiques de genre dans les espaces de travail collaboratifs dans les zones rurales et périphériques d'Autriche

*Résumé:* Les espaces de travail collaboratifs (ETC) sont devenus une alternative populaire aux bureaux traditionnels, mais leurs dynamiques de genre restent peu explorées. Alors qu'ils prétendent offrir une atmosphère égalitaire et ouverte, des recherches précédentes montrent que les espaces de travail ne sont pas neutres en matière de genre. Cette contribution, basée sur une ethnographie des ETC ruraux en Autriche dont un centré sur les femmes, explore les dynamiques de genre et révèle comment leur conception et organisation peuvent influencer l'(in)égalité de genre, en soulignant la nécessité d'espaces de travail inclusifs en milieu rural.

*Mots-clés:* Inégalités de genre, femmes, espaces de travail collaboratifs, zones non urbaines, Autriche

### Egalitäre Arbeitsplätze für Frauen? Geschlechterdynamik in kollaborativen Arbeitsräumen in ländlichen und peripheren Gebieten Österreichs

*Zusammenfassung:* Kollaborative Arbeitsräume (CWS) werden als Alternative zu herkömmlichen Büros populärer, doch deren Geschlechterdynamik ist wenig erforscht. CWS geben vor, eine egalitäre, offene Arbeitsatmosphäre zu bieten, existierende Studien hingegen beschreiben Arbeitsplätze als nicht geschlechtsneutral. Basierend auf ethnografischer Forschung in CWS in ländlichen Gebieten Österreichs, darunter ein frauenorientierter, gibt dieser Beitrag Einblicke in deren Geschlechterdynamik, zeigt, wie Organisationsstruktur und Gestaltung der Arbeitsräume Geschlechter(un)gleichheiten beeinflussen kann, und unterstreicht die Notwendigkeit inklusiver Arbeitsräume in ländlichen Gebieten.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Geschlechterungleichheiten, Frauen, kollaborative Arbeitsräume, nicht-städtische Gebiete, Österreich

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## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Rapid transformations in our globalized world and the recent Covid-19 pandemic have prompted a re-evaluation of societal preferences in work and living arrangements (Bauman, 2013; Taylor & Luckman, 2018). The rise of collaborative workspaces (hereafter CWS) can be seen as a part of these developments. The term collaborative workspaces is used here as an umbrella term encompassing a wide range of “spatial concepts for work, learning and recreation”, including, but not limited to coworking spaces, defined as “shared physical workspace and (often) intentional cooperation between independent workers” (Waters-Lynch et al., 2016, p.2). The degree of cooperation in CWS among coworkers can range from simple co-location to work collectivization (Avdikos & Iliopoulou, 2019). Other types of CWS include fab labs, maker spaces, or creative hubs which may particularly attract creative workers and craftspeople. CWS have been considered a “substitute” of organizations (Bacevice & Spreitzer, 2023) or quasi-organizations (de Peuter et al., 2017) for autonomous new economy workers. Naturally, sharing physical space and resources may also create tension and conflicts such as competition (Cuérel et al., 2019).

The paper combines and addresses two gaps in the literature on CWS: First, while CWS were initially an urban phenomenon, they are increasingly found outside big cities, yet empirical research on CWS in such settings is limited. Second, the growing presence of women in coworking, accompanied by the emergence of female-focused CWS (Akhavan et al., 2022) remains understudied, especially in non-urban areas.

Gender inequalities are persistent, particularly for women in rural areas (ILO, 2018), and gender challenges in such areas differ from those in urban ones (Wiest, 2016). Furthermore, previous research has questioned the reputation of CWS as egalitarian workplaces (de Peuter et al., 2017) while organization scholars emphasize that workplaces are not gender neutral. Yet, despite exacerbated gender inequalities due to the recent pandemic (Collins et al., 2021), the gender dynamics of and within such new workspaces have not been sufficiently studied.

This paper presents findings from the author’s qualitative study on gender dynamics in CWS in non-urban areas in Austria. The overall aim is to discuss the role CWS play in such contexts for their female users. The focus lies on examining aspects of gender dynamics *within* CWS, starting from the extent to which women are represented in these spaces, up to how different organizational settings answer to the specific needs of their female users. Hence, it elaborates on whether and if so how, CWS in non-urban areas have the potential to be both workplaces of *quality* and *equality* for women in the current changing world of work, whereby

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quality refers to explicit aspects such as design and spatial layout of the CWS, and equality to the more implicit, potentially “gendered substructure” (Acker, 2012) of daily informal interactions, construction of divisions based on physical spatial locations, division of labour, and symbols and images such as language, ideology, or dress within the CWS. Finally, the paper also underlines the importance of creating inclusive workplaces that address the unique needs and challenges of women in non-urban areas of Austria.

The article proceeds with a literature review on CWS and their users. Subsequently, the methodology used is provided. After introducing the two cases, the findings are presented. In the discussion, the author critically reflects on how the different organizational setups of the studied CWS meet female users’ needs. The conclusion explains why these models may be considered best practice examples and suggests improvements to inform policymakers in creating egalitarian workplaces.

## 2 CWS and their Users: Current Trends and Challenges

### 2.1 CWS in Non-Urban Areas and their Users

As CWS continue to evolve, not least through the Covid-19 crisis by which such workspaces were heavily affected, the literature on CWS too is expanding. While existing studies primarily focus on CWS in urban areas, the number of these spaces outside big cities is rising (Tomaz et al., 2021). This trend has been associated with the spread of digital services and remote work, paired with a home-working fatigue, and a renewed attractiveness of the countryside in terms of quality of life and a rise in rural tourism, as well as availability and low costs of real estate. All these factors may attract knowledge workers, digital nomads, and creative workers alike (Tomaz et al., 2021). Rural CWS differ from urban ones, for example, they are more diverse in their organization model and offer a wider range of services (Bähr et al., 2020).

European rural areas continue to experience depopulation (Eurostat, 2023a). For the Austrian context, Fischer and Weber (2014) note that concerns about employment, housing, childcare, and leisure amenities seem to drive women out of the countryside. However, some scholars have observed a trend of the 20–30 age group migrating from urban to rural areas, and several media reports and public polls indicate that the Covid-19 pandemic might have accelerated this development (Duxbury, 2021). As will be demonstrated in this paper, these in- and return-migrants constitute potential users of rural CWS.

Concerning the situation of women in rural areas, female job prospects and career options are hindered by structural deficits such as accessibility to workplaces and long commutes, supply of infrastructure including childcare, and public services, but also prevailing traditional gender agreements like the male breadwinner

and the female caregiver (Wiest, 2016). Furthermore, Eurostat data show that the gender employment gap is generally lower in cities than in rural and suburban areas (Eurostat, 2023b).

## 2.2 Women in CWS and Female-Focused CWS

Despite the increase of female users in CWS from 33% in 2012 to 51% in 2019 (Foertsch, 2020a), men predominantly hold ownership and founding roles, while the staff, often female, faces a gender pay gap (Foertsch, 2018; 2020b). Additionally, an overrepresentation of women in host and community manager roles has been observed, and the gendered, feminized nature of the care labour they perform has been recognized by scholars (Merkel, 2023).

Recently, an emergence of women-only or female-focused CWS can be observed (Akhavan et al., 2022). They are predominantly found in urban areas and sometimes also offer in-house childcare services. Originating in the USA, this trend has extended to Europe (Poussier, 2020). One study argues that their value for female workers and entrepreneurs lies in offering flexibility, a professional work environment, and vital support systems (Akhavan et al., 2022). The specific welfare policies of individual countries and the cultural norms pertaining to gender roles play a defining part in determining the services offered by these spaces, including childcare (Akhavan et al., 2022).

## 2.3 Labour and Gender Inequalities in the New World of Work and the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs)

CWS mostly house freelance knowledge workers and creatives, often facing precarious working conditions. Increasingly, remote employees or “corporate nomads” can be found in CWS too (Schmied et al., 2021, p. 8). Scholars describe restructuring processes of the world of work such as deregulation and flexibilization of employment, and new, scattered career-patterns which have brought about growing social and gender divisions (Perrons, 2002).

Work in the so-called new economy and in the CCIs has the reputation of being “cool, creative and egalitarian” and gender-neutral (Gill, 2002). However, this perception represents a surface-level image. Gill (2002) contends that it is precisely the highly valued characteristics of new work, including flexibility, informality, and autonomy, that inadvertently give rise to gender inequalities. For instance, Banks and Milestone (2011) indicate that while the digital new media sector appears to offer women more autonomous careers, traditional forms of gender inequality persist. Women appreciated the industry’s relaxed culture but felt pressured to participate in social activities and struggled to balance work with childrearing aspirations.

## 2.4 CWS: Egalitarian Workplaces of the Future?

CWS claim to be the future of work, providing a more egalitarian and open work atmosphere, easing the isolation effect of the home office, and reducing the socio-economic risk self-employed workers face. Providing their users the opportunity to socialize, network, and collaborate, CWS enable career advancement and may even act as shelters against precarity (Merkel, 2019). However, critical scholars contest that this is only true to some degree (de Peuter et al., 2017). Specific mechanisms producing inequalities in CWS have been identified, including membership curation and access, membership fees, and space layout.

Scholars have demonstrated that work organizations are gendered (Acker, 2012) and that women are disadvantaged especially in male-dominated work environments. Some forms of gendered exclusions include old boy networks—men in positions of power helping men from a similar background in business or other matters, and an informal laddish culture—promoting a particular masculinity expressed through talk at the workplace about drinking, sex, and women (Gill, 2002).

The above outlined debates raise the question of potential solutions to address these workplace inequalities within CWS. Cooperatives or worker-based ownership of hubs and CWS have been proposed as enhancement of precarious working lives and exclusionary practices (Merkel, 2019; Sandoval & Littler, 2019). Indeed, Sobering et al. (2014), reviewing gender (in)equality in worker-owned businesses and collectivist organizations, conclude that women fare better in these organizations than women working in conventional businesses.

The occurrence of female-focused or women-only CWS could be seen as a response to gender inequalities and sexism at the workplace. Consequently, this study delves into these two distinct CWS models, aiming to assess their potential to simultaneously provide quality work environments and promote gender equality for female users.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Data Collection

The study employs a qualitative research design using two CWS in rural Austria as case studies. Ethnographic fieldwork was carried out in one female-focused CWS and in one CWS functioning as a cooperative. Data collection took place between February 2023 and June 2023. 17 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 4 male and 13 female CWS users, staff, and founders were conducted to explore gender dynamics of and within CWS, focusing on the experiences and perspectives of

Table 1 Sub-Sample Participant Characteristics

| Name      | Age | Sociology                     | Occupation  | Employment Status                | CWS      | Role in CWS                          | Return-migrant |
|-----------|-----|-------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|----------|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| Monica    | 30s | middle class                  | designer  | employee of cooperative          | Life Lab | member of cooperative                | x              |
| Jasmin    | 20s | middle class                  | accounting, project facilitator teaching children technology                  | employee of a cooperative member | Life Lab | project staff                        |                |
| Heidi     | 50s | middle class, farmer's family | adult educator, counselor, project facilitator                                | employee of cooperative          | Life Lab | member and co-founder of cooperative | x              |
| Vivian    | 30s | middle class, farmer's family | marketing expert  | self-employed                    | WBH      | member of CWS                        | x              |
| Katharina | 30s | middle class                  | social media and PR officer   | employee                         | WBH      | former member of CWS                 | x              |
| Magdalena | 60s | middle class                  | retired teacher, media-use and addiction prevention expert, co-founder of NGO | self-employed                    | WBH      | member of CWS                        |                |
| Timna     | 40s | middle class                  | illustrator, graphic designer   | self-employed                    | WBH      | member of CWS                        | x              |
| Selina    | 20s | middle class                  | administration  | employee                         | WBH      | front desk staff of CWS              |                |
| Valerie   | 30s | middle class                  | administration  | employee                         | WBH      | front desk staff of CWS              |                |

Table 2 Analytical Categories

| Analytical Category  | Example in CWS   | WBH   | Life Lab   |
|--|--|---|--|
| organizing the general requirements of work  | working hours, opening times and accessibility   | 24/7 chipcard access for long-term or trusted users, otherwise CWS accessible only during staffed office hours                              | publicly accessible only during events, but drop-ins to use unoccupied workspaces possible                                   |
|  |  | premises wheelchair accessible  | free use of equipment, rooms, amenities within cooperative and citizen lab upon request                                      |
| organizing class hierarchies   | description of job tasks and responsibilities (e.g. community manager role), hierarchical job ranks, supervisory practices | below-average fees for desk and private office rentals, reduced student fees  | flexible working hours   |
|  |  | co-founder Ella is backbone of association behind CWS; Valerie and Selina are office managers of CWS but turn to Ella for important matters | co-founder Michael "runs" cooperative since he gets most work projects in; but flat hierarchy owing to status as cooperative |
| daily informal interactions on the job   | e.g. chats at the coffee machine, lunch breaks   | interactions between members described as collegial   | cooperative members depicted as family   |
|  |  | women-specific topics like menopause and period pain openly discussed   | women-specific topics like female-cycle based work discussed   |
| construction of divisions along the lines of: locations in physical space, of allowed behaviour, of power, and of gender divisions of labour | gender divisions of physical space   | all-female administrative and cleaning staff  | attention paid to gender balance in cooperative  |
|  | gender division of labour  | permanently rented offices women-first, flexible and permanent desks open to all genders  | cleaning tasks equally distributed, meal preparation mainly by women   |
|  | gender division of power   | almost all-female funding team  | male co-founder  |
| symbols and images: language, ideology, or dress are constructed to explain, express, reinforce, oppose divisions                            | dresscode  | dresscode: some users and employees dress in formal business attire and wear high-heels   | dresscode: casual  |
|  | symbols, language, images to explain, express, reinforce, or oppose divisions  | some motivational quotes addressed to women as decoration   | charta outlining values and list of good deeds done by members hung up on wall   |

women. Informal conversations with CWS users provided important information about their motives to work in CWS. Additionally, the author engaged in over 1000 hours of observation with varying degrees of participation while working from a rented desk during the fieldwork period and joining events at each CWS. Finally, the organizational structure as well as the physical workspace design of the CWS were scrutinized to uncover possible mechanisms through which gender (in)equality may be produced, reproduced, or reduced. The narratives presented here stem from a sub-sample of the interviews conducted.

### 3.2 Analytical Approach

After transcribing the recorded interviews collected in German, initial coding based on gendered experiences of CWS was performed. Several excerpts following the topic were selected and translated in English. These excerpts were then analysed to identify key themes. The thematic coding was informed by a framework combining insights from organization studies, particularly Joan Acker's work on "Inequality Regimes" (2006) and her "Theory of Gendered Organizations" (Acker, 2012). Inequality Regimes are "loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations" (Acker, 2006, p. 443). Organizations have a "gendered substructure" which plays out in organizing processes, decision-making, but also in the design of the workplace, and rules for behaviour at work, as well as in the organization culture (Acker, 2012). Acker's departure point was the traditional work organization. As the world of work has transformed considerably since, for this study, these models were adapted to CWS, to research the "gendered practices (customs or routine way of doing things in an organization) and policies (rules or guidelines that structure organizational interactions and operations) that make up an organization" (Sargent et al., 2021, p. 2). These analytical categories based on Acker (2006) and examples thereof in each CWS are described in table 2.

## 4 Case Study Presentation

### 4.1 Life Lab<sup>2</sup> – The CWS Cooperative

Life Lab consists of a network made up of an association of so-called citizen labs (a blend of maker space and community hub), and an employment cooperative. Citizen labs can be set up in any village or city, and anyone can organize workshops and courses of any theme, provided they agree and adhere to a Charta.

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2 All names of CWS and interlocutors are pseudonymized to ensure anonymity.

This case study focuses on a Life Lab location in a town with less than 10 000 residents. In exchange for the municipality providing space in a local public building, covering rent and operational costs, Life Lab engages in projects with social impact on the local community, like educational or cultural projects. Life Lab emerged in the mid-2000s when its founder, at the time involved in a local regional development agency, recognized the need for a structure that empowers citizens to shape their future independently, breaking free from traditional political and economic constraints. The Life Lab employment cooperative draws inspiration from philosopher Frithjof Bergmann's concept of New Work (2019) stating that one should find out what one truly wants to do for a living and reflect on this in every stage of one's life. Cooperative members find their own work projects and funding, e.g. through EU-subsidized projects. Each member has their own so-called cost centre which transparently lists all incomes, expenses, and hours worked. For large-scale projects, members share tasks or employ externals under their cost centre. For instance, a long-running project of the cooperative is the development and presentation of kits that enable children in local schools to playfully discover the world of tech and digitalization. Through its successful cooperation with local businesses which provide materials, and support by the Austrian chamber of commerce, five cooperative members receive a steady income from this project.

#### *Accessibility*

Life Lab promotes an open philosophy, welcoming individuals to explore and share their talents with the community. Access to citizen lab locations is typically available during events, with key access granted to event organizers. The employment cooperative operates under a more selective model, where prospective members must present themselves and their businesses to existing members. Democratically, members decide whether the person fits with the values of the cooperative. Expansion is gradual, given the complex rules governing the cooperative. Members continually engage in many hours of discussion, trying to carefully adhere to everyone's needs.

The Life Lab location under study simultaneously hosts a branch of the citizen labs and serves as the headquarters for the employment cooperative. Cooperative members and employees have 24/7 access to the office area, while for non-members, access is trust-based. There is no conventional desk rental system, but visitors can ask to use unoccupied workspaces.

#### *Users and Staff*

Although Life Lab initiators wish for people from all spheres of society to join citizen labs, this is not always achieved and according to one interlocutor, usually, event organizers and participants share the same social circles. In the citizen labs, the age spectrum ranges from 20 to almost 80 with equal representation of both genders. The employment cooperative exhibits a similar demographic diversity, ranging from

a 20-year-old high school graduate to a 65-year-old soon-to be retiree. One interlocutor recounted how a new male member was not accepted into the cooperative because men would then be the majority, demonstrating the importance attributed to gender balance. The members' professions are diverse: from life coaches to architects, designers, and consultants, they come from different career paths and now work on both individual and common projects.

#### 4.2 Women Business Hub—Room for Female Entrepreneurs

Women Business Hub (hereafter WBH) is located in a small town counting less than 5 000 residents in a thinly populated region of Austria. It can be considered a conventional coworking space with a special focus on women. The founder Ella, who is also a local politician, was informed about an impending labour shortage in the region by 2030. One way to face this challenge was to untap the potential of women who often fulfilled unpaid care work at home or worked part-time. Part of Ella's research involved her personally visiting local female entrepreneurs. She found that many women ran their business from home, often because of child caring duties. As she communicated, the existence of their businesses and kind of services offered were unknown even to the women's neighbours. Subsequently, Ella, along with a team of six, founded an association with the goal to support local female entrepreneurs, providing them not only with a physical room—a professional space to work from—but also room in the sense of visibility, and WBH was born. To facilitate unpaid care work disproportionately carried out by women, WBH collaborates with a local childcaring facility and an elderly care home. However, this collaboration is limited to solely informing CWS tenants about the offer, rather than involving financial benefits for its use. WBH is built on three pillars: events and wellness, mentoring, and coworking. One floor houses an event room for workshops and yoga or birth preparation classes. It also accommodates practice rooms for lease for health and wellness practitioners. One floor higher, the coworking space with a small conference room, a coaching room, private offices and two open plan offices as well as a kitchenette and several hangout areas can be found.

##### *Accessibility*

All floors and rooms are wheelchair accessible with one accessible toilet per floor. WBH has a variety of space- and price offers. A reduced student fee is available for the rental of desks in the open plan office. Rooms and desks can be booked, reserved, and paid online and once purchased, used flexibly within a certain period for hours, months, or a year. Long-term and trusted users have 24/7 chipcard access. For everyone else, WBH is accessible only during staffed hours on weekdays. The rent for a desk in a shared office is slightly below the country-wide average of 250 Euros (Coworking Insights, 2022) Despite being a female-focused CWS, desks

in the open plan offices are rented out to male users too. Female users are given priority for the private offices.

### *Users and Staff*

WBH is founded and managed primarily by women, with a mostly female board of association. Staff members, including front desk personnel and cleaner, are also female. A few male users were present during the research period. The user profile is diverse, with an age range of 25 to 60. Many female users were in a life stage involving a return to work after having children, retraining or advanced training, or becoming self-employed. WBH's mentoring program sought to facilitate these processes. Occupations ranged from psychologist, marketing expert, graphic designer, consultant, to a midwife-turned entrepreneur. Many users renting a flexible desk in the shared office typically dedicated one or two days per week to focused work on specific tasks or projects, combined with work from home or at their company's premises.

## 5 Findings

### 5.1 CWS in Rural Areas: A Hub with an Urban Feel for Return-Migrants and CCI Workers?

In both case studies, many interlocutors had lived in bigger cities or abroad before returning to the rural areas. Usually, this return-migration occurred to the place the person or their partner came from. Life Lab's co-founder argued that for successful CWS in rural areas and for sustainable regional development, young people should be encouraged to leave their village, be inspired by the world, ideally return with ideas and experiences gained, and share them with the local community. Often, these ideas and experiences of young people leaving their region stem from urban environments, such as the desire for cultural spaces and meeting points for locals, like CWS. This is illustrated by the following vignette from Monica, a member of the Life Lab employment cooperative:

*There are so many people who lived in the city before but now have children and come back to the rural area. They bring this idea, they want to keep using, or want these city offers in the countryside. ... It makes them miss the city less. I met many people, especially maybe in the creative sector, that lived in the city.*

A connection can be drawn here to the term habitual urbanity, derived from Bourdieu's *habitus*, which Dirksmeier (2006) uses to describe practices urban dwellers use to cope with risks and opportunities the city offers them. It seems that

back-to-rural migrants are seeking habitual urbanity and that CWS are places where they can find and exercise it.

Another common theme was an increased quality of life by moving back to the countryside. Factors like being close to nature, family, and friends, but also affordable housing and less competition on the local labour market were mentioned frequently. This finding is summed up by Katharina, 30, a former user of WBH:

*I moved back because of family. My boyfriend is from here too and in the long run, we saw ourselves living here. It just worked out well: we travelled for six months, I quit my job, and we gave up our apartment in Vienna, and then we were thinking, ok, let's try to set up our lives here. ... I also moved back because of my friends. Many of my friends were in Vienna and most of them returned at the end of their 20s. ... Affordable housing was a benefit too, of course, because now, we have a much bigger apartment and pay much less.*

Katharina's statement points to another communality these back-to-rural migration accounts share, namely that they usually occur at a particular age and stage of life. Ella from WBH stated that the majority of those returning to their region are between 25 and 35, often in the process of starting a family or when they have young children. Monica describes how, as a single mum, she valued the support of her family and of Life Lab as her workplace, when she returned to her region after having lived abroad:

*I think it's the classic thing when you have children, ..., then you repeat your own childhood a bit, or then you want to have the environment that you had as a child. And I also want our children to grow up in nature. ... It was actually important to me to have family around me, I still have three siblings, they are all older and they each have three children, so there are a lot of cousins who all live in the area, about 20–30 minutes drive away. They actually all settled here. ... Just before the daughter was born, we separated, then he moved out ... right now I need the environment even stronger. Yes, it was more like that, the rural context, and the family nearby, probably. And then that happened with Life Lab as an employer, which was really great, actually.*

Finally, several users of the two CWS worked in the CCIs, many of whom were also return migrants. A growing body of literature on CCI work in rural contexts has developed over the past decade, arguing that a rising number of knowledge workers and creatives are moving outside cities, establishing a "Rural Creative Class" (Herslund, 2012) in reference to Richard Florida's (2002) urban-centric Creative Class theory. Fleeing high urban rents in the hope of finding small rural communi-

ties offering a higher quality of life to settle in, they start their businesses working from their country homes or commuting to nearby larger cities (Herslund, 2012). The present case studies confirmed this thesis, and interlocutors added more factors:

*In the design field, there is of course not that much available in rural areas, you probably have to look for jobs yourself. Although that is more now, I think, so here, especially in [region] there is actually a lot going on. Now I think it's better. ... Now with the Capital of Culture too, you can see that the cultural theme and stuff is important to them. That there are already many people behind it. (Monica)*

Similarly, Vivian, a marketing expert and user of WBH reported she found a job in her field easier than in Austria's capital:

*The competition in Vienna is too hard and here in my region, I have a unique selling point. I also saw that some of my clients appreciated that I come from a farmer's family, they liked my "earthy" background.*

## 5.2 Meeting Rural CWS User's Needs within Two Diverse Organizational Setups

During the interviews and conversations, several workplace needs of female users, and consequently, how they were met within the specific organizational setup, emerged. The findings also illustrate how the organizational environments were experienced with respect to gender.

### *A Sense of Security*

In the Life Lab employment cooperative, members experienced a sense of security primarily through financial safety. As opposed to being freelancers, they earn a monthly salary. In addition, a safety pot protecting members of unforeseen circumstances such as prolonged sick leaves to which every member contributes at the beginning of each year is available. Furthermore, cooperative members benefit from limited personal liability. Finally, Life Lab members found a sense of security through transparency, as everyone has complete insight into project budgets and wages of each member. In WBH, the notion of security was perceived more as a physical and mental safe space. WBH provides a range of spaces for retreat, when necessary, as well as numerous communal areas. Several female interlocutors highlighted the unique atmosphere they encountered when exclusively women were present in a room or during events. They experienced it as a motivating, positive, non-competitive, supportive, and encouraging environment. Indeed, other studies confirm that mutual aid and compassion may arise from social interaction with other coworkers and hosts, thereby easing highly individualized and often precarious work situations

Table 3 Summary of Findings

|          | Sense of Security  | Flexibility  | Wellbeing  | Personal and Professional Development  | Networking   | A Room of One's Own                    |
|----------|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| WBH      | physical and mental safe space   | flexible space offers and pricing  | ergonomic amenities<br><br>course offers for physical exercise, workshops on female health<br><br>practice rooms for health and wellness practitioners | mentoring program for women in various stages of work and different types of employment  | monthly free networking events open also to non-members  | distinct physical space away from home |
| Life Lab | financial safety<br><br>limited personal liability<br><br>transparency | flexible working times,<br><br>high degree of self-organization without risks of self-employment | emphasis on mental wellbeing<br><br>access to external resources, integrated well-being activities   | try out and learn- mentality<br><br>opportunity to give and attend workshops in citizen labs<br><br>educational leave encouraged | free events at open citizen labs to meet local community | professional workspace                 |

(Gerdenitsch et al., 2016; Rådman et al., 2023). Additionally, in WHB, female users appreciated that women-specific topics were not considered taboo in the workplace:

*I simply appreciate the fact that there's incredible collegiality and that we can often genuinely have a good laugh, even about things like, for example ... menopause or about things where I think, if it were mostly men, it might be a bit more challenging. So, it's these women-specific topics that we can actually discuss quite openly, and I value that here. (Magdalena)*

*Women also understand each other on an emotional level. When I say, 'Oh, today: PMS,' I don't even need to explain further, and everyone knows how you feel, and they take care of you. So, you are simply supported here, and that indeed makes it special. That's certainly what sets it apart, yes. (Timna)*

Female members of the cooperative too highlighted the openness of other members towards discussing similar topics like the possibility of adopting a female-cycle-based approach to work.

### *Flexibility*

Flexibility, along with convenience and the separation of work and family life have previously been described as characteristics of CWS that may contribute to satisfying key autonomy needs of their users (Merrell et al., 2022). Both CWS studied accommodate the unpredictable work patterns of freelancers and self-employed individuals by offering flexitime arrangements that balance members' professional and personal needs. Heidi from Life Lab thinks the cooperative may be particularly attractive to women as a workplace because of the high degree of self-organization. The following vignettes of two other female members confirm this:

*I have two little kids, and I'm a single parent raising them on my own. The annual flexitime model is really ... For me, self-employment wouldn't be an option because it would stress me out too much. Especially in my design field, I don't have recurring clients, these are always unique projects. That would be too hectic for me. But by working for projects under Michael's [co-founder and member of Life Lab] cost centre, I already know I can plan the year ahead, I know what I have to do, and I'm still relatively flexible with my time management. That really helps me a lot. (Monica)*

*Last week I was at work, and I noticed I couldn't really concentrate. After half an hour, I went back home because it was just pointless. So, I did some yoga and took a long walk and everything. I think it's super cool that you can just schedule it like that. (Jasmin)*

In WBH, flexibility was seen additionally in the various space offers, different pricing packages, the around-the-clock access, and its accessibility for people with disabilities.

### *Wellbeing*

Both physical and mental wellbeing were prioritized in the two CWS. The physical dimension of wellbeing was more pronounced in WBH. Aside from ergonomic office chairs, natural-light flooded rooms and a pleasing aesthetic, an entire floor is dedicated to health professions such as massage therapists. Moreover, WBH hosts weekly sport classes and workshops around women's wellbeing and health. In Life Lab, besides yoga classes offered in the citizen lab, the emphasis was placed more on mental wellbeing. Members appreciated being asked about their current energy level in meetings, and always felt looked out for. In case of group dynamic issues,

external support resources can be accessed. Furthermore, wellbeing activities are part of the cooperative's yearly planning.

### *Personal and Professional Development*

Both CWS emphasized personal growth and skill enhancement, fostering a culture of continuous learning. The co-founder described Life Lab as a space to *try out and learn*, and members were explicitly encouraged to take educational leave. WBH offers a mentoring program particularly designed for women. Having made use of this opportunity when she aimed to re-enter the workforce after giving birth, Vivian expressed that this initiative motivated her to venture into self-employment and take pride in being an entrepreneur. Bacevice and Spreitzer (2023) also note that access to mentorship, knowledge sharing and networking in CWS may benefit autonomous workers who otherwise might have difficulties accessing these offers.

### *Networking*

While the importance of networking was not particularly stressed at Life Lab, it held significant relevance at WBH. WBH organized monthly networking events on-site and streamed online. They were open to both CWS members and non-members and attracted women from villages across the region. The events were facilitated by either CWS staff or members of the association backing WBH. They typically started with a round of introduction and a short meditation. This was followed by one woman presenting her business or profession. The observation at one such event revealed that collaboration, idea sharing, and establishing professional relationships among participants, even of the same field, was actively encouraged. Above all, however, it contributed to the visibility of already existing female-owned businesses in the region. Similarly, in a study on self-employed women working from CWS, participants described business networks as resulting in better prospects for professional collaboration (Rodríguez-Modroño, 2021).

### *A Room of One's Own*

Interviews with female interlocutors consistently revealed a common theme: appreciating the opportunity to leave the domestic environment and work in a distinct physical setting. Many women admitted to getting distracted by household chores when working from home, a concern not raised by any male interlocutor. This illustrates how women may have, often unconsciously, internalized traditional societal expectations regarding gender roles, underscoring the significance of workspaces outside the home for women. Indeed, Rodríguez-Modroño (2021) showed how women used working from a CWS as a strategy to discard traditional gender roles and a gendered division of labour.

The notion of a "room of one's own" is drawn from Virginia Woolf's (1929) essay arguing that women require a private space and financial independence to foster creativity and effectively pursue their work. Two interview accounts demonstrate

this concept, while also showing that each woman attributed a unique and personal meaning to this alternate physical space: Vivian's decision to work from WBH was influenced by her desire for a more professional working environment. While she has a designated office at home, she found it ill-fitting to receive clients due to the constant need she felt to clean or tend to guests' needs. WBH eliminates this issue, offering her a professional setting, effectively becoming her designated *professional space*. Monica from Life Lab valued the opportunity to interact with colleagues at her workplace:

*It's also just that you meet people, I'm usually alone at home with the children, and then you're looking forward to exchanging with adults or adult topics of conversation.*

Consequently, Life Lab can be seen as her *adult space*.

Scholars have pointed out the benefits of CWS as separate work environments. Merkel (2023, p. 86) considers working from a CWS a possible "form of self-care", primarily due to its role in establishing clear boundaries between work and home, reducing work-family conflicts, and fostering focused work environments (Orel, 2019; Robelski et al., 2019).

## 6 Discussion and Conclusion

This paper prompts a crucial question: Can CWS be considered egalitarian workplaces for women? While there has been a rise in female representation and efforts to create supportive environments, challenges persist. Addressing gender dynamics and designing workspaces that consider both explicit and implicit needs remains vital for realizing the full potential of CWS in non-urban areas as equitable spaces in the evolving world of work. The exploration of how two distinct CWS models cater to the needs of female rural knowledge workers revealed insights into their organizational structures and the provision of crucial elements such as flexibility, a sense of security, wellbeing, personal development, networking, and a distinct workspace environment.

The Life Lab cooperative emerged as a promising alternative to the precarious employment conditions frequently faced by freelancers, offering a balance between flexible time management and a sense of security by receiving a regular income. The cooperative's emphasis on shared responsibilities, commitment to democratic decision-making, transparency, community-oriented leadership, non-hierarchical structure, and autonomous work routines allows members to navigate different life stages with economic stability and contributes to its members' overall wellbeing. The data presented endorses previous literature on the organizational structure of CWS suggesting that this model may enhance gender equality. However, as was

confirmed by interlocutors, cooperatives often face challenges of initiation, operation, and access to necessary resources, including time (Sandoval & Littler, 2019).

Women Business Hub (WBH) showcases a unique approach to addressing the specific needs of women living and working in rural areas. The safe space concept resonates strongly within WBH, offering women a supportive and empowering environment to counteract potential negative experiences from previous workplaces, for example by allowing space for female-specific topics. The emphasis on physical and mental wellbeing is reflected in the extensive services provided, ranging from ergonomic facilities to workshops and personal development opportunities. The distinctive value of WBH lies in its role as a platform elevating women entrepreneurs, providing visibility and recognition they might not receive elsewhere, especially through the networking events, arguably particularly important in rural areas. The findings about female-focused CWS as flexible, professional work environment and vital support systems for women (Akhavan et al., 2022) were confirmed. However, integrating childcare services into CWS remains challenging due to the complexity or absence of regulations governing this aspect. Financial incentives given by the state or employer to use child- and elderly care institutions close to the CWS, are desired. Nonetheless, combining such services with *women-only* spaces is questionable since this could perpetuate the gendered division of care responsibilities.

Regarding the specific elements of gendered organizations scrutinized in the analysis, both CWS scored highly as accessible and egalitarian workplaces. The access barriers were low, as using the desks at Life Lab is free of charge, and WBH offers discounts and below-average fees. Both CWS can be used 24/7 by regulars, however, trust plays a role. The flexible, open plan layout and workspace design, as well as the equipment of both spaces appealed to the users, whereby ergonomic chairs, pleasing aesthetics, natural light, and a comfortable temperature were particularly valued by female users. The premises of WBH are fully wheelchair accessible. Observations revealed that the workplace culture at WBH was slightly more formal than that of Life Lab. The staff and many users, regardless of their gender, dressed in business attire, and the interactions between members were described as collegial. In Life Lab, members of the cooperative depicted each other as family, and the dress code was casual. With respect to the division of labour and hierarchies within the spaces, notably, in both cases, members and users attributed an indispensable role to the founders in terms of the management of the CWS, which observations confirmed. In Life Lab, interlocutors highlighted the absence of gender-specific divisions in office cleaning duties. Nonetheless, observations indicated that female users typically took on the responsibility of meal preparation. In sum, the study revealed that the specific organizational structures of the two CWS contributed to an enhancement but not elimination of the gendered structures of a workplace. While there were no explicit accounts or observations of sexism, unequal treatment or exclusion based on gender, there were differences in how the physical workspace and atmosphere of the CWS was experienced by female and male users. Both cases exemplify the importance

of providing spaces for women that transcend mere physical environments. The possibility to discuss subjects like menopause was attributed to the predominantly female work environment, a level of openness and comfort perhaps not attainable in male-dominated settings. Furthermore, the room of one's own concept, wherein the workspace becomes a much-needed place of separation from home, is prominently evident in the narratives. The CWS function not only as physical work locations but also as catalysts for personal and professional development, enabling networking, support, and skill enhancement. Arguably, given that women, compared to men, spend an unproportionally large amount of their time carrying out unpaid care- and housework in their homes, they have fewer opportunities and less time to leave their homes for a different space. Consequently, and as the presented vignettes show, such alternative spaces for women are crucial.

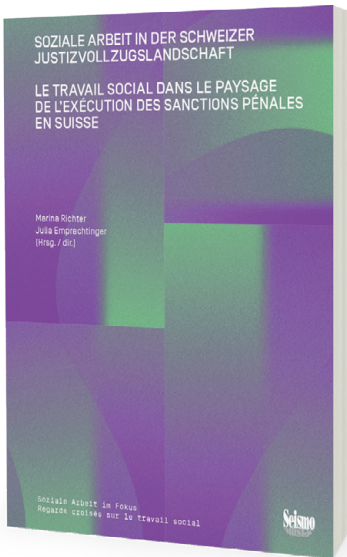
In conclusion, CWS should not be regarded as panacea for workplace inequalities for women in non-urban areas, and much remains to be done, since most gender inequalities are structural ones, such as various gender gaps and traditional societal expectations regarding gender roles. However, the two presented models of CWS can be regarded as examples of egalitarian workplaces and as important alternative space offers. CWS in non-urban areas are still a young, under-researched phenomenon. More in-depth research is required to inform policy makers and CWS operators alike on how to create more inclusive and egalitarian work environments. Importantly, strategies to address gender inequalities at the workplace need to recognize the diverse experiences and situations of women working in these spaces in non-urban settings. With regards to typologies of non-urban CWS and their users, the existence of female-focused CWS and cooperatives, as well as the increasing importance of return-migrants and what they bring to CWS should be considered. Finally, scholarly work on gender inequalities in new workspaces needs to be expanded to research the experiences of *all* genders and how they intersect with other factors of discrimination.

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Marina Richter, Julia Emprechtinger  
(Hrsg./dir.)

## Soziale Arbeit in der Schweizer Justizvollzugslandschaft

### Le travail social dans le paysage de l'exécution des sanctions pénales en Suisse

Reihe  
**Soziale Arbeit  
im Fokus**  
Collection  
**Regards croisés  
sur le travail social**

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Die Soziale Arbeit im Justizvollzug der Schweiz (Bewährungshilfe und Strafvollzug) wurde bis anhin nur für einzelne Kontexte und Institutionen beschrieben. Ein Überblick über die gesamte heterogene Landschaft, wie auch ein Einblick in die geschichtlichen Entwicklungslinien fehlte bislang. Dieses Buch leistet hierzu einen wichtigen Beitrag, indem es bedeutende Meilensteine der inhaltlichen, aber auch der organisationalen Entwicklung beleuchtet und die verschiedenen Organisationsformen und Aufgaben der Profession modellhaft an einzelnen Kantonen aufzeigt. Verschiedene Beiträge aus der Praxis und aus der Forschung geben Einblick in die vielfältige Thematik.

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Jusqu'à présent, le travail social dans l'exécution des sanctions en Suisse (probation et exécution des peines et mesures) n'a été décrit que de manière partielle, se limitant à certains contextes et institutions. Une vue d'ensemble du paysage hétérogène ainsi qu'un aperçu des lignes de développement historiques manquaient à la littérature existante. Cet ouvrage comble cette lacune en mettant en lumière les étapes clés du développement, tant sur le plan du contenu que de l'organisation. Il présente également les différentes formes d'organisation et les missions de la profession en s'appuyant sur des modèles tirés de différents cantons. Des contributions diverses, issues de la pratique et de la recherche, offrent un aperçu de cette thématique variée.

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## New (Sex) Work? Digitalization, Circular Mobility, and Recognition in the Regulation of Sex Work in Switzerland

Lisa Katarina Stalder\*

*Abstract:* With the rise of digital technologies, changing mobility regimes, and the transformation of social and sexual norms, the sex industry has become an employment sector for many. This article looks at the regulation of sex work in eleven Swiss cantons and a city since 1992 from a New Work perspective using Critical Frame Analysis. I argue that the regulation only marginally considered these recent changes. It focussed on traditional forms of sex work associated with migrant women and failed to address material conditions in a diversifying industry.

*Keywords:* Sex work, New Work, digitalization, circular mobility, care

### Nouveau travail (du sexe)? Digitalisation, mobilité circulaire et reconnaissance dans la réglementation du travail du sexe en Suisse

*Résumé:* La digitalisation, l'évolution des régimes de mobilité et des normes sociales et sexuelles ont fait de l'industrie du sexe un secteur d'emploi pour de nombreuses personnes. Cet article étudie la réglementation du travail du sexe dans onze cantons et une ville suisse depuis 1992 dans l'optique du Nouveau Travail. L'analyse critique du cadre montre que la réglementation considérait à peine ces changements, se focalisant sur le travail du sexe traditionnel associé aux migrantes plutôt que sur les conditions matérielles dans un secteur diversifié.

*Mots-clés:* Travail du sexe, nouveau travail, digitalisation, mobilité circulaire, care

### Neue (Sex-)Arbeit? Digitalisierung, zirkuläre Mobilität und Anerkennung in der Regulierung der Sexarbeit in der Schweiz

*Zusammenfassung:* Digitalisierung, sich verändernde Mobilitätsregime und der Wandel sozialer und sexueller Normen haben die Sexindustrie zu einem Beschäftigungssektor für viele gemacht. Dieser Artikel analysiert die Regulierung der Sexarbeit in elf Schweizer Kantonen und einer Stadt seit 1992 aus einer Neue-Arbeit-Perspektive. Anhand einer kritischen Frame-Analyse zeige ich auf, dass neuste Veränderungen kaum Beachtung fanden. Reguliert wurde die mit Migrantinnen assoziierte traditionelle Sexarbeit und weniger die materiellen Bedingungen in einer diversifizierenden Branche.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Sexarbeit, neue Arbeit, Digitalisierung, zirkuläre Mobilität, Care

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## 1 Introduction

The sex industry in Switzerland has undergone profound changes in recent decades due to the development of digital spaces where sexual services are marketized and provided, the liberalization of intra-European mobilities and increasing restrictions imposed on the mobilities of people without EU/EFTA citizenship, and evolving legal and social norms regarding sexuality in general and paid sexual services in particular. These transformations led to an increase in the number of sex workers and businesses in Switzerland, but also to a diversification of the offer, venues (indoor, online), and modalities of sex work (temporary, part-time, independent or salaried employment) (Biberstein & Killias, 2015). While these changes are not unique to Switzerland, its consistently liberal regulation of sex work contrast with the growing tendency to criminalize the selling and/or buying of sexual services in Europe and beyond (Chimienti & Bugnon, 2018; Rubio Grundell, 2022; Wagenaar, 2018). Switzerland largely decriminalized sex work in 1992. Since then, it developed what has been described as a “largely humane form of light-touch regulation” (Wagenaar, 2018, p. 14), primarily at the level of cantons and municipalities. Between 1994 and 2022, ten out of 26 Swiss cantons adopted specific policies on sex work. This article looks at this subnational regulation of a transforming sex industry and ask to what extent the regulation served the workers in this industry.

Despite its legality, sex work in Switzerland remains a socially stigmatized occupation, associated in public discourse with violence and crime – especially in the context of migration (Chimienti & Bugnon, 2018, p. 139). This association has translated into a body of academic literature on sex work in Switzerland that adopts a harm reduction perspective, asking how and under what conditions sex workers experience violence, including human trafficking and forced prostitution, and how they can be protected from it (Biberstein & Killias, 2015; Büschi, 2014; Chimienti, 2009; Chimienti & Lieber, 2018; Le Breton, 2011; Molnar & Aebi, 2023; Molnar & Ros, 2022). I do not intend to dismiss the harm reduction approach, since sex work as a form of migrantized care work has been shown to be prone to exploitative conditions (Agustín, 2003; De Rivière & Schrader, 2021; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003). However, an exclusive focus on the risks neglects important aspects of the transformation of the sex industry into a multifaceted employment sector.

This article looks at the regulation of sex work through the lens of *New Work*, which refers to an ideal of work that serves the worker (Bergmann, 2019). A *New Work* perspective starts from the assumption that sex work can be meaningful work that benefits the worker if the right conditions are in place. It responds to the need to revalorize different forms of care, affective, and reproductive work in the context of the unfolding social and ecological crises emerging under the productivity-centred capitalist model. I draw a connection between sex work and (paid) care work, arguing that the fight against the intersecting inequalities that underpin sex work as well

as other forms of care work should not result in fighting against the work itself, but rather in changing the organization of society.

The article is structured as follows: In section 2, I introduce the concept of New Work and discuss its relevance for sex work in the context of digitalization, circular mobility, and shifting social norms. Section 3 provides an overview of the data and methods used for this article. Section 4 analyses the regulation of sex work in Switzerland through the lens of New Work and in the light of three major developments affecting the sex industry: the rise of digital technologies, intra-European circular mobility, and the recognition of sex work. I conclude and summarize my findings in section 5.

## 2 Theoretical Framework: New Work and the Sex/Care Industry

Sex work encompasses a wide range of practices that involve the satisfaction of sexual human needs in return for payment. Some have placed sex work in the realm of paid care work: It entails emotional work that takes care of diverse needs for affection and intimacy which people consider fundamental to their wellbeing but may not be able to satisfy alone (De Rivière & Schrader, 2021; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003; Siegmann, 2020). Sex work may be considered similar to work in the informal care sector, such as domestic work and privately organized child and elderly care, in that it is typically carried out by women and takes place in intimate and isolated private spaces (Agustín, 2003). This negatively affects the recognition of sex work and care work as “real work” and may be an obstacle to collective organizing among workers (Chau et al., 2018; Schwenken, 2006). Both care work and sex work are devalued and stigmatized, albeit to varying degrees depending on the modalities and social position of the worker (Agustín, 2003; De Rivière & Schrader, 2021).

The question of meaningful work in the sex industry becomes crucial when sex work is understood as a form of paid care work. Against the common perception of commercial sex as an “unavoidable evil” (Euchner & Knill, 2015) that would not exist in an ideal world because it reflects economic and gendered inequalities, it could be argued that in a more equal society, sex work would be economically valued and socially recognized as essential, and a vocational option that anybody may choose. Feminist politics and scholarship have reimagined forms of social and economic organization which would put care work at the centre and create the conditions for this work to be rewarding for whom engages in it. In this context, the concept of New Work, developed by Frithjof Bergmann in the 1980s, provides a useful analytical lens. In a New Work conception of work, both paid and unpaid work are sources of energy for the worker, an enhancing component of people’s life, and perceived as meaningful and fulfilling. Paid work allows the worker to be economically independent while disposing of enough time to engage in meaning-

ful unpaid work, enjoy leisure time, and develop their own projects (Bergmann, 1990; 2019). In relation to sex work, the “new” in New Work may also be read as a reference to new modalities of work that emerged in recent decades. These new modalities offer an opportunity to rethink work in the sex industry.

In the following pages, I introduce three vignettes to show how sex work may fit within a New Work conception of work. The vignettes are excerpts from portraits of three sex workers in Switzerland published in a book (Hürlimann et al., 2020, p. 99–110), a television reportage (Carlin & Kohler, 2021), and a podcast (Héron & Nussbaum, 2019). They provide examples of sex work that is meaningful for the person doing it (vignettes 1 and 3) or a temporary, part-time, and flexible employment that sustains the worker’s meaningful projects outside of sex work (vignette 2). These vignettes also illustrate three fundamental changes that took place in the sex industry over the past decades – digitalization, intra-European circular mobility, and the recognition of sex work – as well as some of the challenges that came with these transformations.

*Vignette 1:* Mrs. Nice, online sexual content creator

*Journalist:* *At one point, you started with the creation of sexual content. What had you been doing before?*

*Mrs. Nice:* *Before, I was a watchmaker. So, something completely different, I would say. And then I considered whether I should take the risk and bet on this [sexual content creation].*

*Journalist:* *You did it.*

*Mrs. Nice:* *Exactly, and it was worth it.*

*Journalist:* *You never regret this decision?*

*Mrs. Nice:* *[No,] I like life much better like this. I have much more time, I am much, much happier.*

(Carlin & Kohler 2021, 06:28–07:05, own translation)

The first vignette refers to the digitalization of sex work. By digitalization I mean the increasing importance of digital technologies, such as the Internet and online platforms, in the marketing of in-person sexual services, recorded performances, or online live interactions (Swords et al. 2023). Emerging digital platform economies mediating between formally independent workers and clients opened up opportunities for flexible and remote work that allow people to balance paid work with other activities, including unpaid child or elderly care. On the downside, labour norms and protections are not extended to these economies (Koutsimpogiorgos et al., 2023; Rand 2018; Swords et al., 2023). Sex workers are vulnerable to the decisions of online platforms such as *OnlyFans* to ban explicit content (Cardoso et al., 2022; Easterbrook-Smith, 2023). This has reinforced precarity and social hierarchies in already precarious industries, such as the sex industry, in which migrants and women are overrepresented (Jones, 2015; Rand, 2018).

*Vignette 2: Emma, escort girl*

*Emma originally studied tourism and works part-time in a hotel in Spain. She does half and half: two weeks in Spain, two weeks in Switzerland. 'When I am at home, everything is about my part-time job, my family, my friends. Then I come to Switzerland, I change my SIM-card, and I am Emma.' If you want to have fun working as an escort, you need two lives, she says. 'Otherwise it destroys you. You need time to disconnect.'* (Hürlimann et al. 2020, 101–2, own translation)

The second vignette illustrates transnational mobility in the sex industry. With the introduction and gradual expansion of intra-European freedom of movement, circular mobility has become a common pattern in Western European care industries (Chau, 2019; Triandafyllidou & Marchetti, 2013), including the sex industry. This has had important repercussions on work arrangements: Sex work in Switzerland has increasingly taken the form of a temporary employment, and jobs in the sex industry are typically shared by several workers throughout the year (Biberstein & Killias, 2015). These circular labour mobility arrangements may bring advantages to workers in terms of improving their economic position (Chimienti, 2009) and being able to spend time on their own projects and family during the months in which they are not working abroad (Schilliger & Medici, 2012). However, labour rights of circularly mobile workers, such as time off, access to unemployment benefits, and other forms of social security, are often limited (Chau et al., 2018).

*Vignette 3: Claire, sexual assistant for persons with disabilities*

*It is true that if you want to make a career out of it [sexual assistance for persons with disabilities], there is nothing more fragile as a profession. It is not regular, you cannot make a living, you are not going to eat with that. But for the moment, I absolutely do not regret that I did it. The assistance has never emptied me of my energy, never. On the contrary, in fact I find that it is a wonderful, I mean, that it really gives me something, it doesn't take from me, it gives me. [...] I will always remember that during the years I have been working as a sexual assistant with all these people, they have felt good, it did them good.* (Héron & Nussbaum 2019, 20:20–21:34, own translation)

The third vignette illustrates a form of work in the sex industry that has been increasingly socially recognized in the past years. This growing recognition may be understood in the context of a liberalization of social and sexual norms and in relation to calls for more inclusion of people with disabilities (De Rivière & Schrader, 2021; Garofalo Geymonat, 2019). However, it has also been pointed out that the recognition of sexual assistance for persons with disabilities builds on a distinction between “good” and “bad” sex work, where the former is presented as an act of

charity towards people who “really need it” (De Rivière & Schrader, 2021, p. 255). This reinforces differences among sex workers based on class and migrant status, recognizing as professionals only those whose motivation is not primarily economic.

As the three vignettes and previous research on digitalization, circular mobility, and recognition in relation to care and sex work suggest, regulation shapes the conditions under which people engage in paid care and sex work. State intervention (including at the subnational level) can promote the structural conditions for meaningful work by protecting workers’ autonomy of choice and strengthening their social position (Osawa, 2022). The former implies that any form of regulation does not infringe on people’s autonomous life choices based on general normative considerations; the second means to secure the material conditions that allow people to make these choices (Osawa, 2022). With the revision of the Swiss Penal Code in 1992, state regulation of sexuality – including sex work – in Switzerland prioritized the protection of individual sexual liberty over the protection of public morals (Brown et al., 2017). This, in theory, constitutes a viable foundation for New Work, because it limits state interference with individual life choices. But in view of the challenges outlined above, it is important to analyse regulation also in terms of its role in securing the material conditions for New Work in the sex industry.

### 3 Data and Methods

This article builds on my doctoral research on the regulation of sex work in Switzerland from 1992 to 2022. The data that I used for this article consists of 109 publicly accessible policy documents collected from all cantons in which a substantial debate on sex work took place during the period under study (Basel-Stadt, Bern, Fribourg, Geneva, Jura, Lucerne, Neuchâtel, Solothurn, Ticino, Valais, Vaud) and the largest Swiss city (Zurich). I included the City of Zurich because its comprehensive law on sex work resembles cantonal regulations and made the adoption of a law by the Canton of Zurich obsolete. Documents were selected so as to include at least one document of the following categories per canton/city: interventions by members of parliament (motion, postulate, interpellation), government reports, parliamentary debates, and laws specifically on sex work. Moreover, documents were selected according to the criteria that they (1) directly contributed to regulation (or the decision not to regulate as in the Canton of Basel-Stadt), and (2) are as substantial as possible and include as many different voices as possible.

I analysed the data using Critical Frame Analysis (CFA) (Roggeband & Verloo, 2007; Verloo, 2005). CFA focusses on how actors define policy problems and propose solutions, considering that how problems are defined in the first place is crucial for understanding potential outcomes (Verloo 2005). Roggeband and Verloo (2007) asked “sensitizing questions” to the material under study as a concrete way

of working with CFA. In this article, I built on their approach focussing on the diagnosis (sensitizing questions: *What is the problem? What is not a problem? Whose problem is it?*) and on the prognosis (sensitizing question: *What needs to be done?*). I asked these sensitizing questions in relation to the three transformations in the sex industry – digitalization, circular mobility, and recognition – that I discussed in the theoretical section. This allowed me to examine the extent to which the creation of conditions that serve workers in the sex industry was at the centre of the debates and which factors enabled or prevented such a focus.

## 4 Analysis: Regulating New (Sex) Work in Switzerland

### 4.1 Digitalization

Digitalization, as a first major development shaping the sex industry since the 1990s, has affected its regulation to a lesser extent than what might be expected in the light of the scope of the impact of digitalization on sex markets (see Donzallaz & Crevoisier, 2022). In the analysed policy texts, the focus was primarily on those services that are provided in person. Emerging forms of sex work enabled through digital technologies, such as the production of porn videos and escort services, were either excluded or addressed through the extension of measures designed for “traditional” forms of sex work, as I am going to show in this section. Digitalization played a role in the regulation of sex work by contributing to raising the salience of the issue in Swiss cantons. With the increasing relocation of the sex industry to massage parlours, Champaign bars, cabarets, private apartments, and online platforms, Swiss cantons feared a loss of control over the sex industry. They shifted their focus away from street-based sex work to these new venues. A member of the Green party and rapporteur of a parliamentary commission in the Canton of Geneva described this shift as follows:

*[...] there has been a displacement of prostitution into spaces that are less identifiable, and therefore less controllable. We spoke very little about street prostitution, which seems to be well under control. The displacement that we have observed can be classified as follows: on the one hand, the cabarets and Champaign bars; on the other hand, the massage parlours. (Grand Conseil du Canton de Genève, 1998, p. 11)*

Digitalization was not diagnosed as the cause of the problem in the quote above. But the quote illustrates a shifting concern from the visible forms of sex work in public space towards those forms of sex work that are hidden from public view. Since the 1990s, an interest grew in the forms of commercial sex taking place in private spaces,

as well as a desire to bring to the light, expose, and regulate sex work taking place in these venues: All cantonal policies adopted since 1992 and the law on sex work of the City of Zurich regulated indoor sex businesses, introducing an obligation for these businesses to register or obtain a licence.

While policy actors defined the relocation of the sex industry as a problem, they simultaneously tried to exempt some of these emerging forms of and venues for commercial sex from regulation. This namely applied to “luxury” escort services provided in hotels and clients’ homes (Conseil d’État du Canton de Neuchâtel 2004, 8), sex work practiced independently by one or two sex workers in a private apartment (Grosser Rat des Kantons Bern, 2012, p. 153), or occasional sex work that students and housewives were thought to engage in to top up their income (Grand Conseil de l’État de Fribourg, 2010, p. 244). These exemptions were justified, as in a report by the cantonal government of Fribourg, by the claim that people engaging in these “unconventional” forms of sex work were not subject to any particular risks.

*People who only occasionally engage in prostitution are not subject to any particular risks, and therefore there is no justification for requiring them to report their activity to the authorities.* (Conseil d’État du Canton de Fribourg, 2008, p. 10)

As the quote suggests, the focus was on the risks of sex work. What is more, regulation was framed as stigmatizing for those whose participation in the sex industry was considered an autonomous choice (Grand Conseil de l’État de Fribourg, 2010, p. 244) and tailored to those who were seen as potential victims of “forced prostitution” and “acts of exploitation” (Conseil d’État du Canton de Fribourg, 2008, p. 3). The latter category was primarily made up, as a member of the cantonal government of Fribourg put it, of “foreign prostitutes in an irregular situation, who are particularly exposed to abuse and violence, which demands the adoption of protection and control measures” (Grand Conseil de l’État de Fribourg, 2010, p. 237).

In the Canton of Neuchâtel, at a time when the Internet favoured the development of a platform economy in the sex industry in the form of escort agencies that acted as intermediaries matching sex workers with clients, escorts and agencies were exempt from regulation (Conseil d’État du Canton de Neuchâtel, 2004, p. 8). Framed as “unproblematic” because working in a “luxury” segment of the sex market, escorts did not match the image of the typical, at-risk migrant sex worker. Only during the revision of the Canton’s sex work policy in 2016 were escort agencies included in the list of sex businesses that needed to obtain a license. The cantonal government argued in 2016 that the escort sector had expanded in recent years and threatened to escape the control of the cantonal police.

*The ads on the Internet show clearly an increase in the offer, especially of escort services. Our current regulation has become outdated and could, in*

*the short or mid run, make us risk a loss of control.* (Grand Conseil du Canton de Neuchâtel, 2016, p. 2)

In 2016, escort agencies were included in the category of a sex business and subjected to the regulations applicable to these businesses, namely the obligation to obtain a license, keep a list of workers, and ensure that the latter were not subjected to any form of pressure compromising their individual sexual liberty (Grand Conseil du Canton de Neuchâtel, 2016). This inclusion meant an extension of the cantonal law's original logic of controlling migrant sex workers, framed as at risk, to the escort sector. It was not accompanied by an evaluation of or debate on the particular opportunities and challenges of work in the escort sector.

Pornography is another part of the sex industry that grew exponentially with the development of digital technologies. Pornography was, however, exclusively discussed and regulated in Swiss cantons in terms of protecting underage consumers, rather than the workers producing and performing in it. The cantonal laws on sex work of Neuchâtel and Jura included a chapter aimed at protecting minors from consuming pornography. The cantons of Lucerne and Solothurn excluded the work of porn actresses and actors from the definition of sex work (Regierungsrat des Kantons Luzern, 2018, p. 5; Regierungsrat des Kantons Solothurn, 2012, p. 44). In a report accompanying a project to introduce an article on sex work in the cantonal labour and economy law, the government of the Canton of Solothurn stated that

*Pornography is [...] not considered sex work. It is characterised by the fact that the sexual act is depicted in a performance in the form of films, texts, audio recordings, or images. This means that pornography involves the consumption of the performance as such, whereas sex work involves the direct consumption of a sexual act.* (Regierungsrat des Kantons Solothurn, 2012, p. 44)

The quote above stresses the importance of physical co-presence of the worker and the client in a given time and space in the definition of sex work. Cantonal laws on sex work narrowly defined sex work as an “act *on the human body* which aims to stimulate or satisfy the sexual instinct of at least one of the participants” (Conseil d'État du Canton du Valais, 2012, p. 3, emphasis added). From the early 2010s, there was a shift in the discourse of members of parliaments, government reports, and laws from the use of the term prostitution to the potentially larger term of sex work. But this did not go in hand with a diversification of the practices considered as sex work. By emphasising the body and the physical co-presence of workers and clients, subnational regulation continued to focus on the forms of sex work associated with and that can be part of a migration project.

Digitalization of the sex industry raised the salience of sex work in Swiss cantons, as it contributed to the relocation of sex work to indoor venues and to anxieties about the effects of pornography on youth. The diversification of the sex

industry and emerging forms of sex work as a result of this digitalization, however, were rarely addressed as an object of regulation. Despite a growing density of policies at the subnational level in Switzerland, the scarce attention paid to services that are provided with the use of digital technologies left large parts of the sex industry unregulated.

#### 4.2 Circular Mobility

Sex workers' circular mobility is not a new phenomenon: Already in the 1980s, erotic dancers employed on temporary visas in Swiss cabarets travelled back and forth between their countries of origin and places in Switzerland, Europe, and elsewhere (Dahinden, 2010, p. 324). With the Agreement on the Free Movement of People between Switzerland and the EU in 2002 and the gradual extension of intra-European freedom of movement to Eastern Europe, circular mobility in the sex industry gained new proportions. It became a dominant form of engaging in sex work in Switzerland (Biberstein & Killias, 2015). Policy debates on sex work in Switzerland increasingly focussed on mobile EU citizens working in the Swiss sex industry on a temporary basis. This temporariness of sex workers' stay was strongly emphasized in the debates.

Temporariness was put forward as an argument to question the legitimacy of the interest of mobile sex workers in comparison to those of Swiss sex workers, established migrant workers, or the general population. In particular starting from the early 2010s, sex workers were problematized as highly mobile, temporary workers. The growing supply of commercial sexual services put pressure on prices. Cantonal authorities struggled to tax circularly mobile, self-employed sex workers staying on a temporary basis and working in a stigmatized economic sector. Policy actors therefore increasingly framed mobile sex workers as unfair or even fraudulent competitors for Swiss (sex) workers.

*How can you make a mountain farmer or a manual worker in the city understand that he has to pay taxes when at the same time a sex worker from Romania, who registers with the foreigners' police in the City of Bern and states – and this is no exception! – that she earns an average of 10'000 to 12'000 francs a month, does not have to pay taxes on any of it? Where is the justice in that, where is the compensation for Swiss sex workers? (Grosser Rat des Kantons Bern, 2012, p. 138)*

Swiss sex workers, who had previously been dismissed as unproblematic in the regulation of sex work, became the group that cantonal policies claimed to protect. In contrast, mobile EU citizens working in the Swiss sex industry were ambiguously

portrayed as both calculating subjects and passive objects. On the one hand, they were accused of misusing freedom of movement; on the other hand, they were framed as potential victims who, unlike Swiss women (and men), were unable to choose sex work independently. Policymakers expressed this ambiguity in particular in relation to women from the “new” EU member states in the East of Europe:

*The fact that in the course of the liberalization of the labour market a relatively large number of sex workers from EU-10 countries [mostly Eastern European member states who joined the EU in 2004] enter Switzerland and only pretend to be self-employed (so-called bogus self-employment) has proven to be a problem. Experience shows that there are often people behind the sex workers who, to varying degrees, determine where or how they work.* (Regierungsrat des Kantons Bern, 2010, p. 997)

The EU enlargement process did not automatically extend equal mobility rights (to which Swiss citizens, too, have access since 2002) to citizens of the “new” EU member states. It delayed access to these rights, creating a regime of differential inclusion between “old” and “new” EU member states, and between fully European and *not yet* fully European citizens (Andrijasevic, 2009, p. 400). In policy debates in Switzerland, EU sex workers continued to be framed more often as victims or involved in illegal practices than as mobile workers and agentic subjects engaging in a legal economic activity. The temporality of European integration, but also of circular mobility fed into this differential treatment of transnationally mobile sex workers. Due to their temporary stay, policymakers questioned the need to guarantee full labour rights to mobile EU citizens whose formal right to move to Switzerland to engage in sex work was, nonetheless, acknowledged. As the government of the Canton of Bern noted in its policy report in 2011, “it should also not be overlooked that many sex workers from the EU region only work in Switzerland for a few weeks, which puts the social security aspect into perspective” (Regierungsrat des Kantons Bern, 2011, p. 137).

The discursively reinforced temporariness of circularly mobile sex workers had implications for the importance given in policy debates to their labour rights and social security. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit in 2020, EU citizens working in the Swiss sex industry on a 90-days short-term permit did not have access to any form of compensation for the loss of their income, while also workers with a more stable (C or B) permit often abstained from claiming benefits because of the risk of having their permit degraded, the administrative hurdles, the stigma, or the difficulty of proving their pre-pandemic income as independent service providers (Brüesch et al., 2021, p. 29; ProCoRe, 2021). Subnational sex work regulations in Switzerland had not secured the material conditions that would have enabled circularly mobile sex

workers to choose to stop sex work during the pandemic. Many sex workers had to continue working illegally and under precarious conditions to meet their financial needs (Brüesch et al., 2021).

The surge of circular mobility in the sex industry was a reason to deny certain categories of sex workers access to labour rights and social security, rather than a reason for cantonal and municipal policymakers to adjust regulation to the realities of circularly mobile sex workers. These workers were, as Chau, Pelzelmayer, and Schwiter (2018) and Palumbo, Corrado, and Triandafyllidou (2022) argued for care and other circularly mobile workers, discursively placed in their countries of origin, rather than recognized as residents of the city where they live for periods of time. Sex workers' temporariness served as an argument for policymakers who, based on moral or financial considerations, sought to prioritize certain interests in the city at the expense of sex workers.

*It is incomprehensible why the absolutely internationally operating, highly mobile, and very profitable prostitution industry should be protected more than the local population.* (Gemeinderat der Stadt Zürich, 2012, p. 2)

*[The excesses of street prostitution] affect the quality of life of residents, are harmful to business people (hoteliers, shops, etc.), and give tourists an image of Zurich that is unworthy of this city.* (CVP Fraktion des Gemeinderats der Stadt Zürich, 2012)

Although *de facto* residents of the city, sex workers were not included in the notion of “the local population” (*ansässige Bevölkerung*) in the first quote by a member of the liberal right-wing party during a debate in the municipal parliament of Zurich. Nor were sex workers included in the category of “business people” (*Gewerbebetreibende*) in the position paper by the Christian-Democratic party. The latter even put the interests of (by definition) highly mobile tourists before those of sex workers. Despite recognizing circular mobility as a common modality of engaging in sex work, policymakers discursively constructed this mobility as an anomaly, rather than taking it as a basis for regulating the sex industry in line with the reality of the majority of its workers.

### 4.3 Recognition

Since 1992, Swiss cantons and municipalities have adopted what may be described as liberal approaches to regulating sex work (Chimienti & Bugnon, 2018; Wageenaar, 2018), seeking to strike a balance between public interests and the rights of sex workers. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the approaches were based more on the consideration that criminalization would push the sex industry underground and

out of the reach of control authorities than on the conviction that sex work was to be recognized as a profession. Policymakers, on the Left especially, shared the ideological underpinnings of the (neo)abolitionist model of client criminalization that Sweden adopted in 1999 – which, in short, equates prostitution to violence against women – but were hesitant about its practical implications. As the speaker of the Socialist party argued in the cantonal parliament of Neuchâtel in 2005,

*While we can understand that a country like Sweden, which cannot be accused of being backward, has chosen the abolitionist system, [...] this system would have the effect of driving prostitution underground and would therefore not solve any of our concerns, such as prevention, information, etc.*  
(Grand Conseil du Canton de Neuchâtel, 2005, p. 100)

By the early 2010s, the dominant framing started to change from sex work as a social evil that had to be controlled and contained, and workers helped to exit, towards sex work as a legitimate occupation. In the majority German-speaking cantons of Bern, Lucerne, and Solothurn and in the City of Zurich that adopted laws on sex work starting from 2012, the recognition of sex work as work entered the mainstream of the debate. Sex workers were framed as professionals capable of making their own choices, and regulation as – in the words of a member of the right-wing Liberal party in the cantonal parliament of Bern – a way “[...] to put the change in values into practice, free prostitution from its shadow existence, and accept it as a trade.” (Grosser Rat des Kantons Bern, 2012, p. 140).

This change also took place in the French-speaking cantons of Geneva, Jura, Neuchâtel, and Vaud that revised their respective laws on sex work starting from the mid-2010s. Only a minority of members of parliaments, representing mainly religious parties, continued to contest this recognition.

The recognition of sex work in Switzerland as a legal and legitimate occupation did not go so far as to officialize it as a profession. An initiative by a Green party member of parliament in the Canton of Bern in 2006 which called for sex work to be given the status of an officially recognized profession was rejected on the grounds, among others, that vocational training as a sex worker would harm the sexual integrity of the trainee (Regierungsrat des Kantons Bern, 2006). Only one category of sexual service providers has come somewhat close to being recognized as professionals taking on a socially valuable task: sexual assistants for people with disabilities. Today in Switzerland, private associations offer professional training for sexual assistants with entry requirements, a selective admission process, and a certificate (Siffert & Aregger 2023). At a political level, however, sexual assistance has not been regulated. Debates in the cantons of Bern, Geneva, Neuchâtel, and Vaud were limited to the question of whether or not to exclude sexual assistants from the scope of the law on sex work.

*[...] Switzerland, like a number of Nordic countries, is a leader in the field of sexual assistance for disabled people. Under the [sex work] law as proposed, these sexual assistants would have been considered as engaging in prostitution and subject to the same rules. But we felt that this activity deserved not regulation as such, [...] but special recognition, in the form of exclusion from the scope of this law. (Grand Conseil du Canton de Genève, 2009, p. 9)*

The Canton of Geneva ultimately excluded sexual assistants for people with disabilities from the target group of its 2009 law on sex work, based on arguments that the former were not exposed to the same risks other sex workers were facing and that their professional activity served a socially useful purpose. The liberal right-wing member of the cantonal parliament of Geneva in the quote above framed the exclusion of sexual assistants from the scope of the cantonal law as a form of recognition in itself, drawing a clear line between sexual assistants and other sex workers, and between “deserving” and “undeserving” sex work. This way of recognizing sexual assistants in the Canton of Geneva was limited to a symbolic form of recognition. Similar to much of the unpaid or low-paid care work that is primarily done by women, it was valued in terms of a personal sacrifice rather than work, and the material working conditions were not addressed by regulation. Moreover, the recognition of certain forms of sex work happened against a constructed “other”: Sexual assistants were recognized as what they were *not*, namely “at risk” migrant sex workers engaging in sex work to earn an income. As the activities and venues for commercial sex associated with Swiss citizens and specialized assistants were excluded from regulation because considered unproblematic, the regulation of sex work was mainly for these “others”.

The shift that took place from an approach that sought to minimize harmful impact of regulation on sex workers in the 1990s and 2000s to an approach that attempted to destigmatize (parts of) the sex industry from the 2010s shaped the terminology of subnational debates and regulations. In 2019, the Canton of Lucerne introduced an article on sex work in an existing cantonal law. The article referred to sex work (*Sexarbeit*) and not prostitution.

*[In this draft law,] the term ‘sex work’ is used. This places the aspect of paid work at the centre, i. e. the offering and provision of sexual services in exchange for payment. (Regierungsrat des Kantons Luzern, 2018, p. 5)*

Four years earlier, in 2015, the cantonal parliament of Lucerne had rejected a comprehensive draft law on sex work that would have introduced a counselling and health prevention centre for sex workers run by the canton. Members of parliament rejected the draft law based on financial arguments, but also on the claim that supporting sex workers was a task for private associations and not the responsibility of the canton (Kantonsrat des Kantons Luzern, 2015, p. 1310). In the article adopted

in 2019, only a licensing system for sex businesses and police competences to control businesses were retained from the original draft law. However, the article used the term sex work, symbolically recognizing sex work as legitimate work and emphasizing the canton's liberal position on commercial sexual services.

Yet, the lack of social recognition and economic disadvantage are intertwined (Fraser, 2020). State intervention for meaningful work not only requires that the state recognizes people as autonomous subjects, but also that it creates the material conditions for people to be able to choose (Osawa, 2022). A liberal approach to sex work that recognizes certain forms of sex work at a symbolic level but fails to address material inequalities only in part creates the conditions for New Work in the sex industry. It reserves recognition and meaningful sex work for those who have the financial and other means to rely solely on themselves, which is at odds with the prevailing precarity in the Swiss sex industry.

## 5 Conclusion

This article used a New Work perspective to examine to what extent the regulation of sex work in Switzerland, in the context of recent transformations of the sex industry, has served those doing this work. It can be argued that Switzerland, by largely decriminalizing sex work in 1992, moved into the direction of protecting sex workers' rights, but only partly succeeded in creating the conditions for New Work – for work that serves the worker – in the sex industry. Over recent decades, digitalization, circular mobility in the context of intra-European freedom of movement, and the recognition of sex work as work created new, flexible, and potentially meaningful opportunities for many. The regulation of sex work at the subnational level considered these transformations of the sex industry, the opportunities, and also the challenges that arise only to a limited extent. The juxtaposition of the interests of Swiss and migrant sex workers in the regulation processes meant that forms of sex work that were framed as unproblematic because associated with Swiss sex workers (occasional sex work, sexual assistants) or because they did not seem directly connected to a migration process (sex work on digital platforms) were largely left unregulated. Circularly mobile sex workers were framed as unfair competitors, and their interests were omitted. And recognition amounted to exempting certain categories of workers from laws that were intended for those engaging in “traditional” forms of sex work. Hence, the regulation of sex work in Switzerland fell short of strengthening workers' socioeconomic position to make autonomous choices – including whether to engage in sex work at all, and if so, under what conditions – through access to labour rights, social security, and measures to combat stigma. This matters because valuing and recognizing sex work, like other forms of care work, as important and potentially meaningful work, and improving the conditions for all people who do

this work, could contribute to a reorganization of society and an economic model that puts life back at the centre.

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## Wohnen und Nachbarschaft im Alter

Reihe Age Report

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Der Age Report ist das Standardwerk zum Thema Wohnen und Altern in der Schweiz, das einen Überblick über aktuelle und zukünftige Fragen zu diesem Thema bietet.

Der fünfte Age Report legt den Schwerpunkt auf die Frage, wie die Nachbarschaft das Leben älterer Menschen beeinflussen kann und wie ältere Menschen dieses Wohnumfeld wahrnehmen und mitgestalten. Welche Rolle spielt die Nachbarschaft in Bezug auf die verschiedenen Lebensräume, Wohnformen und Lebensstile der Bewohnerinnen und Bewohner? Diese und viele weitere Fragen werden anhand von Daten, die im Jahr 2023 im Rahmen der Age-Report-Umfrage bei 2644 älteren Menschen in der gesamten Schweiz erhoben wurden, im ersten Teil des Buches analysiert. Im zweiten Teil wird dies durch multidisziplinäre Beiträge vertieft. Mit seinen detaillierten Analysen und den zahlreichen Grafiken ([www.age-report.ch](http://www.age-report.ch)) bildet das Buch eine wertvolle Grundlage für die fachliche und politische Diskussion zum Thema Wohnen und Altern. Der Age Report wird von der Age-Stiftung in Zusammenarbeit mit den beiden Alterssoziologen Valérie Hugentobler (HETSL | HES-SO) und Alexander Seifert (FHNW) konzipiert und von dieser Stiftung in Partnerschaft mit der Fondation Leenaards finanziert.

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## Promoting Registration for Domestic Workers in Post-pandemic Argentina. A Review of *Registradas*, 2021–2023

Romina Cutuli \*, Inés Pérez \*, and Débora Garazi \*

*Abstract:* This article evaluates the scope and limitations of efforts to include domestic workers in the social security and protection system in Argentina, focusing on the policies targeting the sector since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly *Registradas*, a program that subsidizes the employment of domestic workers by middle-income employers. It shows that, while the politics implemented have improved social security coverage and labor conditions somewhat, three out of four workers continue to lack social protection, albeit to different degrees.

*Keywords:* Paid domestic work, subsidies, social security, labor conditions

### Promouvoir l'enregistrement des travailleur-euse-s domestiques dans l'Argentine post-pandémique. Une analyse des *Registradas*, 2021-2023

*Résumé:* Cet article évalue la portée et les limites des efforts visant à inclure les travailleur-euse-s domestiques dans le système de sécurité et de protection sociales en Argentine, en se concentrant sur les politiques ciblant le secteur depuis le début de la pandémie de COVID-19. En particulier la contribution porte sur *Registradas*, un programme qui subventionne l'emploi de travailleur-euse-s domestiques par des employeur-euse-s à revenus moyens. L'étude montre que, si les politiques mises en œuvre ont quelque peu amélioré la couverture de la sécurité sociale et les conditions de travail, trois travailleurs sur quatre continuent de ne pas bénéficier d'une protection sociale, bien qu'à des degrés divers.

*Mots-clés:* Travail domestique rémunéré, subventions, sécurité sociale, conditions de travail

### Förderung der Registrierung von Hausangestellten im postpandemischen Argentinien: eine Analyse der *Registradas*, 2021–2023

*Zusammenfassung:* Dieser Artikel bewertet den Umfang und die Grenzen der Bemühungen, Hausangestellte in das Sozialversicherungs- und Schutzsystem in Argentinien einzubeziehen, und konzentriert sich dabei auf die Maßnahmen, die seit Beginn der COVID-19-Pandemie auf diesen Sektor abzielen, insbesondere *Registradas*, ein Programm, das die Beschäftigung von Hausangestellten subventioniert. Hausangestellte durch Arbeitgeber mit mittlerem Einkommen. Es zeigt sich, dass die umgesetzten Maßnahmen zwar die Sozialversicherungsabdeckung und die Arbeitsbedingungen etwas verbessert haben, drei von vier Arbeitnehmern jedoch weiterhin keinen Sozialschutz haben, wenn auch in unterschiedlichem Ausmaß.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Arbeitslohn, Subventionen, Sozialversicherung, Arbeitsbedingungen

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## 1 Introduction

As in other Latin American countries, Argentina has promoted a series of policies to improve the working conditions of domestic workers over the last two decades. Among them, the enactment of a new legal regime for the sector in 2013, which significantly expanded the labor rights of domestic workers, stands out. However, these efforts were limited by the high rates of informality. The registration of labor relations constitutes a persistent challenge in economies with high levels of informality, including Argentina. In this country, unregistered work represents around a third of the working population. However, informality rates rise to three quarters among domestic workers (*trabajadoras de casas particulares*).<sup>1</sup> This is highly significant because of the number of women employed in this sector: in 2022, over 1 500 000 women were employed as domestic workers (INDEC, 2022)<sup>2</sup>, around 18% of the female labor force (EPH, 2023).<sup>3</sup>

This article reviews the policies implemented over the last two decades to promote domestic workers' registration, focusing on *Registradas*. This program was created in 2021 to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in this sector. *Registradas* sought to promote both employment creation in the sector and its registration. To do so, it provided state financing for up to 50% of the wages of domestic workers for six months in new, formal employment relationships. In return, employers had to commit to continuing the working relationship for at least four months after the subsidy ended. The program, which was discontinued in December 2023, was focused on middle-income employers. Those with higher incomes have already received a tax deduction to subsidize the cost of registering domestic workers since 2005.

Labor registration is one of the pillars that guarantees access to other labor rights. Thus, its promotion has been a key point in the policies towards paid domestic work. Perhaps because it was the tip of the iceberg of a continuum of precariousness faced by domestic workers, or because it was the aspect of the labor relationship in which the state had the best opportunities to intervene, different actors—from

1 “Trabajo en casas particulares” is the term adopted in Argentina both by the majority trade unions in the sector and in the legislation that regulates it to identify domestic and care work carried out in exchange for remuneration in family homes. Throughout the article, we use “paid domestic work” because it is the term most frequently used in English.

2 The 2022 National Census surveyed individuals in households across the country. The frequency of national censuses is approximately ten years. It is a comprehensive description of the whole population, although with limited depth. The main source for the study of the labor market dynamics is the Permanent Household Survey (EPH, for its Spanish acronym). The EPH is a quarterly survey, carried out from a sample of 31 urban agglomerates of more than 100 000 inhabitants distributed in all the provinces of the country. The data in this article take the second quarter of each year as a reference, except for those that mention data for the year 2024, for which the second quarter is not yet available. The choice of the second quarter is linked to the seasonality of economic activity, which over time shows the most stable behavior in this period and is therefore more suitable for year-on-year comparisons.

3 71% of the domestic workers in Argentina mainly perform domestic tasks—cleaning, cooking, washing, etc.—; the main activity for 26% of them is caring; and the remaining 3% perform other activities (EPH, 2023).

trade unions to international organizations and various state agencies—converged around the need to register labor relations not as a floor but as a ceiling for the recognition of rights. In this sense, the focus on registration implied neglecting other key elements in the improvement of working conditions in the sector, such as the intensity of working hours and wage levels.

Different studies have linked the persistence of informality to different elements, such as the presence of migrants; the nature of the tasks performed which involve a strong level of physical or emotional proximity between the worker and the employers; the development of policies centered on an androcentric model of labor unsuitable to the dynamics of paid domestic work; the difficulty for state agents to supervise domestic workers' workplace, both because of its atomization and because of its private nature (Blackett, 2020; Casanova, 2019; Guarnizo & Rodríguez, 2017; Pla-Julian, 2014; for Argentina, Cutuli, 2021; Esquivel & Pereyra, 2017; Gorbán & Tizziani, 2018; Pereyra & Poblete, 2024; Poblete, 2022;). Research has addressed both the strategies deployed by workers to demand registration and the effects of the introduction of new actors in domestic labor relations, such as agencies, digital platforms, and cooperatives, although in all cases they have shown ambivalent results (Andrade Matias & Araujo, 2020; Fragale Filho & dos Santos Lima, 2024; Komposch et al., 2021; Mousaid et al., 2017; Posso Quiceno et al., 2024; Raz-Yurovich & Marx, 2018; Safuta & Camargo, 2019; Triandafylidou & Marchetti, 2016; Tsikata, 2011; for Argentina, Baiocchi, 2019, Freytes Frey et al., 2019; Hopp & Kasparian, 2021; Poblete et al., 2024).

As shown in other cases (Tomei, 2011), one of the most effective strategies to increase registration levels has been to subsidize employers through tax exemptions. In Argentina, since 2005, employers have had the possibility of deducting domestic workers' wages and contributions from income tax payments. This policy focused on higher-income employers, and though it contributed to reducing the informality rates considerably, it has seemed to have stagnated at around 25% of the employment relationships in the sector. In 2021, *Registradas* took up this strategy, but extended it to middle-income employers, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This article asks about the impact of *Registradas* and shows that, although it favored the creation of registered jobs, it was less effective than existing subsidies for high-income employers. Throughout the article, we argue that it faced three limitations: firstly, an imprecise characterization of the universe of employers potentially eligible as beneficiaries; secondly, its transience; and finally, its inability to guarantee social security<sup>4</sup> to workers employed for less than 16 hours per week, which represent a majority in the sector of paid domestic work.

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4 Employer contributions to the social security system allow workers to access health care, through health insurance provided by unions; pensions, unemployment insurance, and maternity leave, among other protections; and occupational risk insurance, which covers health and salary expenses in the event of occupational accidents or illnesses, in the event of sick leave. To have access to the protections, workers need contributions equivalent to a labor relation of a minimum of 16 weekly working hours. For those with shorter working hours, they only access occupational risk insurance.

After this introduction, the article is organized in three sections. First, we outline a brief reconstruction of the history of the regulations of paid domestic work in Argentina. Next, we situate the creation of *Registradas* within the framework of the labor policies implemented during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, we analyze the scope and limitations of this program in promoting employment creation and registration in the sector. The article is based on the analysis of two sets of data sources: key informant interviews and public statistics. The corpus of interviews allows us to identify the divergences and confluences in the construction of the consensus necessary for the design of public policies.<sup>5</sup> We recovered the perspective of national civil servants, trade union representatives, and non-governmental organizations involved in the configuration of policies towards the sector. Through our second group of sources, public statistics, we present evidence of the difficulties in characterizing the current dynamics in the sector, reproduced in the design of *Registradas*. The EPH provides information that enables us to describe the evolution of paid domestic work, regarding the registration rate, the sociodemographic characteristics of the workers, the number of working hours, and the main activity performed. It is the only source of information that allows a statistical approach to the sector, including unregistered work. The evolution of registered labor is observed through the public statistics of the Superintendence of Labor Risks (SRT for its Spanish acronym), that make it possible to identify the status of compliance with employers' contributions to the social security system.<sup>6</sup> Information on the incidence of the income tax deduction and *Registradas* on labor registration in the sector is not part of the public statistical corpus. To elaborate the analysis presented in this article, we requested information from the Federal Administration of Public Revenues (AFIP for its Spanish acronym) and to the Secretariat of Labor, Employment and Social Security.<sup>7</sup> We also used statistical reports published by different state agencies.

5 We conducted a total of 14 interviews between July and September 2022. We decided to quote only those that were particularly relevant to the arguments we developed through the article.

6 The SRT is the agency that supervises the labor risk insurance system, mandatory since 1995 and regulated by Law 24.557. In its statistical section there is an abundant corpus of data that enables an approach to some characteristics of the formal labor market, though it does not provide information on the informal sector. Registered paid domestic work relations have been covered by the occupational risk insurance system since 2014. All statistics from this source cited in this article have been extracted from: <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/srt/estadisticas>.

7 AFIP is an autarchic entity that regulates the administration of the tax, customs, and social security resources system. It provided us information on the deduction of contributions and salaries made by employers of domestic workers. The Secretariat of Labor, Employment and Welfare—with the rank of ministry until December 2023—oversaw the implementation of *Registradas*. It provided us information on the program (number of benefits requested, approved, and active month by month during the term of the program, tasks performed by the workers hired under the program, working hours and salaries).

## 2 Domestic Work in Argentina over the Last Two Decades

During the 20th century, domestic workers were excluded and segregated from labor law (Pérez et al., 2018). In the first half of the century, labor rights recognized to all workers systematically omitted them. Decree-Law 326, sanctioned in 1956, opened the doors of labor law to the sector, with marked differences with respect to the legal status of workers situated in a local version of the “wage-earner’s statute” (Castel, 2003). This legislation was designed to regulate labor relations of at least 16 hours per week, at a time when full-time work and the “live-in” modality—colloquially called “*cama adentro*”—were still common in the sector. By the last decades of the twentieth century, the regulations proved incapable of regulating a significant number of labor relations within the sector. Due to changes in both supply and demand in this labor market, hourly work was becoming more frequent and was no longer protected by law. It should be noted, however, that during this half-century unregistered work was the constant condition for almost all domestic workers.

The domestic labor market has changed considerably since the late 20th century in terms of the composition of both supply and demand, and also in terms of the laws that regulate it. Demand has been transformed by the growing participation of middle- and high-income women in the labor market. With women pursuing longer careers and in a context in which the social organization of care is still family-oriented and feminized, hiring paid staff was a way to decompress the “stalled revolution” (Hochschild, 1989; Wainerman, 2005). Supply has also shifted. In Argentina, households became increasingly impoverished during the debt crisis of the 1980s and the austerity policies of the 1990s, coupled with the deterioration of working conditions and the purchasing power of wages. These factors conspired to push large numbers of women into the labor market under precarious conditions, a tendency that continued in the two first decades of the 21st century. The work most readily available to them was performing the same tasks they had historically done within their homes but for a (low) wage.

In 2013, following the approval of International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 189, Argentina enacted Law 26.844, which expanded the rights of domestic workers in two ways: by covering more workers and recognizing more rights. While the previous legislation only covered those who worked for at least four hours a day, four days a week for the same employer, the applicability of the new legislation is not limited by a minimum number of days or hours worked. It also extended the rights enshrined in the Labor Contract Law for all private sector workers to include domestic workers for the first time. These include maternity and paternity leave, occupational risk insurance, and leaves of absence following the death of a spouse or to sit academic exams. Other rights that were previously limited, such as leave and severance pay, were brought in line with the Labor Con-

tract Law.<sup>8</sup> A fundamental right that was recognized was the inclusion of domestic workers in the protection provided by the Occupational Risks Act. Another major legal advance that resulted from the law was the creation of the National Commission of Work in Private Homes (*Comisión Nacional de Trabajo para el Personal de Casas Particulares*, CNTCP), made up of representatives from worker and employer organizations and the state. The CNTCP began to operate in 2015, and its functions include establishing a minimum wage for the sector, thus empowering unions (Pereyra, 2017; Pérez et al., 2018).

However, in practice, these rights have only become a reality for a limited number of workers due to the high levels of informal employment in the sector. In 2018, access to labor rights among informally employed domestic workers was extremely limited: only 18.8% received the one-month bonus that workers in Argentina are legally entitled to receive, only 9.4% had social security, 13.9% had paid leave, and 16.4% had paid sick days (MTEySS, 2020). In this scenario, different social actors agreed on the lack of registration as the main problem to be addressed to improve the working conditions of domestic workers. Elva López Mourelo, the ILO representative in Argentina, pointed out that informal workers' rights tend to be "flexible" because of the "discretionality [that drifts from] maintaining the relationship unregistered". In her view, the "compliance with a series of formalities" involved in domestic workers' registration entails the payment of contributions, vacations, Christmas bonuses, holidays, etc.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, members of the Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security (MTEySS, for its Spanish acronym) indicated that "the increase in registration levels will improve labor conditions and collective bargaining".<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, representatives of the Argentinean Union of Housewives (SACRA, for its Spanish acronym)<sup>11</sup>, who represent the employers in the CNTCP, pointed out that registration boosts "labor rights [and tend to ameliorate] hiring conditions".<sup>12</sup>

In this sense, most of the policies aimed at the sector have focused on registration. Since 2005, labor registration has been promoted through tax benefits for employers: social security contributions and wages were made tax-deductible for high-income employers up to the annual equivalent of the bottom threshold for income tax.<sup>13</sup> Although tax deduction succeeded in expanding the share of domestic workers in formal employment, it reached its highest pre-COVID level in 2016, when

8 Law 26.844 also governs the working hours of live-out domestic workers, which are limited to 8 hours per day and 48 hours per week. The situation is different for live-in staff, whose working day remains the same as in Decree-Law 326/56 – 12 hours per day. However, their weekly time off was increased from 24 to 35 hours.

9 Interview with Elva López Mourelo, performed by the authors, August 25, 2022.

10 Interview with Mariana Álvarez y Julieta Solano Varela, conducted by the authors, August 19, 2022.

11 SACRA is an organization that brings together housewives. Although it presents itself ambiguously as a union, it represents employers in the negotiation of domestic workers' salary levels at the National Commission of Domestic Work.

12 Interview with Mariana Núñez, Guadalupe Ramírez Cellerino, Amalia Miranda, María Stella, Colombo, Pimpi conducted by the authors, September 10, 2022.

13 Income tax is tax on both salaried and self-employed workers' wages, and the minimum threshold is updated periodically.

27% of the domestic workers were formally employed. Formal employment was also promoted through monitoring mechanisms, such as inspections in gated communities and notifications requiring high-income households that were not paying employer contributions to do so, on the assumption that they were hiring workers on a cash basis. Although these measures have garnered significant media coverage, their impact on formal employment rates has been limited. As pointed out by Lucía Cirmi Obón—who served as Undersecretary for Equality Policies in Argentina’s first Ministry of Women, Genders and Diversity during the administration of Alberto Fernández, where she headed the committee of *Registradas*—, before the pandemic, “there was already a stagnation in formalization” in paid domestic work, which was identified as a problem that the State should work on.<sup>14</sup>

### 3 Policies Toward the Sector during and after the Covid Pandemic

Paid domestic work is the economic sector that was hit hardest by the pandemic and has been the slowest to recover. An estimated 1.4 million people were employed in the sector in 2018, 99.3% of whom were women (MTEySS, 2020). It has been estimated that more than 430 000 jobs were lost in the sector between 2020 and 2021. In 2022, employment levels were 9.3% below where they had been before the pandemic began. Consequently, domestic employment went from being the number one occupation for women in the labor market in 2019 to ranking third, behind retail and teaching, in 2021 (DNEIG, 2021). Before Covid, domestic workers represented almost a fifth of Argentina’s economically active female population, and it had the most feminized workforce. It is essential to consider these workers’ role in the social organization of care, as they play a double role as paid care workers—without whom the employment of many women in other sectors of the economy would not be feasible—and as carers in their own homes, where they have more limited resources for delegating care than their employers.

However, until 2021, there was no specific policy addressing employment in the paid domestic work sector. At the end of March 2020, the Argentinean government created two policies: the Work and Production Support Program (*Programa de Asistencia al Trabajo y la Producción*, ATP) and the Emergency Family Income (*Ingreso Familiar de Emergencia*, IFE). The ATP consisted of several measures, the most important of which was the Compensatory Wage Allowance (ACS, for its Spanish acronym) for all formal workers employed in economic sectors affected by the pandemic, with the exception of formally employed domestic workers. In contrast, the IFE was an unconditional income transfer for all individuals with no formal income suffering from economic precarity due to the pandemic, which included unregistered domestic workers.

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14 Interview with Lucía Cirmi Obón conducted by the authors, August 22, 2022.

Initially, formally employed domestic workers were both excluded from ATP and IFE. However, thanks to pressure from domestic workers unions, formally employed domestic workers were shortly after included under the IFE, being the only formal employed workers who could receive it. However, the IFE provided 75% of the minimum wage, while the ACS was equivalent to 125%–200% of the minimum wage per worker. As a result, in April 2020, both the SACRA and the Union of Workers in Private Households (*Unión Personal Auxiliar de Casas Particulares*, UPACP) requested that paid domestic work be covered by the ATP.<sup>15</sup> The request to enter the ATP program only applied to formally employed domestic workers and would have covered 50% of wages, thus halving the amount that employers needed to pay, but it was not approved. They repeated this demand in June 2020 but did not obtain a favorable response.

However, the National Directorate of Economy, Equality and Gender under the Ministry of Economy took UPACP and SACRA's demand and drove the creation of a special scheme for the domestic workers.<sup>16</sup> In the words of the then Director of this agency, Mercedes D'Alessandro, there was also "a social demand for something [some kind of state aid] so that those who hired [a domestic worker] could continue paying [her salary]".<sup>17</sup> This demand was expressed in different spaces, such as the National Commission of Work in Private Homes, as well as in the media, in which what several voices demanded "assistance to pay the [woman] who takes care of my mother, or the one who takes care of my children, or the woman who works at home, whom I have to keep paying even if she doesn't come [to work]".<sup>18</sup> After several months of meetings and an intense discussion between different state agencies that were reluctant to launch a specific program for this sector, in September 2021, the Ministry of Women, Gender, and Diversity and the Ministry of Labor, Employment, and Social Security created *Registradas*.

15 UPACP is the largest union of domestic workers in Argentina, and the main representative of the workers' voice in the National Commission of Domestic Work.

16 The National Directorate of Economy, Equality and Gender was created in December 2019, with the assumption of the current government. In the same line, this administration created the Inter Ministerial Roundtable on Care Policies, in which the aforementioned Directorate mobilized the implementation of policies related to paid and unpaid care in collaboration with the Ministry of Labor and Social Security and the Ministry of Gender, Women and Diversity. Among the actions carried out in this line, the first National Time Use Survey (ENUT, 2021) stands out. There were previous experiences of EUT, but with less geographical scope and representativeness. It also promoted the regulation of Article 179 of the Labor Contract Law on care spaces or economic compensation for workers with children up to three years of age in their care (Decree 144/22), and the elaboration of a Child-Rearing Basket, promoting its application in the parental obligations of food quotas. All these policies contributed to the diagnosis, recognition, and reparation of rights related to care. *Registradas* is among these policies.

17 Interview with Mercedes D'Alessandro conducted by the authors, September 20, 2022.

18 Interview with Mercedes D'Alessandro conducted by the authors, September 20, 2022.

This initiative was particularly important both because it promotes job creation and formal employment and because it provides economic support to help middle-income households find ways to cover their domestic work and care needs. Only employers with a gross monthly income below the minimum income tax threshold may register. Initially planned to mimic the ATP for six months, the program was subsequently extended. As Mercedes D'Alessandro pointed out, “*Registradas* [was designed] for a scenario in which the pandemic triggered the [economic] crisis, and today the sector is still in crisis and needs to be strengthened”.<sup>19</sup> However, the program was terminated in December 2023, with the change in the national government.

#### 4 Labor Registration Incentive Policies

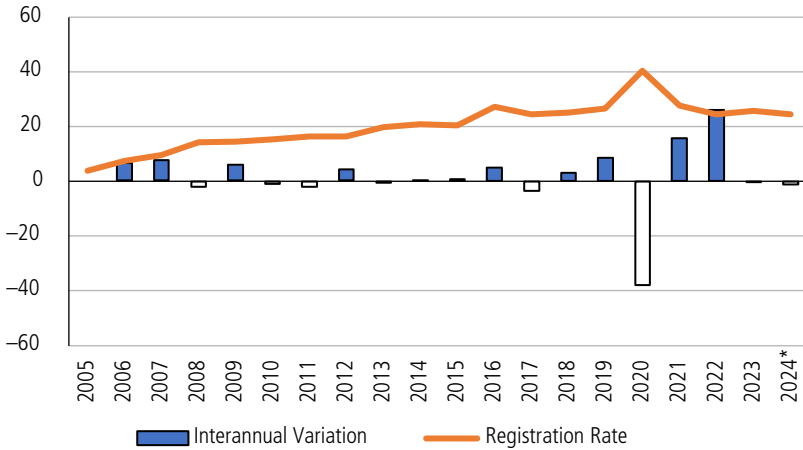
As pointed out in the previous sections, labor registration became the focus of policies towards paid domestic work. Prior to the pandemic, the stimulus with the greatest impact on domestic work registration was the deduction of income tax. Only higher-income employers were subject to this tax, which, with variations linked to the updates of taxable amounts, varied between 9% and 29% of the people with declared earnings. Thus, it was considered necessary to create some kind of incentive that could include employers who were exempted from it. The pandemic added to the problem of job loss, as evidenced by the sharp year-on-year drop in 2020. The higher percentage of registration observed in that year is due to the protective effect that labor registration had on labor stability and has been visible in the labor market as a whole (Actis Di Pasquale et al., 2022). In this context, *Registradas* targeted the registered employment creation in the sector by focusing on middle-income employers, encouraging the labor registration of new hires through a time-limited subsidy.

One difficulty faced by policies aimed at employers is the scarcity of systematized information on them. In public discourse, they are recurrently identified as *workers* who employ *domestic help*. For SACRA representatives, for example, it was important that the State created incentives for domestic work registration for middle-income employers who were “also workers themselves”.<sup>20</sup> Diagnoses of the limitations encountered by registration incentive policies have presumed that the 75% of employers who did not register their labor relations would probably have lower incomes than those covered by income tax and, therefore, could not benefit from registration incentives. However, this presumption contrasts with available information. In 2018, only 13% of the total number of households in the country employed domestic workers, for which this expenditure represented only 6% of

19 Interview with Mercedes D'Alessandro conducted by the authors, September 20, 2022.

20 Interview with Mariana Núñez, Guadalupe Ramírez Cellerino, Amalia Miranda, María Stella, Colombo, Pimpi; conducted by the authors, September 10, 2022.

Figure 1 Interannual Variation of Total Paid Domestic Work Labor Relations (Registered and Unregistered) and Labor Interannual Registration Rate



Source: EPH, Second trimester of each year.

\*For 2024, we used data from the first trimester, which is the latest available.

Table 1 Conditionalities of Income-Tax Deduction and *Registradas*

|  | Income-tax deduction   | <i>Registradas</i>   |
|--|--|--|
| Direct beneficiaries                                     | Higher-income employers  | Employers with earnings below the minimum taxable income   |
| In force   | 2005–present   | 2021–2023  |
| Benefit period   | Undetermined   | Up to eight months   |
| Type of labor relations covered                          | All  | Only new hirings   |
| Salaries and contribution amounts covered by the benefit | Variable, proportional to the employers’ tax burden, it can reach between 30% and 50% of the salaries and contributions, for the duration of the employment relationship | Up to 50% of salaries and contributions, proportional to the employers’ income and workers’ salaries, until the end of the benefit |

Sources: AFIP and Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security (2023).

total household income. Moreover, 60% of domestic workers' employers were in the top three income deciles (ENGHo, 2022).<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, *Registradas* still had a relevant margin of action for the 40% of employers who were in the lower income deciles. In the two years it was in force, it accumulated more than 176 000 subsidized contracts. Through this period, there was a negative variation in the evolution of registered jobs, with a slight increase in the labor registration rate between 2022 and 2023, that returned to the 2022 levels with the end of the program (see Figure 1). The subsidized contracts accumulated during its term represent 11% of the sector's total number of job relations (INDEC, 2022), and 28% of the registered jobs (SRT, 2024). The average number of subsidized contracts was between 1.5% and 2% of the sector as a whole during the program's term. In this regard, the effect of *Registradas* on the total number of registered labor relations did not reach the scale of the income tax deduction which is around 54% of active registered labor relations. However, this is in part due to its cancellation. The income tax deduction had a cumulative effect, visible in longer terms: the registration rate doubled in four years since its implementation and quadrupled in ten (see Figure 1). In the case of *Registradas*, it is impossible to know how the continuity of the program could have affected labor registration levels. During the period in which *Registradas* was in force, both programs had had a complementary effect: together, they covered more than 80% of registered labor relations (AFIP-Public Information Request, 2024).

The duration of the benefit granted by *Registradas* shows a weakness compared to the income-tax deduction. As mentioned in Table 1, the tax deduction is available for any employment relationship and for as long as it remains active. The benefit provided by *Registradas*, on the other hand, could be requested only once and for the registration of a new employment relationship. In other words, even if employers complied with the conditionalities, they could not access the subsidy if they already had an active registered employment relationship. The main protection for the continuity of the employment relationship was given by the obligation to continue the contract for at least nine months, while the benefit was maintained for six, with an exceptional maximum of eight months. These limitations made *Registradas* regressive compared to the income-tax deduction, because the economic benefit was smaller for lower-income employers. Even so, the program managed to scale its impact in a relatively short period of time. These data allow us to infer that there could have been a positive cumulative effect, if sustained over time.

During the period in which *Registradas* was in force, there was also a trend towards a reduction in the number of contributions owed by employers. It should

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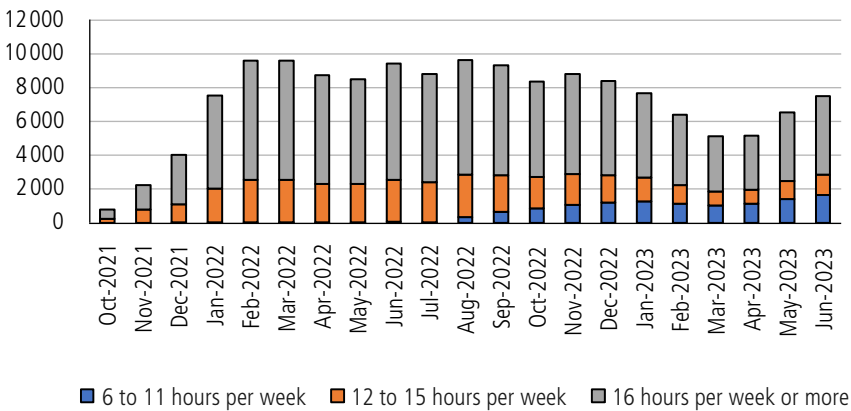
21 The National Household Expenditure Survey (ENGHo for its Spanish acronym) is a one-off operation, the last of which was carried out between 2017 and 2018. It comprehensively surveys household expenditures throughout the country, in localities with more than 2000 inhabitants (INDEC, 2024). The aforementioned information was processed through a public information request to the agency and is not available in public databases.

be noted that only the workers whose contributions are up to date are fully protected by the regulations, including occupational risk and health insurance. In this respect, *Registradas* was also effective, since to access the subsidy, it was necessary to demonstrate compliance with salaries and contributions. As a result, the non-compliance rate among program subsidized contracts was 4.7% as of November 2023 (Secretariat of Labor, Employment and Social Welfare-Public Information Request, 2024), while for all registered labor relations it amounted to 15.5% (SRT, 2024).

However, despite the employers' compliance with contribution payments, the social security system has significant limitations for the coverage of domestic workers with contracts of less than 16 hours per week. The sector has progressively shifted from full-time to hourly contracts since the second half of the 20th century, in a trend that has intensified in the last decade: in 2014, 17% of the work relationships were of 15 hours per week or less, by 2022, this proportion had risen to 40% and to 45% by 2023. Full access to the protections derived from social security contributions is only achieved with the contributions corresponding to contracts of 16 or more hours per week (AFIP, 2024). In the case of shorter hours, to reach full coverage, the employer should voluntarily make up the difference or, failing that, the worker should do so. In this regard, the system discourages the labor registration of low-hour contracts.

Moreover, the proportion of social security contributions, the amount of which is fixed, is higher in relation to the salaries of those who are hired for shorter hours. From the perspective of both employers and workers, making contributions that will

Figure 2 *Registradas*: Subsidized Contracts per Month and Weekly Working Hours



Source: Secretariat of Labor, Employment and Social Security – Request for Public Information – *Registradas* (2024).

not guarantee access to social security protections makes little sense. This translates into divergent levels of labor registration depending on the weekly working time. In 2023, the labor registration gap between workers with contracts of 15 hours per week or less and those with more than 15 hours per week reached 20 percentage points: in the first group, registration rate was 15%, while in the second group it reached 35% (EPH, 2023).

*Registradas* sought to address this divergence. Initially, it subsidized only contracts of 12 hours per week or more, but after a few months, this conditionality was reduced to 6 hours per week, with the intention of broadening the scope of the program to include the most unprotected workers. As can be seen in Figure 2, the number of contracts from 6 to 11 weekly working hours that were subsidized by *Registradas* increased in the second half of 2022, while those from 12 to 15 weekly working hours remained stable. Likewise, the number of contracts of less than 16 hours per week subsidized by the program went from 27% in early 2022 to 38% by the end of the year. However, as we have noted before, *Registradas* did not guarantee full access to social security benefits to those workers. As of November 2023, 22% of the contracts subsidized by the program gave access only to occupational risk insurance and 16% had incomplete contributions to health insurance and pension contributions.

## 5 Final Remarks

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of paid domestic work, especially affected by job loss, which was even more marked in unregistered labor relations. The increase in registration had already reached a limit in previous years, but the pandemic showed the need to design new specific policies for the sector. *Registradas* arose from this need, with the intention of favoring the recovery of the sector and, at the same time, promoting labor registration. Its implementation fulfilled a double reparatory function: on the one hand, it compensated for the exclusion of paid domestic work from the main support policy for the private sector during the pandemic, the ATP; on the other hand, it remedied the regressive nature of the tax incentive for higher-income employers to register paid domestic work relations.

Throughout the article, we identify three groups of conditioning factors for understanding the limitations of registration incentives created by *Registradas*. The first one is related to the characterization of employers. The aim of *Registradas* was to broaden the base of employers reached by the economic incentives to register paid domestic work relations, based on a diffuse diagnosis of this group. Public statistics describe domestic workers in greater depth than employers, and informality prevents them from being tracked through social security registration systems. Based on the available information, we observed that most employers have high levels of income.

*Registradas* extended the incentives to middle-income employers, plausibly a less numerous group than the one already reached by tax deduction. Its results support such an assumption, since the total contracts subsidized by *Registradas* are equivalent to slightly more than half of the employers that requested the deduction of wages and contributions of domestic workers from income tax in 2022.

The positive effects of the program on labor registration were, moreover, truncated by its interruption in December 2023. The total number of contracts subsidized by *Registradas* represented 28% of the registered jobs and 33% of the jobs with updated contributions at that time. The two registration incentives in force accounted for more than 80% of registered jobs. This, however, was not enough to raise the level of labor registration, which stagnated at around a quarter of the sector's total. In any case, it should not be overlooked that during the period in which *Registradas* was in force, there was a similar trend to the one observed at the beginning of the income tax deduction in 2005 in terms of the increase in the registration rate. However, it is not possible to know whether this trend could have been sustained.

Thirdly, we have shown how the characteristics of the social security system also limited the incidence of *Registradas* in increasing the registration rate. The system only guarantees full coverage for workers whose contributions are equivalent to an employment contract of 16 or more hours per week. This disincentivizes the regularization for both employers and workers in such labor relations, which have significantly grown in the last decade. The former see the contributions as a high proportion of wages and the latter are discouraged from demanding registration, since it does not give them access to social security protections. Noticing the prevalence of this type of contract, *Registradas* extended its scope to contracts starting at 6 hours per week. However, it did not remedy the exclusions of the social security system for workers who had working weekly hours of less than 16 hours.

More generally, the main tension of the programs that promote registration through incentives to employers is that, despite the profile of the employers addressed, they sustain fiscal regressivity. Both *Registradas* and the income tax deduction subsidize domestic and care services to the higher-income segments of the population, operating as a regressive care policy. These incentives have had favorable effects, but the economic cost they subsidize have low relevance for employers' households. According to the latest available data, domestic workers' salaries and contributions barely represented 6% of employers' household expenses.

The lack of effective penalties for non-compliance with regulations contributes to maintaining the low levels of registration. Since December 2023 this scenario has worsened. The new government presided by Javier Milei implemented flexibilization measures for the private sector as a whole, which have also had an impact on paid domestic work. The regulations in force until 2023 established penalties for non-compliance with labor registrations: employers in default were fined and included in a public registry. Since December 2023, such penalties have been eliminated, in addition to a public discourse in favor of decreasing the relevance of the State

in its role of controlling the labor market. This resulted in a decline in both the total number of jobs in paid domestic work and the registration rate in the sector during 2024. In addition, there was an increase in the rate of non-compliance with contributions, which affected almost 20% of registered domestic work contracts in the first half of the year.

As a lesson learned for future policies, it is important to note the relevance of in-depth diagnoses, including knowledge about the employer households and the characteristics of the contracts. If sustained over time, *Registradas* could have promoted labor registration directly and indirectly with similar effects to the income-tax deduction. Perhaps the new ceiling would have been 50% of labor registration, which would coincide with the percentage of labor relations that equals or exceeds 16 hours per week. However, it is essential to design a sustainable and effective security system for those workers with shorter working hours. Likewise, it is to restore the State's role in controlling labor relations. As long as employers perceive no risk in non-compliance with their responsibilities, informality will continue to predominate.

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Le Age Report est un ouvrage de référence sur l'habitat et le vieillissement en Suisse, qui offre un aperçu des questions actuelles et futures sur cette thématique.

Ce cinquième Age Report met l'accent sur la manière dont le voisinage peut influencer la vie des personnes âgées et comment, à leur tour, les personnes âgées contribuent à façonner cet environnement résidentiel. Quel rôle joue le voisinage, en fonction des différents territoires de vie, des formes d'habitat et des styles de vie des habitants et des habitantes ? Ces questions sont analysées dans la première partie de l'ouvrage, à partir des données tirées de l'enquête menée en 2023 auprès de 2 644 personnes âgées dans l'ensemble de la Suisse. Les contributions de la seconde partie proposent des approfondissements pluridisciplinaires. Grâce à ses analyses détaillées et à ses nombreux graphiques ([www.age-report.ch](http://www.age-report.ch)), cet ouvrage constitue une base précieuse pour le débat professionnel et politique sur le thème de l'habitat et du vieillissement. Le Age Report est conçu par la Fondation Age-Stiftung en collaboration avec deux sociologues spécialistes des questions de vieillissement – Valérie Hugentobler (HETSL | HES-SO) et Alexander Seifert (FHNW) –, et financé par cette même fondation, en partenariat avec la Fondation Leenaards.

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## Risky Business: Techno-Masculinist Conceptions of Flexibility in India's Platform Economy

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*Abstract:* Location-based digital platforms promise flexibility, autonomy, and supplemental income, but neo-liberal hustle culture shifts risks onto workers, exposing women to heightened sexist and sexual violence. By promoting freedom and entrepreneurship, these platforms perpetuate techno-masculinist notions of flexibility, ignoring women's needs. Through narrative analysis of 10 female platform workers in India's ridesharing and food delivery sectors, this study reveals how masculine ideas of flexibility and risk exacerbate the precarity of already precarious work.

*Keywords:* Digital labour platforms, gig economy, gender, techno-masculinity, flexibility

### Risky Business : les conceptions techno-masculinistes de la flexibilité et du risque dans l'économie de plateforme en Inde

*Résumé:* Les plateformes numériques basées sur la localisation promettent flexibilité, autonomie et revenus complémentaires, mais la culture néolibérale d'hyperproductivité transfère les risques aux travailleur-es, exposant les femmes à des violences sexistes et sexuelles accrues. En promouvant la liberté et l'esprit d'entreprise, ces plateformes véhiculent des notions technomascuines de flexibilité, ignorant les besoins des travailleuses. À travers l'analyse narrative de 10 travailleuses de plateformes dans les secteurs du covoiturage et de la livraison de nourriture en Inde, cette étude montre comment les conceptions masculines de flexibilité et de risque aggravent la précarité de ce type de travail.

*Mots-clés:* Plateformes numériques de travail, gig economy, genre, techno-masculinité, flexibilité

### Riskantes Geschäft: Techno-maskulinistische Vorstellungen von Flexibilität und Risiko in Indiens Plattformökonomie

*Zusammenfassung:* Standortbezogene digitale Plattformen versprechen Flexibilität, Autonomie und Zusatzeinkommen, während die neoliberale Erwerbskultur Risiken auf Arbeitnehmer abwälzt und Frauen einem höheren Risiko sexistischer Gewalt aussetzt. Mit der Förderung von Freiheit und Unternehmertum verbreiten sie techno-maskulinistische Vorstellungen von Flexibilität und ignorieren die Bedürfnisse von Frauen. Diese Studie analysiert die Erfahrungen von 10 Frauen in Indiens Ridesharing- und Lieferdiensten, um zu zeigen, wie diese männlichen Vorstellungen von Flexibilität und Risiko ihre prekäre Arbeitssituation weiter verschärfen.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Digitale Arbeitsplattformen, Gig Economy, Gender, Techno-Männlichkeit, Flexibilität

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## 1 Introduction

Increased flexibilisation and the proliferation of digital labour platforms such as Uber in the ride-hailing sector and Delivroo in the food delivery sector have transformed the world of work, reorganising workers' lives in every aspect, including where, when, and how they work. The effects of these platforms on the transformation of work now concern a large population of workers around the world – as much as 4.4 to 12.5 per cent of the global workforce is in the platform economy (Datta et al., 2023). The EU alone had 28.3 million digital platform workers in 2022 with this number expected to reach 43 million by 2025 (European Commission, 2021).

In India especially, the platform economy is booming. Studies estimate 3.03 million (Fairwork, 2020) to 7.7 million gig workers (NITI Aayog, 2022) in the country<sup>1</sup>, with projections to reach 23.5 million by 2030. Between 2010 and 2018, transport aggregators Ola and Uber alone are reported to have unlocked 2.2 million livelihood opportunities in the country (Pradhan, 2019).

Working conditions of those providing services on these platforms are widely considered to be precarious, characterised by irregular working hours, task-based pay, digitally mediated work, reduced collective representation, the legal classification of “self-employed” in most countries, and limited access to social protection (Stanford, 2017; ILO, 2021a). This is the case for both location-based or “geographically sticky” platforms (Graham & Woodcock, 2018) that allocate work to individuals in a specific geographical area using the internet, and micro-working or web-based platforms where work is outsourced via an open call to a geographically dispersed population. Although we are primarily interested in location-based digital labour platforms, over the course of this study, Taskmo, a hybrid platform<sup>2</sup>, was also studied.

## 2 Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

The on-demand platform economy is characterised by a recurring discourse of freedom, flexibility, and entrepreneurship, spearheaded by platforms like Uber (Griffith, 2015). These ideas – particularly the former two – have been unpacked with relation to job insecurity, dependence (Lehdonvirta, 2018), and precarity (Anwar & Graham, 2020), often showing that they come at the price of low pay, irregular hours, and

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1 These figures vary considerably due to the methodology used to characterise this type of work. While the Fairwork India 2020 report based its estimates on the 11 most popular platforms in India, the NITI Aayog methodology involved identifying the immediate characteristics of platform workers (supply side) and then estimating the number of workers with these characteristics within the sectors and occupations that require on-demand work (demand side).

2 Hybrid platforms have been mentioned in other studies of the Indian platform economy (Ghosh et al., 2022) but they are not all necessarily platforms that pay per task. In this study, however, all the digital platforms studied pay per task.

exhaustion and are heavily shaped by algorithmic control and information asymmetries (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016) inherent to the functioning of these platforms.

Gendered perspectives that break down the implications of this discourse for women are woefully lacking, particularly from the Global South (Hunt et al., 2019), despite indications of a strong gender dimension.

Platform work has been posited by multiple studies as offering flexibility that helps women reconcile their care responsibilities with paid work (Hall & Krueger, 2018; Manyika et al., 2016; Harris & Krueger, 2015) because they assume that women seamlessly fit gig work into workdays which constitute paid and unpaid work and that they choose this work for its flexibility, which is not necessarily the case (Balakrishnan et al., 2016). Beyond the question of choice, the way that women engage with these platforms is largely informed by their care responsibilities. Tubaro et al. (2022), for instance, have examined women's patterns of micro-work, a type of work with inherently "flexible" working hours, showing that women logged in more frequently, and for shorter durations, because their leisure time was more fragmented. This does not just indicate how women organise their time – it has concrete impacts on how much they earn on these platforms (Adams-Prassl & Berg, 2017).

This leads us to our first research question: How is flexibility experienced by women in the location-based platform economy? Is this flexibility compatible with what they need?

Platforms want their workers to exhibit "risk-taking entrepreneurship", telling workers that what they truly desire is to be flexible and work on their own time to combine multiple gigs to make additional income as a side hustle. These discourses are deeply embedded in the "language of neoliberalism" (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Holborow, 2015), which "encourages people to see themselves as individualised and active subjects responsible for enhancing their own well-being" (Zwick, 2018). In this way, platform work exemplifies neoliberal changes in employment relations, where the emphasis on individual freedom shifts risk onto labour (Anwar & Graham, 2020). The transfer of risk is an integral function of platforms that mask it behind shiny ideas of freedom and flexibility, leading us to our second research question: How does this transfer of risk impact Indian women platform workers? What kind of risks does this translate to in their work environment?

### *Techno-Masculinity in the Platform Economy*

While techno-masculinity today appears largely in reference to male bastions of technology such as software engineering, geek culture, video game design, or military surveillance (Bell, 2013; Latini, 2023; Masters, 2005; Poster, 2013), the idea contained within, that men design and control technology, and by extension, women, is not a new one.

The relationships between masculinity and technology have been studied in sociology since the 1980s (Edgell et al., 2015), especially from a labour sociology perspective. Feminist technology research like Cynthia Cockburn's *Machinery of*

*Dominance* (1985) has shown how technology reproduces gender relations under capitalism. It is now widely accepted that technology is not neutral and that the “gender question” must be posed at every turn. It is primarily men who make the key decisions that shape technologies (Balakrishnan et al., 2016), and thus, the ideas beheld by these technologies are never neutral from a gender perspective.

When it comes to the platform economy, gender-blindness has been put forward by researchers (Barzilay & Ben-David, 2017; Micha et al., 2022), but the heart of the question, i. e. the ideologies causing these, has not been fully investigated. The absence of women in AI has been recognised in the use of workforce management systems or algorithmic governance (Digital Future Society, 2022; Westhoff, 2023), but this explains only an instrumentalisation of technology for the continued domination of women, rather than structural issues of techno-masculinity.

We purport that the platform economy is inseparable from the neo-liberalist hustle culture that it has flourished in. It is not simply male domination of the technologies involved in platform mediation that causes this gender-blindness, but a certain idea of masculinity constructed by neo-liberalist discourses in the West which are defined in terms of success, freedom, and entrepreneurship, and propagated by digital platforms. For this reason, we use techno-masculinity as a frame of reference instead of simply viewing this technology as being dominated by men.

This is reinforced by the fact that the masculinity in the “techno-masculinity” is directly in contrast with various experiences of racialised male workers in Western countries (Bernard, 2023) and in the Global South (Dinh & Tienari, 2021) who do not conform to these ideals and are in contrast, exploited and put in precarious situations by this type of work, impressing upon us the need to look at masculinities in plural, rather than using a universalist, one-dimensional understanding of male domination.

Finally, we situate this techno-masculinity vehicled by platforms in the cultural context of India, where it interacts with patriarchal and caste norms that dictate women’s work.

The Western view of legal classification being among the principal causes of the exploitation of platform workers is not a universal experience, especially in India, where informal work is widespread. Around 80 per cent of the working population is in the informal sector (Basole, 2018). Informal work is extremely heterogeneous and comprises a wide range of employment relationships, often based on underlying social divisions of caste, community, gender, ethnicity, and religion. Women’s presence in this type of work is disproportionate: up to 91 per cent are in the informal sector (Mishra & Iyer, 2021). The type of work that Indian women can engage in is highly restricted by intersections of caste, class, respectability (Radhakrishnan, 2009), and domestic responsibilities. This leads us to our final research question: How do Indian women experience techno-masculinist flexibility in conjunction with their care responsibilities? How do they negotiate the risk and precarity that come with a gig in the platform economy?

Our study thus aims to fill an important gap in literature around platform work – that of articulating these ideas, where they come from, how they are vehicled, and how they impact Indian women workers, who are at the intersection of precarity and rooted gender roles.

### 3 Methodology

This study is situated in sociological approaches to understanding women's experiences in India's digital platform economy, particularly in ridesharing. Traditional forms of occupational segregation seem to be reproduced in India's platform economy, relegating women to domestic work, beauty, and well-being services while men dominate in the growing sectors of taxi services and food delivery (Fairwork, 2023a; Ghosh et al., 2022). A report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that in 12 countries, only nine per cent of delivery riders and five per cent of ride-hailing drivers are women (ILO, 2023). As a result, studies on gendered experiences of the platform economy in India have mostly focused on the sectors of beauty services and domestic work (Bansal & Arora, 2023; Dhar & Thuppilikkat, 2022; Ghosh et al., 2022; Komarraju et al., 2022; Hiriyur, 2022), and by extension gender and caste intersections of care work. We try to thus reframe women's participation in this type of work by focusing on differing notions of flexibility in the most masculinised sectors of the platform economy.

10 semi-directive telephonic interviews of 20 to 30 minutes were conducted with women who previously or presently worked for a location-based platform in India in New Delhi and Bangalore, the two cities in India with the highest concentration of platform workers (Bansal & S.H., 2019).

Our sample consisted of two workers of the hybrid platform Taskmo mentioned earlier, one former Ola autorickshaw driver<sup>3</sup>, one former food delivery worker, and six Uber drivers, as seen in Table 1 on the next page.

We chose Uber as the primary platform of study and included in our sample platform workers from other traditionally masculine sectors (food delivery, autorickshaws). The hybrid platform Taskmo was examined because it has been vocal in the past about the increase in women "taskers" during the pandemic (Sengupta, 2022). However, the interview process was heavily regulated from start to finish, reflecting the tendency of platforms to limit or control access to their workers to protect their image, a challenge that has already been identified in this type of research (Digital Future Society, 2021). The two interviews were scheduled without transparency in participant selection and the confidentiality of the interviews was not respected.

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3 Digital labour platforms in the ride-hailing sector Ola, Uber, and Rapido have onboarded auto rickshaws as part of their transport services. In 2016 alone, Ola had over 100 000 auto rickshaws registered on its platform across 24 Indian cities.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

| Participant | Profession                      | Age | Marital status | No. of children |
|-------------|---------------------------------|-----|----------------|-----------------|
| Vaishali    | Worker on Taskmo                | 22  | Single         | None            |
| Misha       | Worker on Taskmo                | 24  | Single         | None            |
| Yamini      | Former Ola auto-rickshaw driver | 43  | Divorced       | 3               |
| Sujata      | Uber driver                     | 30s | Married        | 3               |
| Sheila      | Uber driver                     | 51  | Widowed        | 2               |
| Gauri       | Uber driver                     | 35  | Married        | 1               |
| Maya        | Uber driver                     | 32  | Married        | 3               |
| Radhika     | Uber driver                     | 43  | Married        | 1               |
| Vani        | Former Uber driver              | 32  | Separated      | 3               |
| Yuvika      | Former Zomato driver            | 39  | Separated      | 1               |

To minimise the impact this could have on results, only the demographic profile of these participants and our independent observations of their working conditions were considered, along with the platform's motives for advancing these participants, which we look at later.

Due to Taskmo's control over workers' narratives, we reached out to Shaikh Salauddin, the founder and president of the Telangana Gig and Platform Workers Union (TGPWU) and the national secretary general of the Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers (IFAT), to access women drivers in the transport sector. We ultimately used snowball sampling because of the trust that women drivers in the union had in each other. In Bangalore, one of our initial interviewees, Yamini<sup>4</sup>, introduced us to other participants who agreed to take part in the study based on her recommendation. In New Delhi, participant Sheila connected us with other drivers in the National Capital Region (NCR) whom she knew through a WhatsApp group

<sup>4</sup> All participants' names have been changed.

of over 300 women drivers. This group served both as a communication channel and a safety solution.

It is important to note the challenges in recruiting participants in this type of economy due to the individual, alienating nature of this type of work – there is no physical place of work where platform workers can be recruited, and they spend long hours on the road, making it difficult to reach out to them. Workers often work independently, in isolation, and in direct competition with each other (Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas, 2018).

Emerging unions can regroup workers to a certain extent, but unionisation in this type of work is still nascent in India (active since 2019), and may not capture certain groups of workers, including women who have historically low rates of unionisation and participation in unions (Dash, 2019). In addition, women drivers constitute a small percentage of workers in the male-dominated sectors we have studied. Our results are thus indicative, but not representative of the larger experiences of women in the platform economy.

#### 4 “Hustle Culture” and the Platform Economy

The working conditions offered by platforms are mainly considered precarious due to their break from the Standard Employment Relationship (SER) which became the norm in Western societies in the 1950s. Defined as “a situation where the worker has one employer; works full-time, year-round on the employer’s premises under his or her supervision; enjoys extensive statutory benefits and entitlements; and expects to be employed indefinitely” (Cranford & Vosko, n.d.), the SER reinforced the male breadwinner model, relegating women and racialised workers to non-standard forms of employment (Woodcock & Graham, 2020).

The SER has since largely declined, giving way to flexible employment relations that permit enterprises to increase or diminish their workforce, reassigning and redeploying employees with ease (Stone, 2006) as part of a larger neoliberal shift in employment relations (Thomas et al., 2020). Historical perspectives indicate that platform work originated in neoliberal economies (Edgell et al., 2015) and has intensified since the 1990s (Cano et al., 2021).

True to its neoliberal roots, the platform economy promotes idealised visions of individual economic success and autonomy (Hill, 2020), pushing workers to “hustle”, which Cottom (2020) describes as “a type of job-adjacent work that looks like it is embedded in the formal economy but is governed by different state protections, which makes the work risky and those doing it vulnerable.”

Platform capitalism is a vehicle for hustle culture, defined as “a toolkit for individuals to navigate rising inequality, develop a sense of empowerment in the face of structural oppression, and create moral boundaries around worthy and unworthy individuals” (Hill, 2020, p. 1). Hustle culture by itself is intricately linked

with the idea that structural inequalities can be overcome through personal grit and entrepreneurship, framing them as inconveniences rather than fundamental organising principles of society.

This discourse is especially appealing to Indian women, who have been historically excluded from formal employment and as a result, have turned in large numbers to paid informal work in the service sector (Sen, 2008).

*Ma'am I have done a diploma in Civil Engineering but our family is poor, 5 daughters, we didn't have a father so at that time the routes to success were very different, we had to work in unique ways. And even if we go and work for someone, we remain only their employee. If we do it on our own then even if we earn 10 rupees, we are the owners, so we have that satisfaction. With our family, we have to think about money.* (Yamini, participant)

When Yamini refers to the desire to break free from being a mere employee, it can be understood in context of the “frayed careers” (Sabelis & Schilling, 2013) that women have as opposed to men’s mostly linear careers. This was the case for many of our participants, whose careers resembled a patchwork of multiple entries and exits into the job market, often in informal jobs in gas stations, tea shops, etc.

In the face of this, the neoliberal dream of hustling one’s way to success, while difficult, is especially tempting.

*Someone would say that if you have relations with me, then I'll give you a good job or something like that... they said quite a lot of things like that. In another place it was like I didn't get a salary despite having worked 15 days and they said... the salary is this much, then after I started going to work, I found out that they weren't going to pay me. I was quite worried about all these things. For women, this is the most important thing.* (Maya, participant)

Our participants seem to feel a sense that they could make it on their own in the hustle culture of the platform economy despite the long hours and precarious working conditions. This is not to position them as passive victims of predatory platforms, but rather to say that the discourse surrounding hustle culture may appeal to them particularly due to a lack of agency in other areas of life.

#### 4.1 Risk and Responsibility in Hustle Culture

In their bid to transfer risk and responsibility entirely onto their workers, platforms reinforce existing inequalities for women, including threats to their physical safety.

ILO surveys have revealed that workers in the app-based taxi and delivery sectors, particularly women, face several occupational safety and health risks. About

83 per cent of workers engaged in the taxi sector and 89 per cent in the delivery sector reported having safety concerns about their work, such as road safety, theft, and physical assault (ILO, 2021b).

Platforms ignore how to retain the women and marginalised groups that they actively recruit, isolating women workers as a result. In Fairwork's interviews with women, many have reported feeling discriminated against and unwelcome on these platforms (Fairwork, 2023b).

*Uber does not give any response to the fact that these are women, they are driving at night, so we should pay special attention to them. In Uber, it's not like there are 1000 women, there are around 10–12 ladies, right? If you cannot ensure the safety of 10–12 women, then what do we do? Uber keeps saying: "bring more ladies into the company", but if there is no safety in the company, then what is the point? (Maya, participant)*

#### 4.2 The Risk of Sexual Violence

In the event of incidents, interview participants voiced that the platform helpline was unresponsive or unreachable, and workers were left to fend for themselves. In case of accidents, Uber does not intervene, nor do they compensate drivers for lost income, leading to harrowing ordeals for women drivers.

*Two days ago, I was completing a journey from Noida to Ganeshnagar. He... [the customer]... had to pay a bill of Rs 471. He misbehaved with me for a while. When the destination arrived, I said, "Get off". He said no, you have to go all the way to Lakshminagar. I said "I will drop you according to your drop location". He then started misbehaving with me, saying "I have 36 women like you in my bed". I asked him to get out of the car and he refused. I thought that it would only take two minutes and that I'd just drop him instead of arguing with him. The moment I crossed the Lakshminagar bridge, he refused to pay me. He was really out of line with his bad behaviour. I'd been calling the police for 15 minutes and dealing with this man alone. He left without giving me the money. The police arrived 15 or 20 minutes later. If he'd hit me, if he'd tried to force me, what would I have done on my own? I called Uber and got no answer, they told me it was my responsibility, and that I should have taken the money from him. This man is ready to hit me, and I'm supposed to take money from him? He's ready to hit me, should I let him? He is mistreating me, should I listen to him? (Maya, participant)*

Women drivers feel powerless in such situations, not least because Uber does not get involved. The police were not quick to intervene either, which increased the

risk for the participants. Indeed, platforms enjoy the grey area of their lack of legal responsibilities.

*Today we went to the police station... we have a friend, Priya madam. She drives at night. A drunkard had smashed a bottle on her neck. We didn't get any compensation from Uber. So, we went to the police station to file a complaint, and the police constable said he would come to the Uber office with us and we could complain to them. He said we could go to the Uber office next week and he would mediate. (Sheila, participant)*

While this anecdote may show a proactive police officer, what it really illustrates is the lack of protections and recourse that workers have in the face of the platform. The legal grey area occupied by platforms and a lack of established protocol mean slow reactivity of law enforcement, forcing women to create informal support networks such as Whatsapp groups in the face of sexual harassment and physical threats.

Platform workers do not have insurance in case of accidents, leaving them entirely responsible in the case of injury or personal harm. Women in particular are reluctant to raise disputes because of the lengthy procedures involved and the fear of a consequent drop in their ratings or a loss of income (Kasliwal, 2020).

*He [the policeman] asked me if I'd like to file a complaint. I said if I file a complaint and he is caught, then okay...whichever police station you call me to, I'll come. If I file a complaint and you can catch him and punish him, then I'll come. But if you can't guarantee that he's caught, then there's no point in coming, I won't waste my time. In this time, I could just work. (Maya, participant)*

#### 4.3 Sexism and Surveillance

*When I was working as a driver, other drivers, male drivers would try to overtake me. Ego problems. "Oh, you have come to earn money?" They would touch you, things like that. I have faced the worst. (Sujatha, participant)*

Women workers are likely to experience overt and covert sexism in the form of patronising behaviour and intimidation from their peers (Fairwork, 2023b), and sexist remarks from customers, especially in highly masculine sectors such as food delivery and ridesharing. Women cab drivers in India have shared that customers often cancel on them shortly after they see a woman cab driver's name (Outlook Web Desk, 2023).

Information asymmetries present in the digital infrastructure of the platform skew power relations to the advantage of customers (Heeks, 2017). The provider in-

terface offers minimal information about clients and even the most basic information becomes available only after the provider has accepted the request and thus commits to taking on the gig (van Doorn, 2017). This is especially risky for women drivers, who are apprehensive about customers having access to their personal information.

*If a man books a cab, we don't get his details, but he gets all of ours. Our information, like our name, our address, where we are – but we only get their phone number. If we also get their contact details, we'll have some security in the event of an incident.* (Yamini, participant)

This information asymmetry is based on an underlying philosophy that favours the customer, often to the detriment of the driver. As far as evaluation is concerned, both parties can rate the ride, but participants made it clear that their comments on the passengers are never taken into account. Women drivers often have to listen to sexist comments about their profession, but do not always stand up for themselves out of fear of being sanctioned by the platform. While high ratings mean more fares, higher tips, and the possibility of getting onto new tiers of Uber, low ratings can penalise drivers, leading to account review or deactivation in some cases.

*We are driving the car. And we are taking them somewhere. So, they are a kind of God... whatever they say, we are on duty and so, until then we keep saying yes sir, yes sir, yes sir.* (Vani, participant)

Platforms' risk transfer mechanisms are gender-blind and deeply embedded in their systems, causing their digital infrastructure to reproduce – and often amplify – risks for women workers. This is a result of what we consider to be techno-masculinity inherent in the platform economy.

## 5 How Platforms Vehicle Techno-Masculinist Ideas of Flexibility

One of the most important characteristics of digital labour platforms today is their positioning of themselves as a path to more flexible working arrangements than the standard employment relationship, prioritising “hustle” over job security.

What we are seeing is a complete restructuring of the sectors in question, which the platform dictates through its modes of functioning, impacting women workers in ways that it has not anticipated, nor seeks to avoid. Platforms mobilise technology to shape or rather, dictate processes and systems that inherently speak to male ideas of freedom and flexibility, which are not necessarily shared by the women who participate in them, forcing them to fit around a system designed with men in mind.

Fairwork (2023b, p. 4) too finds that “platforms operate on the assumption that the worker is an independent, efficient, mobile, digitally engaged man without family responsibilities and other considerations.” Platform processes reflect this assumption in their use of algorithmic governance to provide incentives that ultimately attempt to prime a certain pattern of predictable behaviour of workers, which does not consider women’s needs.

### 5.1 Gendered Notions of Flexibility in the Platform Economy

Our interview with the Director of Operations at Taskmo highlights one of the many gendered ways in which platforms fail to address women’s specific needs. When talking about the hybrid nature of tasks offered, he referred to housewives as being lazy for preferring remote work. Taskmo does not use an algorithm to allocate tasks but attributes them manually to “active” workers, or rather, their idea of one.

Our sample includes two women who work at Taskmo, who were selected by the platform for our interviews. It can be supposed that their selection over other workers was because they embody what the platform values in workers: they came to work every day (even though they worked on projects that did not require it), were young and motivated to work irrespective of the income and were more educated than our other participants. They were not averse to working on the weekends when the company required it (Misha, participant), a stark contrast to the Uber drivers in our sample, who worked on weekends because they needed the money.

Their aspirations are aligned with the hustle culture that we describe above. Both women had side gigs from which they gained at least 20 per cent of their total income, despite working over 50 hours a week at Taskmo. Their perception of platform work was that of a quick money-making endeavour, while waiting for their real projects to take off.

*I think since the financial year is ending in March, from April or May the people will start onboarding us so until then I’ll be doing temporary jobs here and I think my future job is to get into the IT domain and you know, work there, improve my skills, do some certifications and courses. (Vaishali, participant, worker at Taskmo)*

The two workers we interviewed at Taskmo corresponded to the profile of workers that the platforms sought and rewarded with more tasks, while women who sought remote work opportunities were penalised by the platform.

If we look closely at the wage-setting systems at platforms like Uber, we notice that the algorithmic attribution of tasks shows similar biases.

## 5.2 Algorithmic Wage Discrimination Through Obscure Wage-Setting Systems

In order to maintain the supply of drivers during high-demand slots, such as mornings from 8 to 11 am and evenings after the workday at 5 pm, Uber's incentive policy offers higher pay to drivers during these peak hours. Participants expressed a sense of obligation to work these hours and planned their day around completing these tasks, not solely due to financial necessity.

Refusing too many rides can impact drivers adversely and could even get them suspended or blocked permanently. "Cancellation abuse" (H., 2024) is one of the documented reasons that drivers' accounts can be blocked on these platforms.

*They penalised a trip of mine even though it wasn't my fault. The customer cancelled the duty<sup>5</sup> at the airport. And they blocked my ID. If we cancel 3 rides... or if the rider cancels, then they put us on hold for 15 minutes. For one month I've been going to the airport, and I don't get trips. They've banned me from the airport for a month now. (Maya, participant)*

In July 2022, Uber introduced an upfront payment that tells drivers how much they will earn in total for a ride (India.com, 2022) but hides the breakdown of the ride price, leading to a lack of transparency on the platform's commission.

Veena Dubal's (2023) findings on "algorithmic wage discrimination" suggest that Uber uses granular data on its drivers to produce unpredictable, variable, and personalised hourly remuneration. Experiments with drivers show that the same rides do not result in the same remuneration for all drivers – in one case, the algorithm offered higher fares to the driver who was more selective in order to incentivise him to work – and lower fares to the driver who was more likely to accept a ride for less remuneration (The Rideshare Guy, 2023).

*It was difficult because, in the beginning, they used to give us four "Go homes". Wherever you go, you can use the "Go home" button four times. If I've come here by chance, and I'm 3–4 km away from my house, then I can put in my home address in the app. In the beginning, we used to get it four times. Everything has changed now. I think they give two "Go homes" now. (Vani, participant)*

Platforms dangle a carrot to entice workers who are highly dependent on this income into a position of forced flexibility which can especially affect women's ability to balance work and family responsibilities. Low incomes especially fragilise women

5 The term "duty" was used by multiple drivers, all in and around New Delhi, to refer to the rides that they accepted, and the times they were on call. This could be looked at as a simple variation of Indian English that has found its way into Hindi, or on a deeper level, a projection of how participants look at this time in general.

who face a persistent wage gap. Studies have found that women delivery workers in India make around 10 per cent less than men (Kar, 2019; Kasliwal, 2020) due to women's inability to earn more by taking advantage of surge pricing, schemes, and incentives, etc.

Platform policies that influence “flexibility” can take an even more paternalistic turn. Fairwork (2023b) highlights the case of women workers at an Indian grocery delivery platform who were automatically logged out of the application at 6 pm due to safety issues. The platform took upon itself the moral responsibility of preventing women from accessing work instead of offering security measures for them, choosing instead to police their working hours, which penalises women attempting to “work on their own schedule”, giving them unequal opportunities when compared to their male counterparts, and ultimately amplifying existing gender inequalities.

## 6 Where Hustle Culture Meets Traditional Gender Roles in India

For Indian women, these notions of flexibility intersect with a history of “rooted” social reproduction (Cowan, 2020), creating conflict between their need to work and their social role as caregivers.

Patriarchal, upper-class, and caste-based ideologies restrict women's mobility and associate their moral values with social reproductive responsibilities (Lal, 2011; Soni-Sinha, 2006). Women's education has a U-shaped relationship with labour force participation due to an income effect whereby women with more education marry into richer families that enable them to withdraw from the labour force (Das & Desai, 2003; Kingdon & Unni, 2001; Reddy, 1979). Other studies have shown that women have many domestic responsibilities – they look after children and the elderly in the family and tend to do other unpaid work – and so only accept work in times of distress; if the economy is doing well, they tend to withdraw from the workforce (Ghose, 2016; Mehrotra & Sinha, 2017).

Our participants at Uber in particular have low levels of education, and their socio-economic background does not allow them this choice to remain at home, instead pushing them into informal, precarious work while they continue to maintain their social roles. Some of our participants grappled with this conflict between neo-liberal, flexible production at Uber and “rooted” social reproduction, i.e. their role as caregivers, but accepted it as their lot in life.

*If we want to do our housework, then we have to make time for it as well. At that time... even if we can't, we still somehow have to... however tired one is, one has to do the housework. If we are tired and don't do it, then it'll become more in the morning. Then in the morning if it becomes more, we won't be able to go to work.* (Vani, participant)

We understand the resignation towards this tension as a reflection of how deeply hustle culture is ingrained in platform work, and how it interacts with women's social responsibilities, increasing work-family conflict and leading to exhaustingly long hours of paid and unpaid work.

Some of our participants, such as Vani and Yamini, were divorced, and hence played a double role: that of the family breadwinner as well as that of the caregiver. Women in India often enter domestic work, cab driving, and food delivery in the absence of a primary male earning member in the family (Ghosh et al., 2022). In countries like India and Bangladesh, Fairwork has found that platform work is the natural choice for women in non-traditional family structures due to cultural stigma around divorce and single motherhood (Fairwork, 2023a). For Yamini, this double role was a precarious balancing act; she felt that she was responsible for the family's reputation or honour as well as for making ends meet.

*I return home at 8:30 or 9 pm. In the morning, I leave at 8:30–9 or 10 am. I lock the house and leave. Even though the neighbours are good, because of my daughters' age... I have to bring up and educate my daughters. I've made it this far on my own, but if there's the slightest problem... (Yamini, participant)*

While platform work could be seen as providing women in non-traditional arrangements with stable employment, techno-masculinist ideas of flexibility and risk clash with the multiple social roles that they play, rendering them economically and socially precarious.

## 7 Conclusion

As the platform economy continues to expand, it is extremely important to understand that this gender blindness is not a symptom, but inherent to the way that platforms function. Digital labour platforms, as other jobs and organisational structures, are not gender-blind or gender-neutral; they simply rest on the assumption that the average worker is a male, although in reality, workers are very much "gendered" and "bodied" (Acker, 1990).

How can we go about dismantling these biases? Perhaps by naming the unnamed and gendering that which appears degendered.

This article is a first step towards revealing how "gender-neutral" processes in fact reproduce existing inequalities between women and men in the world of work, but other promising ones have begun.

BluSmart, an electric ride-sharing platform based in Gurgaon is using Fairwork Guidelines to consult women drivers to understand and eventually factor in their

needs in terms of working hours and safety (Fairwork, 2023b). They acknowledge women drivers' unique position in terms of their care responsibilities and career aspirations (BluSmart India, 2023), claiming to provide flexibility and support to navigate these.

On a policy level, the state of Rajasthan for instance, has passed the Rajasthan Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act 2023 to establish a welfare fund for platform workers financed by a tax levied on every transaction on a given platform (Bhatia, 2023). The fund will be used to finance programmes to ensure the welfare of platform workers. A government-run database will keep track of employment status and length of engagement with a platform. This could be a first step towards documenting women in the platform workforce. In addition, the law provides for the establishment of a welfare council where representatives of the platform workers' unions will participate in decision-making on how the money is to be spent, one-third of whom are required to be women.

However, in terms of policies around women's specific needs, the challenges are more complex. Platforms do not provide their data on workers, citing concerns of privacy and anonymity. This is especially concerning in a country like India, where challenges in measuring the scope and size of informal work abound. In withholding this data, not only do platforms slow down regulatory action, but also evade the responsibility of taking into consideration the demands of different segments of workers.

No Indian platforms are currently willing to negotiate with worker-led movements (Fairwork, 2020), leaving workers trapped between a platform that does not acknowledge their legitimacy, and a government that lacks the information and resources to move the needle in a significant way. This is especially detrimental to women's needs since much of the mobilisation in platform work has taken place in the male-dominated rideshare and food delivery sectors. Women thus do not necessarily profit from the strides taking place in collective bargaining in the platform sector and their specific concerns are less likely to find a voice.

Perhaps we can look at other, more egalitarian organisational structures as part of the answer. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), India's first self-employed women's union, has launched a platform co-operative for beauty services in multiple cities in India wherein the design of the application was responsive to women's needs, incorporating a panic button, restoring information symmetry by obscuring individual worker profiles from clients, and installing a GPS feature to allow real-time tracking. Platform commissions are fixed at 15 per cent to facilitate transparency in income (Scholz, 2018). Mobilisation in this sector may find forms that centre women workers' concerns and address their historic exclusion from union spaces, funding spaces where they advocate for themselves and where organisational structures can look at their specific needs as the norm and not the outlier.

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