Working From Home – The Children Conundrum

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Abstract
This study examines the role of gender and presence of children in the household on work from home (WFH). Unprecedented measures were introduced during Covid-19, allowing employees in many countries to continue working from home in compliance with the quarantine requirements. During this period, the experiences and views of 312 workers in a European country (Malta) were collected, allowing us to estimate models that forecast the willingness to WFH and the quality of the work produced. Women believe they deliver higher levels of quality of work at home in contrast to men, regardless of whether they have children or not. Women with children at home report relatively higher levels of job satisfaction when working from home while all women exhibit a strong preference for additional WFH arrangements. These findings highlight that WFH experiences are both gendered and also dependent on the presence of children.

JEL Classification: I39, J13, J16, M54

Keywords
working from home — quality of work — gender — children

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Introduction

In contrast with the traditional approach of working from an office, working remotely has, until recently, been mainly limited to women with young children (Dettling, 2017), workers in the technology sector (Tremblay and Genin, 2010), freelancers (Davis et al., 2014), or self-employed persons (Gottlieb et al., 2020). This changed when the restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic created a 'new normal' way of working (Bonacini et al., 2021), whereby employees across various countries rapidly switched to working from home, with heterogeneous behavioral reactions (Alifano et al., 2020; Baddeley, 2020b,a). As the Covid-19 restrictions lifted, companies began to consider the impact of work from home (WFH) on their businesses (Fayard et al., 2021), and the prospect of remote working going forward (Ozimek, 2020). These developments echoed broader discussions on the opportunities and risks of a large-scale move to remote work (Lord, 2020).

Preferences for WFH

There is some evidence indicating that employees have a preference towards working from home. Companies that offer WFH optionality rate higher in organizational attractiveness among employees (Wörtler et al., 2021). Bloom et al. (2022) find statistically significant improved job satisfaction scores for employees of Trip.com who were offered to WFH. A study of academic library employees in the US finds that 51% participants prefer to work mostly remotely, with reasons including saving on commuting costs and being in control of their work environment (Green, 2023). Skountridaki et al. (2024) also find that employee dissatisfaction with their working space in the office boosts their preferences to work from home.

Demographic issues such as gender and the presence of children at home impact preferences when working from home (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2012).

Job satisfaction and WFH

Research on the relationship between working from home and job satisfaction presents mixed findings. Several studies highlight positive effects. Chong et al. (2018) find that challenges in managing work-home boundaries further contribute to reduced satisfaction. Kim et al. (2020) observe that frequent WFH, while linked to higher satisfaction, can also increase work-to-family conflicts and stress. Irawanto et al. (2021) show that WFH enhances work-life balance, which in turn improves job satisfaction, partly due to reduced commuting time and increased flexibility enabling more personal and family engagement (Jamal et al., 2021). However, these benefits are not universal. Attanasi et al. (2021) documented negative emotional impact of COVID-19 and increase in potentially addictive behaviors during lockdown, with gender differences eventually related to WFH. Limanta et al. (2023) found that work-related stress, driven by role ambiguity and overwork, can undermine satisfaction. Long working hours, often associated with remote work, have been shown to erode job satisfaction over time (Rahman and Wahat, 2023). Nonetheless, organizational support and adequate job resources can mitigate these negative effects and help sustain job satisfaction in telecommuting contexts (Jamal et al., 2023).

Work quality and WFH

Though employers may be concerned with lower productivity, the experiment by Bloom et al. (2015) in a Chinese travel agency with 249 participants finds that the performance of employees working from home improved by 13%. Telecommuters employed by nine Belgian organizations also report working with more vigor and less emotional exhaustion (Vanderstukken et al., 2022).

A key consideration for performance when working from home is the availability of resources that resemble those in the office. Wong et al. (2020) find that WFH effectiveness is predicted by family well-being and resource constraints.

Tejero et al. (2021) find that the presence of children in the house throughout the day contribute to reducing the employees' productivity. However, in a 4-week experiment Sherman (2020) finds that women with children experience a statistically significant increase in job performance with remote working. Arenas et al. (2024) find that Brazilian mothers who lived with children under 12 years old were more susceptible to burnout than mothers with older children or no children during the pandemic. Their research points at the relationship between childcare responsibilities and burnout (Arenas et al., 2024).

Gender, Children and WFH

The evidence of the distinctions of WFH on men and women is mixed. Wheatley (2017) finds that women are often constrained in their use of flexible working arrangements, which means that job satisfaction increases less for women than for men. Powell and Craig (2015) find that women are more likely to work from home, and that time scheduling differs significantly by gender. However, earlier work by Possenriede and Plantenga (2014) found that the positive effect of flexible working on employee well-being and work-life balance does not vary significantly with gender. A reduction in work-family conflict during remote working weeks is reported for mothers but not for fathers (Sherman, 2020). Song and Gao (2020) find that parents, and in particular fathers, report lower levels of subjective well-being when working from home on weekend and holidays compared to non-parents. Gender discrepancies become prominent during the pandemic as women were more likely to combine working from home with caring for children (Arntz et al., 2020). Sevilla and Smith (2020) report that women in the UK with children under the age of 12 were more involved in childcare compared to men during the pandemic.

This research addresses a gap in the literature by investigating the effects of gender and presence of children on the preferences of employees around WFH and the self-reported quality of their work, in particular amongst the Maltese population. We also test the effect of facilities at home and their role in employee preferences around working from home.

Against this backdrop, we explore the following hypotheses:

H1: Demand for WFH is higher among females with children at home.

H2: Job satisfaction from WFH is higher among females with children at home.

H3: Quality of work from home is lower among females with children at home.

Data and Methods

Context

The study is conducted in Malta, a small European Union (EU) country with a population of around 515,000 in 2020 (Office, 2020a). In the run up to the study, the country had been actively working on increasing the female labor force participation rate which stood at 52% in 2020 (Economy, 2022). Studies on gender equality in Malta (Camilleri-Cassar, 2017) indicate that unequal working hours in Malta stem from traditional gender roles with men typically focusing on careers, while women tend to sacrifice this in favor of home involvements. Households with one child represent 59% of Maltese households, followed by 34% of households with two dependent children (Office, 2020b).

Throughout 2020 male and female employees in various sectors in Malta were able to experience working from home. In line with what occurred in the majority of other European countries (Alifano et al., 2020), lockdown restrictions were put in place in March 2020 leading many organizations to implement working from home (Cuschieri, 2020). This was followed by three stages of relaxation of lockdown measures between May and June 2020, enabling some employees to come back to the workplace (Cuschieri, 2022).

Data

The analysis employs secondary data initially collected by the Malta Business Bureau in Autumn 2020 when the first round of coronavirus restrictions in Malta were being lifted.[1] The survey included questions about experience of WFH (including the number of hours they worked from home, the number of hours they wished they worked from home, the assessment of whether working from home enhanced or reduced their performance or made no difference to it), their self-assessed wellbeing (including happiness, life satisfaction and job satisfaction measured on a Likert scale from 0 to 10, the presence or otherwise of chronic health or mental health conditions), the nature of their work (including industry) and a series of demographic questions (including age and gender). Follow-

[1]The data collection followed research ethics and standard data collection procedures. The dataset was collected via a questionnaire designed for the Malta Business Bureau targeting employees and business owners in Malta. The sector distribution closely mirrors the structure of Malta's service-oriented economy, with strong representation from professional, scientific and technical services ($n = 39$), information and communication ($n = 36$), financial and insurance activities ($n = 28$), manufacturing ($n = 31$), and other services ($n = 31$). Smaller but important contributions came from education ($n = 12$), human health and social work ($n = 6$), public administration and defense ($n = 8$), and others, including construction, transport, wholesale trade, and accommodation and food services. Participation was voluntary and responses were anonymous. All respondents provided informed consent prior to starting the questionnaire.

ing data cleaning procedures the total number of complete observations used in the analysis is 312.[2]

The dataset includes an age range between 22 and 74 years and respondents from a broad range of industries across all major NACE Codes. In terms of gender, 61% of the respondents are male and 39% female. The variables used in the analysis are summarized in Appendix 1 (Tables A1, A2 and A3).

We capture the demand for WFH by calculating the difference between actual WFH hours and desired WFH hours using a linear transformation. We capture job satisfaction using the self-reported job satisfaction measured on a 10-point Likert scale. We measure quality using the self-reported variable that captures the effect of WFH on quality of work done, which can take three values: negative effect, no effect, and positive effect.

In the original survey the number of children under 18 in the household varied from 0 to 4. As categories with 3 or 4 children were significantly underrepresented, we transform this variable to include categories "no children" and "has children". We also create an interaction between gender of the respondents and children living at home. This allows us to look at the effect that children have on male and female respondents.

We utilize data on age, management level, organization size, presence of a private workspace at home and current WFH hours to proxy control variables.

Models and Estimation

To test H1, we estimate a linear regression model with WFH demand as the dependent variable, measured on a continuous scale. Gender, presence of children in the household, and their interaction are included as key predictors, with controls for age, management level, employer size, availability of a private workspace, and current WFH hours:

$$\begin{aligned} WFH\_demand_i = {} & \beta_0 + \beta_1 Gender_i + \beta_2 Children_i \\ & + \beta_3 (Gender_i \times Children_i) + \beta_4 Age_i \\ & + \beta_5 Management_i + \beta_6 OrganizationSize_i \\ & + \beta_7 PrivateSpace_i + \beta_8 WFHHours_i + \varepsilon_i. \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

To test H2, we estimate an ordinal logistic regression model with job satisfaction as the dependent variable, measured on a 10-point ordinal scale. Let JS_i denote job satisfaction for individual i. The model is specified as:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{logit}(\Pr(JS_i \leq j)) = \theta_j - \Big[& \beta_1 Gender_i + \beta_2 Children_i \\ & + \beta_3 (Gender_i \times Children_i) + \beta_4 Age_i \\ & + \beta_5 Management_i + \beta_6 OrganizationSize_i \\ & + \beta_7 PrivateSpace_i + \beta_8 WFHHours_i \Big], \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

for $j = 1, \ldots, J-1$, where θ_j are the cutpoints.

To test H3, we estimate a similar ordinal logistic regression model but with quality of work when working from home as the dependent variable, measured on a 3-point ordinal scale. Let QW_i denote perceived quality of work while working from home for individual i. The model is specified as:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{logit}(\Pr(QW_i \leq j)) = \theta_j - \Big[& \beta_1 Gender_i + \beta_2 Children_i \\ & + \beta_3 (Gender_i \times Children_i) + \beta_4 Age_i \\ & + \beta_5 Management_i + \beta_6 OrganizationSize_i \\ & + \beta_7 PrivateSpace_i + \beta_8 WFHHours_i \Big], \end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

for $j = 1, \ldots, J-1$, where θ_j are the cutpoints.

In line with the hypotheses outlined, we expect the coefficient β_3 to be positive in Models 1 and 2 and negative in Model 3. A post-hoc power analysis based on our sample size indicated that the study had 71% power to detect small effects ($R^2 = 0.02$), 98% power for moderate effects ($R^2 = 0.05$), and 100% power for medium ($R^2 = 0.10$) and large effects ($R^2 = 0.15$) at $\alpha = 0.05$.

The assumptions for multiple linear regression were satisfied, including linearity of relationships, no evidence of problematic multicollinearity, and a conditionally normal error term (given the independent variables) with mean zero and homoscedasticity.[3]

Analysis and Results

The full results of the regressions are reported in Table 1.

WFH demand

Model 1 examined whether WFH demand is higher among females with children at home. The results showed a significant positive effect of gender ($\beta = 4.64$, $SE = 1.59$, $p < .01$), indicating that female employees expressed substantially greater demand for WFH compared to male employees. Having children was not a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.93$, $SE = 1.59$, $p = .56$), and the interaction between gender and having children was also non-significant ($\beta = -1.52$, $SE = 2.36$, $p = .52$). These findings reject H1, as greater WFH demand was observed among women regardless of parental status, with no evidence that the presence of children heightens demand.

Marginal effects analysis (Figure 1) further illustrates that female employees reported a substantially higher preferred–actual WFH hours gap compared with male employees, regardless of whether they had children. For men, the presence

[2] We removed 13 unconsented entries and a number of responses with missing observations relevant to the study at hand. We then inspected the dataset for any outliers and removed two unusual values in distance traveled.

[3] Breusch-Pagan test to rule out heteroskedasticity in the error term. To do this we conduct the Breusch-Pagan test (Koenker, 1981) in Stata. The null hypothesis is that the variance in the residuals is homogenous. Given the high p-value that the test returns for all four models, none of which are significant at the 10% level, we accept the null hypothesis and conclude that the homoskedasticity assumption is satisfied. To test for non-linear cases of heteroskedasticity we also conduct the White's test. All p-values are large and not significant at the 10% level, which means that we can accept the null hypothesis that the errors are indeed homoscedastic.

Table 1. Regression results. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Dependent variable	(1) WFH demand	(2) Job satisfaction	(3) WFH quality of work
Gender: Female	4.639***	−0.285	0.579**
	(1.586)	(0.258)	(0.285)
Has children	0.930	0.029	−0.290
	(1.587)	(0.269)	(0.308)
Female and has children	−1.523	0.882*	0.987*
	(2.357)	(0.471)	(0.524)
Age	−0.124**	0.025**	−0.013
	(0.058)	(0.010)	(0.011)
Management level	−0.058	0.447***	−0.013
	(0.716)	(0.110)	(0.128)
Organization size	−0.306	−0.105	0.079
	(0.943)	(0.145)	(0.171)
Private space for work at home	4.523***	−0.106	0.777***
	(1.366)	(0.236)	(0.259)
Current WFH hours	−0.609***	0.017**	0.019**
	(0.043)	(0.007)	(0.008)
Observations	312	312	312

Notes: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

of children was associated with a slight increase in WFH demand, while for women, the presence of children was linked to a modest decrease. However, these differences were not statistically significant, and the confidence intervals overlap.

Job Satisfaction

Model 2 tested whether job satisfaction from WFH is higher among females with children at home. Neither gender ($\beta = -0.29$, $SE = 0.26$, $p = .27$) nor having children ($\beta = 0.03$, $SE = 0.27$, $p = .91$) showed significant main effects. However, the interaction between being female and having children was positive and marginally significant ($\beta = 0.88$, $SE = 0.47$, $p < .10$), indicating that female employees with children report higher job satisfaction from WFH compared to all other categories. These results provide support for H2, as the effect is concentrated within the subgroup of female employees with children.

Figure 2 shows the full set of marginal effects, plotting predicted probabilities for the ten job satisfaction categories. To aid interpretation, Figure 3 presents predicted mean job satisfaction scores, summarizing ordinal results into expected values that highlight group differences. Taken together, the figures indicate that WFH satisfaction is notably higher among women with children, while men's satisfaction remains broadly unchanged across parental status. This pattern supports H2, suggesting that higher satisfaction from WFH is concentrated among female employees who have children at home.

Quality of Work

Model 3 assessed whether WFH quality of work is lower among females with children at home. The presence of children was not significantly associated with work quality ($\beta = -0.29$, $SE = 0.31$, $p = .35$). Female gender was instead positively associated with work quality ($\beta = 0.58$, $SE = 0.29$, $p < .05$). The interaction between gender and having children was positive and marginally significant ($\beta = 0.99$, $SE = 0.52$, $p < .10$), indicating that female employees with children reported higher work quality compared to others. These findings reject H3 and suggest that higher work quality is associated with being female, regardless of parental status.

Figure 4 displays the marginal effects of reporting that working from home has a negative impact, no effect, or a positive impact on self-reported work quality, shown separately for men and women with and without children in the household. The plot indicates that female employees with children were more likely to report a positive effect of WFH on their work quality compared to women without children, with little change observed among men.

Secondary Results

Several control variables showed significant associations with WFH outcomes (Table 1). Age was negatively associated with WFH demand ($\beta = -0.12$, $p < .05$) but positively associated with job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.03$, $p < .05$). Managerial employees reported higher job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < .01$) than non-managers, with no significant effects on demand or quality of work. Having a private workspace strongly predicted both higher WFH demand ($\beta = 4.52$, $p < .01$) and higher perceived quality of work ($\beta = 0.78$, $p < .01$), but was not associated with job satisfaction. Current WFH hours were linked to lower demand ($\beta = -0.61$, $p < .01$) yet slightly higher job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.02$, $p < .05$) and perceived quality of work ($\beta = 0.02$, $p < .05$).

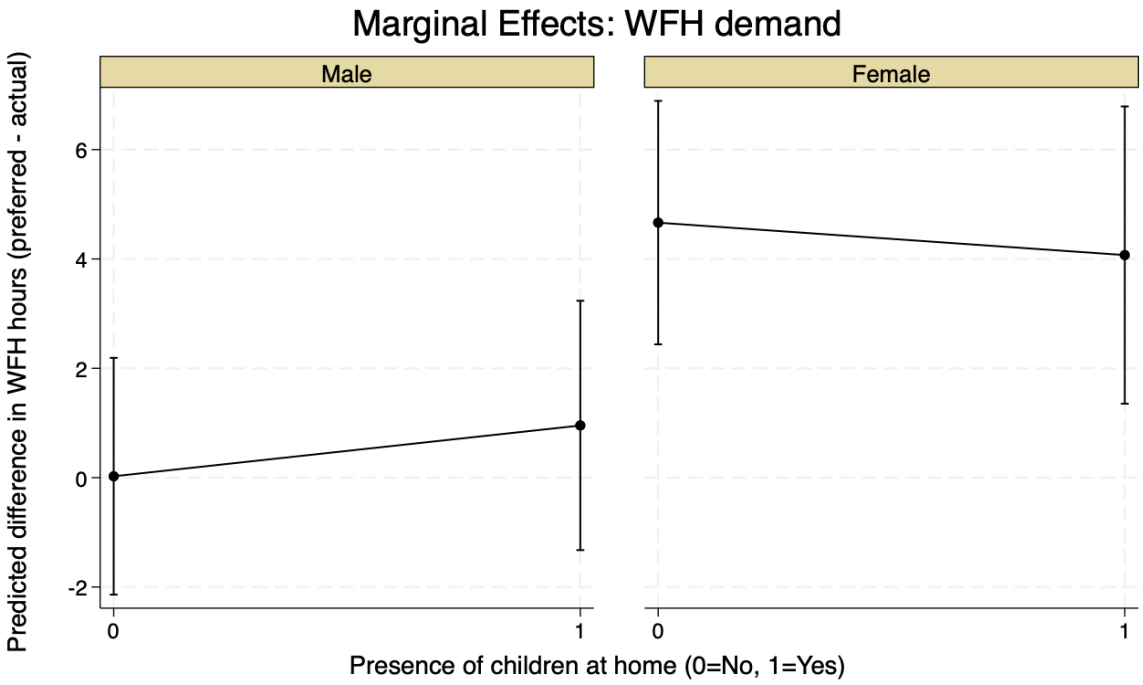

Figure 1. Marginal Effects: WFH Demand

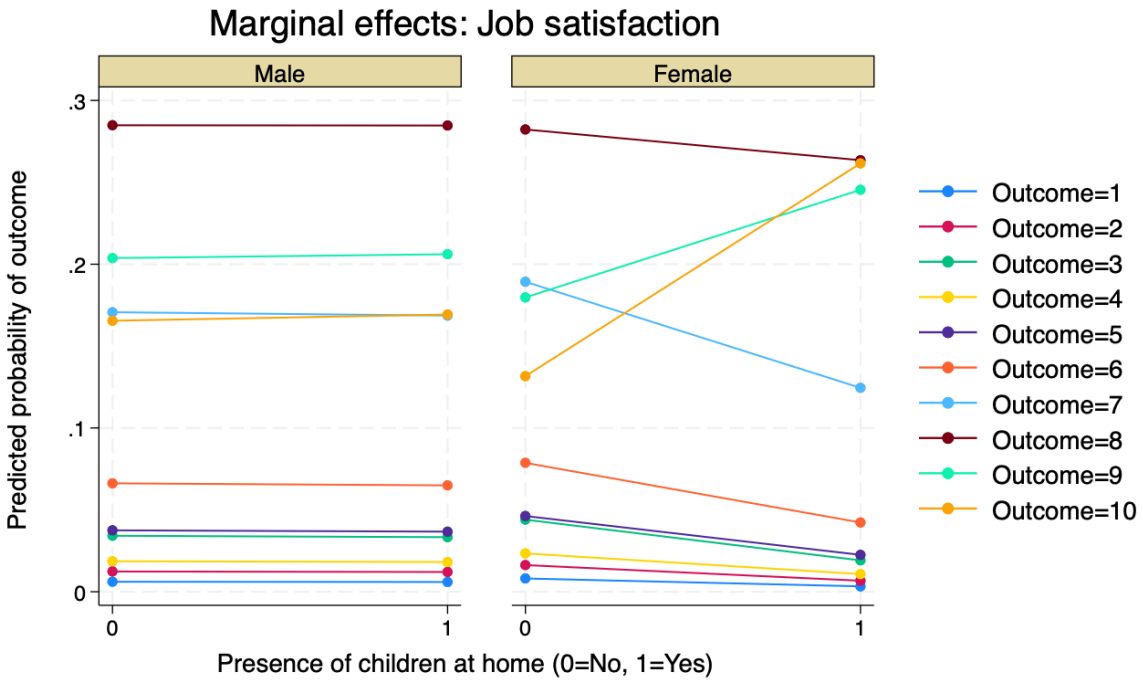

Figure 2. Marginal Effects: Job Satisfaction

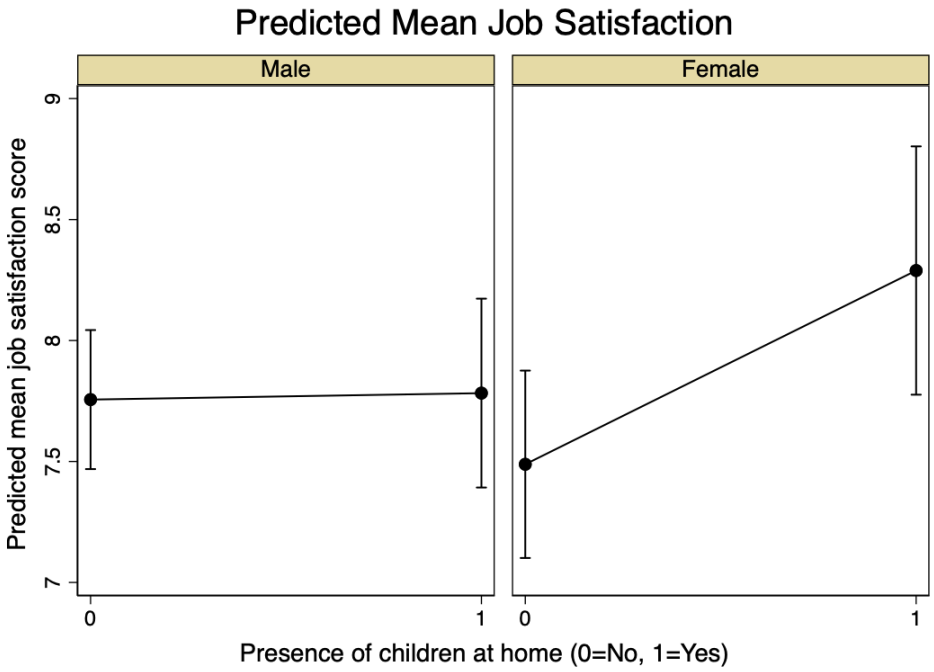

Figure 3. Predicted Mean: Job Satisfaction

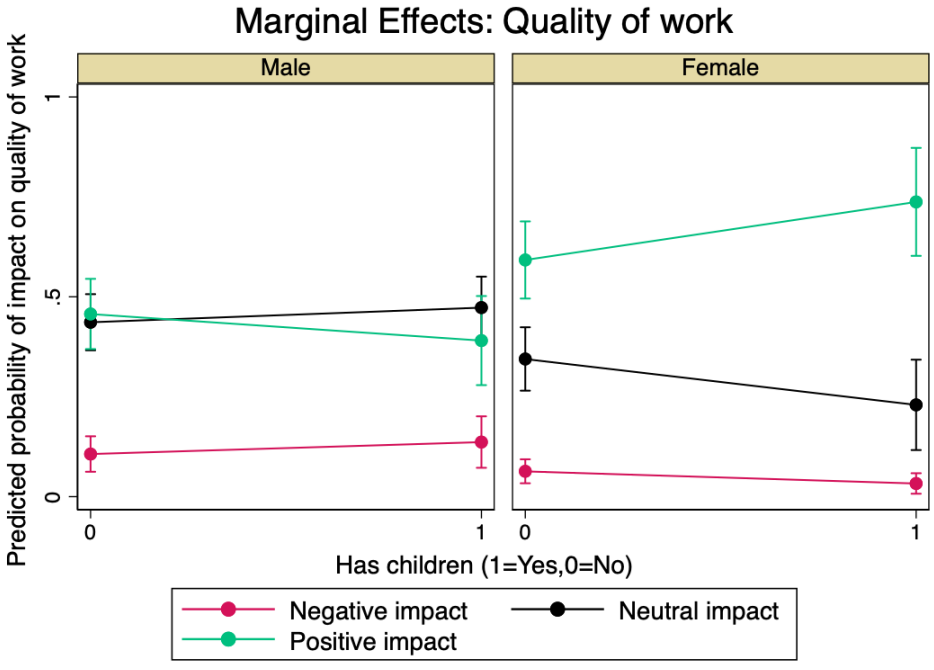

Figure 4. Marginal Effects: Quality of Work

Conclusion

Our analysis reveals the complex and nuanced impacts of having children on various work-related outcomes, especially differentiating between the experiences of male and female employees: the children conundrum. The results provided only partial support for the proposed hypotheses.

In terms of H1, female employees with children reported no higher WFH demand although females without children did – suggesting that higher demand among women is not uniquely driven by caregiving responsibilities.

For H2, job satisfaction from WFH was higher among female employees with children than others. Predicted mean indicated a clear upward shift in satisfaction for females with children, while men's satisfaction levels remained stable regardless of parental status. This suggests that for women, WFH may be particularly valued when combined with caregiving roles, potentially offsetting some of the challenges associated with balancing work and home demands.

Contrary to H3, the presence of children was not associated with a lower quality of work from home. In fact, the interaction term for women with children was positive and significant, indicating higher self-reported quality of work. Being female is, by itself, a positive determinant of quality, as is being female and having children, while the presence of children per se is not. This difference in self-reported performance between male and female employees may be attributed to varying expectations and responsibilities: Women may have developed more effective strategies for balancing work and home life, or may experience differing societal expectations regarding their role in managing work and family responsibilities (van der Lippe and Lippényi, 2020).

Together, these results suggest that while women continue to exhibit greater demand for WFH, this is not solely a function of parental status. Moreover, women with children at home appear to perceive both higher work satisfaction and higher self-assessed work quality from WFH, contradicting prevalent narratives that remote work is detrimental to productivity among working women. These findings add nuance to existing literature on gender, caregiving, and flexible work, indicating that the benefits of WFH may be most pronounced when employees are able to align work arrangements with their household roles and resources.

Based on the findings of this study, several policy implications emerge that can help enhance the effectiveness of hybrid work arrangements. Employers should recognize the diverse gendered needs of employees with diverse family dynamics. Given the strong preference for WFH among female employees, organizations should continue to implement flexible work arrangements that cater specifically to the needs of female employees. Adopting gender-specific interventions can help accommodate the unique demands faced by adults with children at home improving their job satisfaction and work quality, regardless of their gender. The positive impact of WFH on job satisfaction and work quality for female employees with children, may suggest a need for robust support systems such as childcare support and family-friendly policies in the workplace. Policymakers should consider these insights when crafting regulations and guidelines for remote work, ensuring that they address the varied needs of the workforce.

Several limitations should be acknowledged in the present study. First, the study relies on self-reported data, which can be influenced by social desirability and recall biases. Participants may have inaccurately reported their WFH hours, satisfaction, and quality, potentially compromising the findings' accuracy and reliability. The cross-sectional nature of the data provides limited causal insights into the relationships between desired and actual WFH hours, wellbeing, and productivity. Longitudinal data would be necessary to better understand the temporal dynamics and causative effects of WFH on these outcomes.

The sample size of 312 respondents may limit the generalizability of the results and includes a higher proportion of male respondents (62%) compared to female respondents (38%). Future research can explore a larger sample size with greater and more equal representation of relevant sub-groups including gender and number of children. Including other control variables could further benefit the analysis. One such factor that would be parental status. In the present study, the relationship between the respondent and the children present in the household is not limited to offspring but could include younger siblings, for instance.

The study's focus on Malta may be particularly valuable for Southern European countries with similar traits. Future research should conduct comparative studies across multiple countries to enhance generalizability.

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Appendices

Table A1. Main variables

Variable	Description	*M*	*SD*	*Min*	*Max*
WFH Demand	Hours wished vs hours worked from home (hours)	2.00	14.26	-40	46
Job satisfaction	How satisfied are you with your job? (0–10)	7.74	1.89	1	10
Quality of work	Impact of WFH on self-reported quality of work (0–2)	1.42	0.66	0	2
Age	How old are you? (years)	40.54	11.51	22	74
Current WFH hours	How many hours do you work from home per week? (hours)	17.14	15.86	0	60

Note: $N = 312$ for all variables. In all (0–2) responses, 0 is Negative, 1 is Neutral, 2 is Positive.

Table A2. Descriptive data for categorical variables

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	190	60.90
	Female	122	39.10
Children (binary)	No children	195	62.50
	Has children	117	37.50
Children (count)	No children	195	62.50
	1 child	59	18.91
	2 children	53	16.99
	3 children	4	1.28
	4 children	1	0.32
Management level	Not management level	71	22.76
	Middle management	72	23.08
	Senior management	105	33.65
	Business owner/co-owner	64	20.51
Organization size	0–9 employees	52	16.67
	10–49 employees	108	34.62
	50+ employees	152	48.72
Private space for work	No	86	27.56
	Yes	226	72.44

Table A3. Summary of gender and children variables

Children	What is your gender?		
	Male	Female	Total
0	111	84	195
1	39	20	59
2+	40	18	58
Total	190	122	312

Table A4. Robustness check regression results including Age^2 term. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Dependent variable	(1) **WFH demand**	(2) **WFH job satisfaction**	(3) **WFH quality of work**
Gender: Female	4.702***	−0.238	0.598**
	(1.625)	(0.262)	(0.286)
Has children	1.108	0.178	−0.231
	(1.766)	(0.276)	(0.335)
Female and has children	−1.552	0.876*	0.978*
	(2.368)	(0.472)	(0.523)
Age	−0.237	−0.078	−0.049
	(0.411)	(0.071)	(0.083)
Age^2	0.001	0.001	0.000
	(0.005)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Management level	−0.017	0.486***	−0.001
	(0.753)	(0.114)	(0.129)
Organization size	−0.285	−0.086	0.084
	(0.956)	(0.148)	(0.171)
Private space for work at home	4.483***	−0.152	0.765***
	(1.394)	(0.241)	(0.260)
Current WFH hours	−0.609***	0.017**	0.019**
	(0.043)	(0.007)	(0.008)
Observations	312	312	312
R-squared	0.476		

Notes: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.