

Fathers Combining Work and Care: Flexible Work Arrangements and Paternal Involvement Across Financial Situations

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Abstract

Flexible work arrangements significantly impact childcare divisions among dual-earner parents, yet few studies address their impact on fathers as primary caregivers. This article explores the relationship between fathers' ability to work flexibly and their share of childcare responsibility across financial situations. A capabilities perspective is applied to better understand why fathers' childcare aspirations may not align with what they are capable of in practice. Using 2021 survey data on fathers ($n=493$) and mothers ($n=472$) of young children in different-sex partnerships from four European countries, multinomial logistic regressions are estimated to predict childcare responsibility. Findings suggest fathers' spatial flexibility (working from home) increases their likelihood of being the person primarily responsible for childcare, whereas temporal flexibility (varying the start/end times of the working day) does not. Economic conditions influence these dynamics, with financially strained fathers benefiting most from spatial flexibility.

Keywords

capability approach, childcare responsibility, fathers, financial constraints, flexible work arrangements, multinomial logistic regression

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Introduction

Fathers' involvement in childcare has transformed over the last decades. Beyond a breadwinner role, men increasingly expect and are expected to be caring, engaged fathers (Bear, 2019; Elliott, 2016). Flexible work arrangements (FWAs), such as flexitime and teleworking, can facilitate this by granting fathers greater control over their schedules and work locations (Chung et al., 2007). However, FWAs can reinforce traditional gender roles in both paid work and home life. Owing to gendered expectations surrounding work and care (Chung and van der Lippe, 2020), men are likely and expected to use FWAs to enhance work performance, while women are more likely and expected to do so in order to accommodate childcare demands (Beham et al., 2019; Glass and Noonan, 2016; Kurowska, 2020).

Key barriers to men's uptake of FWAs for care purposes include a lack of organizational support and a fear of negative repercussions due to not conforming to 'ideal worker' norms (focused on paid work and unencumbered by caregiving responsibilities; Acker, 1990; Halford et al., 1997). Particularly for fathers, work demands are in constant tension with their caring ambitions, and thus their real opportunities for significant childcare involvement (Hobson and Fahlén, 2009; Hobson et al., 2011; Moran and Koslowski, 2018).

Along with gendered expectations, financial circumstances shape fathers' use of flexible working for caregiving (Lyonette and Crompton, 2015). Fathers in high-income occupations generally have higher control over their working time and organization than those in lower-income jobs (Galinsky et al., 2011; Perry-Jenkins et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2013). Yet, research indicates a positive connection between workplace flexibility and childcare involvement primarily among lower-income workers (Chung and Booker, 2023; Gerstel and Clawson, 2014). While the gendered issues around flexible working are well established as paradoxical (Chung and van der Lippe, 2020; Lott and Chung, 2016), how and why the relationship between work flexibility and childcare responsibility varies across groups of working fathers whose access to FWAs is known to differ, remains underexplored. Previous studies rely on mixed measures of FWA availability and actual use (Kim, 2020), focus on specific occupations (Gerstel and Clawson, 2014) or small qualitative samples (Fox et al., 2009; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001). Additionally, research studying fathers across socioeconomic conditions is limited and varies in approach, ranging from higher- and lower-income occupations in the UK (Chung and Booker, 2023) and the US (Kim, 2020) to advantaged and disadvantaged healthcare occupations in the US (Gerstel and Clawson, 2014).

This research aims to address this gap by providing a comprehensive framework that integrates the literatures on fatherhood and flexibility through a capabilities lens (Norman, 2017; Sen, 1990, 2000). From this perspective, FWAs are more than formally available resources. Capabilities to work flexibly capture fathers' valuation, institutional context (e.g. actual accessibility of flexible arrangements), as well as prevailing norms about flexible working and parenting (e.g. perceived consequences of using flexibility for care).

Using cross-sectional data capturing capabilities to care from Project CAPABLE, this study explores how fathers' actual opportunities for temporal flexibility (adjusting the

start/end time of their working day) and spatial flexibility (working from home) relate to primary childcare responsibility. Furthermore, it examines the intersection between flexible arrangement type and financial situation. The study includes data on fathers ($n=493$) and mothers ($n=472$) in different-sex partnerships with young children (under 12) across four European countries: the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain and the UK.

Findings can inform policies aimed at promoting class- and gender-equitable caregiving practices. Advancing men's participation in caregiving is key for the wellbeing of children, mothers and fathers (Flouri, 2005; Kotelchuck, 2022). Moreover, it is crucial in alleviating women's 'double burden' of paid and unpaid work, advancing the stalled gender revolution (England, 2010).

Theoretical considerations

Fathers' involvement and childcare division

Parental involvement is gendered, with mothers typically spending more time with children (Smith, 2004) and fathers traditionally showing involvement through material provision (i.e. breadwinning; Norman and Elliot, 2015). However, norms and expectations around fatherhood and (caring) masculinities have shifted significantly (Elliott, 2016; Lamb, 2000). Fathers increasingly have (and are expected to have) simultaneous aspirations to provide indirect care and resources as well as being direct (physical) carers (i.e. caring ambition; Bear, 2019).

Previous theoretical developments provide explanations on how changes in working time and place may influence fathers' role in the division of childcare and housework (Bianchi et al., 2000). From a time availability perspective (Becker, 1981), housework and childcare are divided based on each partner's paid working hours. Therefore, shifting or reducing these hours should increase fathers' availability for childcare. Resource bargaining theory (Lundberg and Pollak, 1996) argues that couples negotiate work division based on earnings and education (i.e. absolute and relative resources; Hook, 2017). Historically, men's higher earning potential has allowed them to avoid domestic tasks (Bianchi et al., 2000). However, since childcare is seen as rewarding, fathers may be inclined to remain involved (Sullivan, 2013), especially when valued labour market resources give them more access to flexibility (Olsen et al., 2015). The 'doing gender' perspective (Berk, 1985) sees domestic work as continuously shaped by gender norms and expectations, with fathers typically fulfilling a breadwinning role. Such expectations may restrict fathers' caregiving, as adjusting work for childcare can challenge traditional gender roles (Chung, 2022). Lastly, role exposure theory suggests societal shifts, like increased female workforce participation and FWAs, have heightened awareness of gender inequalities fostering fathers' caregiving engagement (Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004; Carlson et al., 2021).

Conceptually, paternal involvement has three key components: accessibility, engagement and responsibility (Lamb et al., 1987). Accessibility refers to physical presence, primarily through supervisory care. Engagement involves intensive interaction with children, such as feeding, playing or helping with homework. Responsibility entails ensuring children's welfare by anticipating and arranging their needs, including daily routines.

More enriched definitions of paternal involvement have been developed by further detailing parenting activities (see Palkovitz, 1997; Pleck, 2010). However, empirically capturing these accurately requires detailed data on fathers' time use. Therefore, this study builds on Lamb's conceptualization by incorporating a capabilities approach to paternal involvement (Norman, 2017; Sen, 1990). From a capabilities perspective, what fathers value in terms of involvement may not necessarily align with what they are capable of doing in practice (Moran and Koslowski, 2018; Norman, 2017). As involvement requires fathers' presence and participation in children's lives, capabilities to control their paid working time and place could help them prioritize childcare responsibilities.

Capabilities for flexible working: Value, access and use

Theoretically, FWAs have the potential to challenge traditional childcare divisions. FWAs can give working parents more control over when or where they work than traditional on-site, fixed-schedule employment (Chung et al., 2007). This study focuses on FWAs, allowing for temporal and spatial flexibility. Temporal flexibility consists of flexibility to vary the start/end times of the working day, including the ability to choose from a pre-defined set of schedules (i.e. flexitime; Chung and van der Lippe, 2020). Spatial flexibility refers to working from a location different to the usual workplace, including the home (telework). These are highly prominent work resources affecting how individuals reconcile employment with caregiving (Fuller and Hirsh, 2019), particularly among parents of young children (Kim, 2020).

However, not all workers have equal opportunities to leverage FWAs to alleviate tensions between family and work demands (Fox et al., 2009; Hobson et al., 2011). Sen's (1990) capability approach (CA) offers a nuanced understanding of this issue. Central to the CA is that capabilities reflect whether individuals are able and enabled to 'do and be' what they value or have reason to value in life (Sen, 2000). In contrast to outcomes, which may already be the result of constrained choices (van der Klink et al., 2016), the CA focuses on real opportunities or capabilities. These combine: (i) valuing a certain outcome (considering it important); (ii) having sufficient opportunities to realize it (being enabled); and (iii) actually managing to do it (being able). Hence, capabilities for temporal and spatial work flexibility can be understood as valued aspects of work that are enabled and can be realized.

Transforming formal access to a FWA (a resource) into the substantive opportunity to work flexibly (a capability; Sen, 2000) can be enabled or constrained by conversion factors (Robeyns, 2005) expressed at the micro (individual characteristics, such as labour market resources), meso (institutional context, such as organizational access to FWAs) and macro levels (societal-cultural factors, such as predominant societal norms about flexible working and parenting). Applied to working flexibly, this means individuals are not exclusively responsible for making use of a certain arrangement. This research focuses on how gender (Beham et al., 2019; Chung, 2022; Kurowska, 2020) and financial conditions (Chung and Booker, 2023; Gerstel and Clawson, 2014) simultaneously shape fathers' flexible working valuation, opportunities and use (Hobson and Fahlén, 2009).

The value assigned to workplace flexibility is likely shaped by gendered expectations (Chung and van der Lippe, 2020; Lott and Chung, 2016). Women are typically socialized

as primary caregivers, leading to the expectation that they will value and make use of FWAs as tools to accommodate childcare and housework demands (Chung, 2019). Conversely, men are stereotypically socialized as breadwinners, leading them to place value on workplace flexibility mainly as a tool for enhancing work performance (Beham et al., 2019; Glass and Noonan, 2016; Kurowska, 2020). This divergence in valuing FWAs reflects broader societal norms, where men's identities are often intertwined with their professional dedication (Ewald and Hogg, 2022).

Access to FWAs can vary significantly across sectors (Brega et al., 2023) and be particularly contingent on organizational factors (Hobson et al., 2011). Workplaces are gendered organizations that value workers characterized by an unwavering commitment, around the clock availability and prioritizing work above all else (Acker, 1990; Halford et al., 1997). Expectations of workers embodying these 'ideal worker' norms, closely intertwined with traditional notions of masculinity (Acker, 1990; Dumas and Sanchez-Burks, 2015), can bring about organizational barriers that constrain men's opportunities to utilize FWAs (Robeyns, 2005). Access to FWAs can be discouraged by managers, who still commonly perceive FWAs as a 'women's issue' (Borgkvist et al., 2021), but also by employers and peers who tend to mock or oppose fathers who embrace active parenting (Doucet, 2018).

Actual use of FWAs illustrates the translation of potential into real opportunities, highlighting the complexities of individual choice and external constraints. As noted above, a key barrier to men's uptake of FWAs for care purposes is 'flexibility stigma' (Blair-Loy, 2003; Chung, 2022; Ewald and Hogg, 2022). Utilizing FWAs for care can expose deviation from the prevailing expectation that fathers, as 'ideal workers', are unburdened by caring responsibilities typically taken up by the women in their lives. Subsequently, men might be perceived as less committed (Coltrane et al., 2013) and suffer negative career repercussions (Chung, 2022).

The importance fathers place on flexibility, combined with available opportunities and actual use, illustrate the complexities of translating potential resources into capabilities. On the one hand, capabilities for temporal flexibility can be key for aligning paid work with children's schedules (e.g. dropping-off or picking-up from school, cooking and eating dinner together), particularly since the most demanding childcare tasks are typically routine-based with limited room for change (Craig, 2006). Flexible schedules allow for each parent to care for their children while the other is working, therefore extending family time (i.e. 'tag-team' parenting; Becker and Moen, 1999). Research on flexitime, however, apart from a few exceptions that find a positive link (Kim, 2020), rarely finds a significant relationship with fathers' involvement in childcare (Chung and Booker, 2023; Noonan et al., 2007; Rapoport and Le Bourdais, 2008). On the other hand, capabilities for spatial flexibility can alleviate time constraints by means of reducing commute times, allowing fathers to fulfil work tasks asynchronously (Carlson et al., 2021), or to combine childcare and work (Andrew et al., 2020). Evidence of the impact of home-based work on childcare among fathers is, however, inconclusive. While some find a negative relationship between fathers' ability to work from home and childcare involvement (Chung and Booker, 2023; Kim, 2020; Lott, 2020; Lott and Chung, 2016), others report a positive link (Carlson et al., 2021; Lyttelton et al., 2020, 2022; Pabilonia and Vernon, 2022, 2023); although the COVID-19 pandemic could play a role in such results (Boll et al., 2023).

On their own, temporal and spatial flexibilities do not necessarily alter power dynamics or traditional gender norms around childcare, but they can reduce barriers that might otherwise limit fathers' involvement (Chung and Booker, 2023). Notwithstanding, financial circumstances further complicate this dynamic.

Interplay of workplace flexibility and financial conditions

Fathers' capabilities to work flexibly are further shaped by financial conditions. While not inherently tied to class, financial conditions are highly correlated with income (Whelan and Maitre, 2008). Access to and utilization of FWAs among fathers, in fact, vary significantly between high- and low-income occupations (Chung and Booker, 2023; Gerstel and Clawson, 2014). Men in higher-income occupations often enjoy high control over their working time and organization of tasks and are more likely to have supportive organizational policies that facilitate their use of flexibility (Galinsky et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2013). In contrast, men in lower-income occupations face higher schedule rigidity, frequent and unpredictable shift changes, and low organizational support (Lyonette and Crompton, 2015; Perry-Jenkins et al., 2017).

Importantly, men in higher-income occupations tend to have more egalitarian views on gender roles (Knight and Brinton, 2017). However, working couples in lower-income occupations tend to display a more equitable division of domestic labour and childcare – 'lived egalitarianism' (Usdansky, 2011: 164) – than those in higher-income occupations (Deutsch, 1999; Lyonette and Crompton, 2015). Among fathers in lower-income occupations, the use of schedule flexibility is usually associated with higher participation in housework (Chung and Booker, 2023) and childcare (Gerstel and Clawson, 2014). This strategy maximizes both parents' working and caring hours without depending on secondary childcare arrangements (Verhoef et al., 2016). Facing financial constraints, outsourcing childcare and domestic help is less feasible compared to their higher-income counterparts (Sullivan, 2004). In contrast, among men in higher-income occupations, flexitime and homeworking are related to high dedication to paid work and low participation in housework and childcare (Chung and Booker, 2023). These men tend to experience the 'stress of higher status' (Schieman et al., 2009: 970), and thus greater demands for emotional allegiance and time dedication to work (i.e. adherence to ideal worker norms; Blair-Loy, 2003; Jacobs and Gerson, 2004). Accordingly, they tend to protect the boundaries of their working time and place even if working flexibly (Chung et al., 2022; Dunatchik et al., 2021).

This paradoxical income-based variation in the division of paid and unpaid work (Usdansky, 2011) indicates that, despite having the *potential* to take advantage of FWAs to navigate work and care responsibilities effectively, fathers in higher-income occupations might not translate this into actual opportunities for childcare involvement.

Using this integrated framework, fathers' capabilities to adjust working time and place are expected to be related to their share of childcare as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Capabilities for temporal flexibility (to vary the start/end time of their working day) among fathers are associated with a higher likelihood of being primarily responsible for childcare.

Hypothesis 1a: A positive association between capabilities for temporal flexibility and primary responsibility for childcare is expected for fathers in disadvantaged financial situations.

Hypothesis 2: Capabilities for spatial flexibility (working from home) among fathers are associated with a higher likelihood of being primarily responsible for childcare.

Hypothesis 2a: A positive association between capabilities for spatial flexibility and primary responsibility for childcare is likely stronger among fathers in disadvantaged financial situations than among fathers managing financially.

Methods

Data

This article uses a survey specifically developed to collect data on capabilities for work, care and personal life by Project CAPABLE, drawing on the 3MC (multinational, multi-cultural, multiregional) method to ensure comparability given the cross-country and cross-cultural differences (Yerkes et al., 2024). The survey was fielded in September 2021 in the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain and the UK,¹ when schools, childcare facilities and most services were fully open. These data also include a booster sample collected between November and December 2021 in Slovenia and the UK given the underrepresentation of lower-educated individuals in the first sample. Notwithstanding, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on work organization could be present at the time of the survey, such as increased teleworking and flexible schedules compared to pre-pandemic levels (Zucconi et al., 2024). The survey was fielded by *Kantar Public*, who drew eligible participants from national panels in each of the respective countries (working adults between 18 and 64 years old). Each country sample was non-probabilistic yet stratified based on sex and age distributions. Stratification, the booster sample and large overall sample size do not entirely eliminate selection biases but improve representativeness. Respondents participated in a computer-assisted web interview (CAWI) survey. The total net response reached 4161 participants (the Netherlands=957; Slovenia=1071; Spain=1027; UK=1106).

Sample

The study focuses on individuals participating in paid employment that cohabit with their partner/spouse and have at least one child aged 12 years or younger living in their household. Of the 4161 survey respondents, 1218 were not employed and were thus excluded from the sample. Another 803 individuals were not partnered and cohabitating. Additionally, 1144 individuals were excluded as they did not have at least one child (biological or adopted) aged 12 or younger, resulting in an analytical sample of 996 individuals. Finally, three individuals were excluded due to missing data on the dependent variable, 16 were excluded because some of their working conditions could not be measured (e.g. workplace size) and another 12 were excluded because some partner

characteristics could not be measured (e.g. working hours). This resulted in a final analytical sample of 965 individuals (472 mothers and 493 fathers).

Measures

Dependent variable. Main responsibility for childcare measured individual reports of the division of childcare responsibilities. Respondents were asked to indicate who was the primary person responsible for childcare in a typical week: themselves; their spouse/partner; the child(ren)'s other parent – if not living in the same household; grandparents; other family members; formal childcare (e.g. day-care centres); other paid carer (e.g. babysitter); equally shared with their spouse/partner; or equally shared with the child(ren)'s other parent. Data limitations prevented examining childcare in more detail, such as time spent on care or type of care provided. However, reporting on main responsibility conveys a significant aspect of parental involvement, including planning and anticipating needs (Lamb et al., 1987), demonstrating a baseline level of availability for care and thus providing a bridge that connects accessibility to potential engagement. By first identifying if the respondent was a mother or father, childcare responsibility was distinguished between three categories: (2) father had primary responsibility; (1) both parents equally shared childcare; as opposed to (0) the mother or someone else was primarily responsible. The dependent variable thus refers to the reported primary person responsible for childcare.

Independent variables. Flexible working capabilities were measured by two separate variables. *Spatial flexibility* measured the extent to which individuals had the capability to work from home. *Temporal flexibility* measured the extent to which individuals had capabilities for a flexible start and/or end time to their working day (Voydanoff, 2007). Capability is a latent construct that reflects real opportunities to use temporal or spatial flexibility. Each respondent was presented with three statements for each type of arrangement (i.e. fathers and mothers reported on their own capabilities). Statement A: 'I think it's important to [be able to work from home] and [have flexibility in my start and/or end times at work]' for spatial and temporal flexibility, respectively. Statement B: 'My current work situation offers me sufficient opportunities to [work from home] and [have flexibility in my start or end times]', respectively. Statement C: 'I actually manage to [work from home] and [make use of [this] flexibility in start or end times]', respectively. Building on previously validated instruments applying the CA to work-related capabilities (Abma et al., 2016; van der Klink et al., 2016), respondents were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale the extent to which they (*strongly*) agreed or (*strongly*) disagreed with each statement. Answers were recoded as follows.

A respondent was considered to have flexible working capabilities if they rated the FWA important (A=Likert scores 4–5), had sufficient opportunities in their work environment (B=4–5) and felt able to use it (C=4–5). Conversely, a respondent lacked flexible working capabilities if they considered the FWA important (A=4–5), but either (i) perceived insufficient opportunities in their work setting ($B \leq 3$), or (ii) felt unable to realize it ($C \leq 3$). Additionally, lacking capabilities for flexible working included scenarios where the respondent perceived sufficient opportunities for flexibility ($B=4-5$),

but (iii) felt unable to realize it ($C \leq 3$), or (iv) deemed FWAs as unimportant ($A \leq 3$). This process resulted in two dichotomous variables (0=No, 1=Yes) measuring the respondent's capability for flexible start/end times at work and their capability to work from home, respectively. This reflects individual capabilities as the ability to achieve (being able and enabled) a valued outcome.

Financial situation measured the economic conditions of the respondents' household (i.e. self-reported consumptive resources). This indicator is based on the perceived capacity to afford basic needs in the year prior to the survey (i.e. financial strain; Whelan and Maître, 2008). Basic needs in the survey included: (1) rent or mortgage; (2) utility bills; (3) internet and telephone; (4) any loan payments; (5) healthcare costs; (6) educational expenses; and (7) groceries. Respondents whose household had no difficulty affording basic needs were managing financially (reference), those with difficulty affording between one and two basic needs were classified as struggling financially, whereas those facing difficulty affording three or more needs were considered financially precarious. These categories reflect different levels of financial constraints, a key factor in the division of childcare between couples and their opportunities to outsource care (Gerstel and Clawson, 2014; Usdansky, 2011). Note that, to avoid conflating indicators that may have contradictory effects on paternal involvement, financial situation and educational level were treated separately (Antonoplis, 2023).

Control variables. Investigating the relationship between flexible working capabilities and childcare requires controlling for various factors influencing childcare divisions. Availability for childcare was mainly captured through weekly working hours (self-reported, min = 1 and max = 80). As some jobs lack schedule flexibility or simply cannot be performed remotely (Kossek and Lautsch, 2018), the models include dichotomous variables distinguishing if the nature of the work allows for home-based work and flexibility in start/end times, respectively. Self-employment (reference: dependent employee) might also influence respondents' availability, since self-employed individuals usually have higher levels of work control and autonomy (Nordenmark et al., 2012). Workplace size (categorized from less than five to 500 or more) was also accounted for as large organizations are more likely to offer FWAs (den Dulk et al., 2013). Accounting for individual resources, the respondent's educational level was categorized as middle (ISCED 3 and 4; reference), low (ISCED 0–2) and high (ISCED 5 and 6). Respondents' age, urban living status (reference: rural) and self-perceived health (reference: fair/good health) were controlled for due to their influence on childcare capabilities (Kotelchuck, 2022). Older (Lerman and Sorensen, 2000), highly educated (Sullivan, 2013; Sullivan et al., 2014), urban (Buhmann et al., 2009) and healthy fathers (Kim, 2020) tend to show higher levels of childcare involvement. Partner characteristics are also relevant for the performance and division of childcare (André et al., 2025). Along with relative resources, such as the partner's educational level (reference: middle), the partner's availability was controlled for through their weekly working hours (maximum: 80 hours/week). Foreign-born status was also controlled for among respondents and partners (reference: not foreign born) as it affects the work–care decisions of families in Europe (van Lancker and Pavolini, 2023). Further controls included the number of children and age of the youngest child in the household, as younger children typically require more attention and care

(Wray, 2020), and a country variable (reference: Spain) to account for variation in working time regulations, gender norms and FWAs' availability and accessibility across national contexts (Brega et al., 2023).

Methods

Multinomial logistic regressions including both fathers and mothers (i.e. controlling for gender) were conducted to investigate the hypothesized association between FWAs and childcare (see the correlation matrix in Table A in the online supplemental material). A main advantage of this technique is estimating multiple logistic regression equations simultaneously, thus modelling multiple outcomes at once (Long and Freese, 2014).

Two multinomial models were conducted. The first provides information on the influence of capabilities for flexible working on the father being primarily responsible or both parents equally sharing childcare responsibilities, as opposed to the mother being primarily responsible (base outcome). The second model considers potential variation related to financial situation (moderation effect) by including an interaction term. By estimating the effects on both an egalitarian childcare distribution and on fathers as primary caregivers, something rarely examined in similar studies, the results depict whether and *how* capabilities for flexible working are associated with less traditional divisions of childcare responsibility.

Following recommended approaches for exploring nonlinear effects in models for categorical outcomes, average marginal effects (AMEs) were calculated based on the coefficients from the multinomial logit models (Long and Mustillo, 2018; Mize, 2019). AMEs illustrate the impact of changes in an independent variable (flexible working capabilities), on the predicted outcome (the probability of a father being the primary caregiver), while holding the observed values of the covariates for each observation in the sample (Mize, 2019). The significance of the discrete change in AMEs between different categories was statistically evaluated using Wald tests. Additionally, to establish whether interaction effects were significant, tests of second difference were conducted (Long and Freese, 2014). Models 1 and 2 were calculated using the complete sample (mothers and fathers, $n=965$), but AMEs were calculated using the subsample means for fathers ($n=493$) because this is the group of interest for hypothesis testing (Long and Mustillo, 2018). Finally, assumptions of independence of irrelevant alternatives (IIAs) were tested, confirming that multinomial logistic regressions were appropriate over similar techniques such as multinomial probit models (Long and Freese, 2014). The models' sensitivity to alternative measures of FWAs was tested as an additional robustness check. All analyses were conducted in Stata 17.

Findings

Descriptive results (Table B) showed that almost a quarter (23%) of the fathers reported being the primary person responsible for childcare, while about a quarter shared responsibility equally (26%) and half indicated the mother being primarily responsible (51%).² A large share of fathers had start and/or end time flexibility (57%) and working from home (44%) among their capabilities. Compared to previous studies, the high proportion of paternal responsibility for childcare and capabilities to work flexibly could reflect

Table 1. Predicted probabilities of primary responsibility for childcare by fathers' financial situation.

	Primarily responsible											
	Father				Equally shared				Mother			
	Pr	SE	Pr	First difference	Pr	SE	Pr	First difference	Pr	SE	Pr	First difference
a: Managing	0.18	0.02		$b - a = 0.20^*$	0.30	0.02		$b - a = -0.14^*$	0.52	0.02		$b - a = -0.05^*$
b: Struggling	0.38	0.04		$c - b = -0.13^\dagger$	0.16	0.04		$c - b = -0.02^*$	0.47	0.04		$c - b = 0.14^\dagger$
c: Precarious	0.25	0.05		$c - a = -0.07^\dagger$	0.14	0.04		$c - a = -0.16^*$	0.61	0.06		$c - a = 0.09^\dagger$

Notes: Predictions based on fathers' subsample ($n = 493$). First difference = average marginal effects of the financial situation on the predicted probability of childcare responsibility. $^\dagger p < 0.10$, $^* p < 0.05$, $^{**} p < 0.01$, $^{***} p < 0.001$.

some lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on work organization (Zucconi et al., 2024) and childcare demands (Boll et al., 2023). Most fathers (73%) had a manageable financial situation, with some struggling financially (19%) and a minority (8%) in a precarious situation.

The initial analysis of the division of childcare responsibilities revealed compelling insights into the independent influence of financial situations and flexible working capabilities (see the full model in Table C in the online supplemental material).

Data in Table 1 show clear trends in the division of childcare depending on fathers' financial situation. Fathers consistently reported that mothers were primarily responsible for childcare, particularly when in precarious financial conditions. Nevertheless, fathers better off financially were significantly more likely to report sharing childcare equally with the mother ($Pr = 0.30$) compared to struggling fathers (0.16 ; $\Delta = -0.14$; $p < 0.05$) and those in precarious financial situations (0.14 ; $\Delta = -0.16$; $p < 0.05$). Noticeably, fathers struggling financially were more likely to assume primary childcare responsibility ($Pr = 0.38$) in contrast to their financially managing counterparts (0.18 ; $\Delta = 0.20$; $p < 0.05$) and those in precarious situations (0.25 ; $\Delta = -0.13$; $p < 0.1$).

Data in Table 2 show that the effect of fathers' capabilities for temporal and spatial flexibility on childcare division differs by work arrangement. No relationship was found between fathers' capabilities for temporal flexibility and their likelihood of being primarily responsible for childcare. However, the probability of the father being primarily responsible for childcare was significantly higher if they had the capability to work from home ($Pr = 0.28$) than if they did not (0.20 ; $\Delta = 0.08$; $p < 0.05$), as illustrated in Figure 1.

The findings provided compelling evidence to reject Hypothesis 1, which posited that fathers with capabilities for temporal flexibility (to vary the start/end time of their working day) were more likely to be primarily responsible for childcare than fathers without such capabilities. These results resonate with previous studies that found no significant correlation between fathers' flexitime and childcare involvement in various contexts, including the US (Noonan et al., 2007), Canada (Rapoport and Le Bourdais, 2008) and the UK (Chung and Booker, 2023). Conversely, findings confirmed Hypothesis 2, showing that fathers with capabilities for spatial flexibility (working from home) were indeed more likely to take on primary childcare responsibility compared to those lacking this

Table 2. Predicted probabilities of primary responsibility for childcare by fathers' capabilities for time and spatial flexibility.

Primarily responsible													
		Father			Equally shared			Mother					
		Pr	SE	Pr	First difference	Pr	SE	Pr	First difference	Pr	SE	Pr	First difference
Capabilities for flexible start/end times	No	0.23	0.02		0.23 – 0.23 = –0.00	0.26	0.03		0.27 – 0.26 = 0.01	0.51	0.03		0.50 – 0.51 = –0.01
	Yes	0.23	0.02			0.27	0.02			0.50	0.03		
Capabilities to work from home	No	0.20	0.02		0.28 – 0.20 = 0.08*	0.26	0.02		0.27 – 0.26 = 0.01	0.55	0.03		0.46 – 0.55 = –0.09*
	Yes	0.28	0.03			0.27	0.03			0.46	0.03		

Notes: Predictions based on fathers' subsample ($n=493$). First difference = average marginal effects of flexible working capabilities on the predicted probability of childcare responsibility. † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

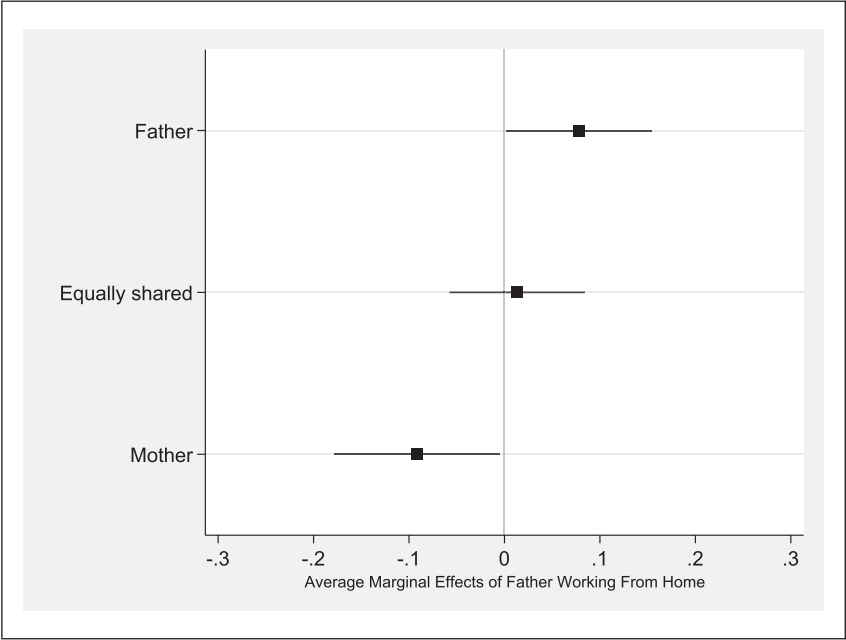


Figure 1. Average marginal effects of fathers’ work-from-home capabilities on the likelihood of (a) father being primarily responsible, (b) parents equally sharing and (c) mother being primarily responsible for childcare.

capability. These results align with recent research indicating that the ability to work from home correlates with increased paternal involvement in childcare (Carlson et al., 2021; Lyttelton et al., 2020; Pabilonia and Vernon, 2022, 2023). However, they contrast with studies that found lower childcare involvement among fathers with arrangements to work from home in the US (Kim, 2020), Germany (Lott, 2020) and the UK (Chung and Booker, 2023).

Variations across financial situations

A deeper examination of the effect of flexible working on main responsibility for childcare showed differences depending on fathers’ financial situation, as illustrated by AMEs in Table 3 (full model in Table D in the online supplemental material). Findings revealed that the significant association between capabilities for flexible working and childcare responsibility was limited to fathers struggling financially, and the effects differed depending on the FWA in question. These results are vital because, as reported above, fathers in this situation were most likely to be primarily responsible for childcare.

Data in Table 3 show that fathers struggling financially reported a lower likelihood of being primarily responsible for their child(ren) when they had capabilities for temporal flexibility (flexibility in start/end times) ($Pr=0.31$) compared to those without such flexibility (0.47 ; $\Delta=-0.15$; $p=0.1$). Moreover, this negative effect was significantly distinct

Table 3. Predicted probability of primary responsibility for childcare by fathers' flexible working capabilities and financial situation: the marginal effects of flexibility and the differences in the effect of flexibility across the financial situation.

Primarily responsible									
Father									
Father has flexibility in start/end times	Equally shared			Equally shared			Equally shared		
	No	Yes	AME: temporal flexibility gap	Contrasts	No	Yes	AME: temporal flexibility gap	Contrasts	Contrasts
a: Managing	0.17	0.19	0.02	b	0.28	0.31	0.03		–
b: Struggling	0.47	0.31	–0.15 [†]	a, c	0.15	0.15	–0.00		–
c: Precarious	0.15	0.29	0.15	b	0.23	0.09	–0.14		–
Father can work from home	No	Yes	AME: spatial flexibility gap	Contrasts	No	Yes	AME: spatial flexibility gap	Contrasts	Contrasts
	No	Yes	AME: spatial flexibility gap	Contrasts	No	Yes	AME: spatial flexibility gap	Contrasts	Contrasts
a: Managing	0.17	0.19	0.03	b	0.28	0.32	0.04		b
b: Struggling	0.27	0.53	0.26**	a	0.19	0.09	–0.11		a
c: Precarious	0.16	0.30	0.14	–	0.14	0.17	0.03		–

Notes: Predictions based on fathers' subsample ($n = 493$). Average marginal effects (AME) = (First) difference of capabilities for flexibility on the predicted probability of childcare responsibility. Contrasts = report which flexibility gaps are significantly different across financial situations (second differences). Full table: Table E (supplemental material). [†] $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

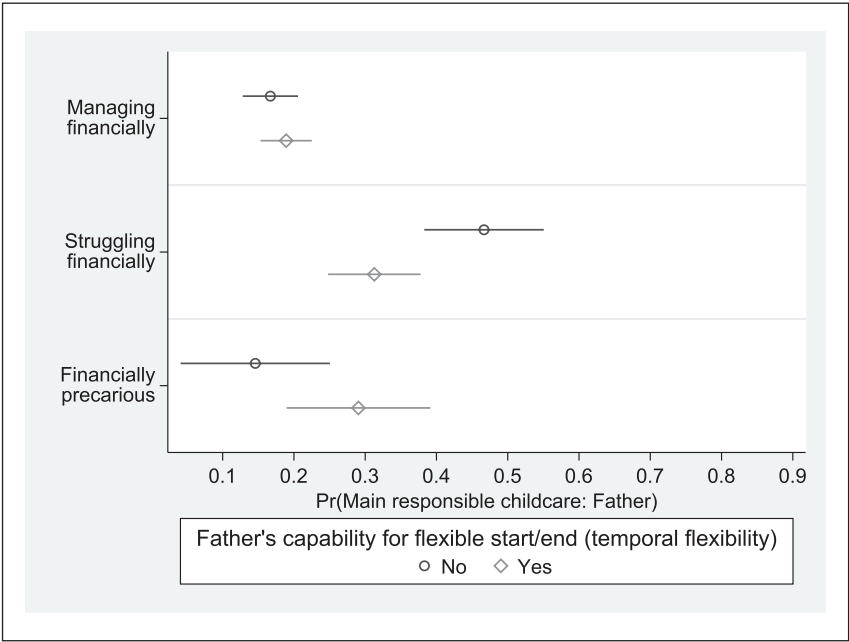


Figure 2. Average marginal effects for fathers' capabilities for temporal flexibility and the likelihood of primary responsibility for childcare, by financial situation.

from fathers in any other financial situation (all second differences $p < 0.05$; Table 3). As illustrated in Figure 2, flexibility in start/end times of the working day had a negative impact on fathers' chances of being primarily responsible for their child(ren), but only among financially struggling fathers.

Conversely, the data also reveal that fathers struggling financially were significantly more likely to be responsible for childcare when they had the capability to work from home ($Pr=0.53$) compared to when such an option was unavailable (0.27 ; $\Delta=0.26$; $p=0.01$). Furthermore, the positive effect of remote work on primary childcare responsibility was not significant, and was notably larger for financially struggling fathers than for those who were managing financially (second difference $p < 0.05$; Table 3), as illustrated in Figure 3.

These findings lead to a rejection of Hypothesis 1a, which posited a positive association between capabilities for temporal flexibility and primary childcare responsibility among fathers in disadvantaged financial situations. These results align with comparable quantitative studies (Chung and Booker, 2023), that despite finding a positive relationship between participation in housework and fathers in lower-income occupations using flexitime, found no effect on childcare involvement. In their qualitative study, however, Gerstel and Clawson (2014) found that fathers in lower-income medical occupations used schedule flexibility to increase their involvement in childcare. Similarly to Chung and Booker (2023), no association was found between the schedule flexibility of high-income fathers and their childcare involvement.

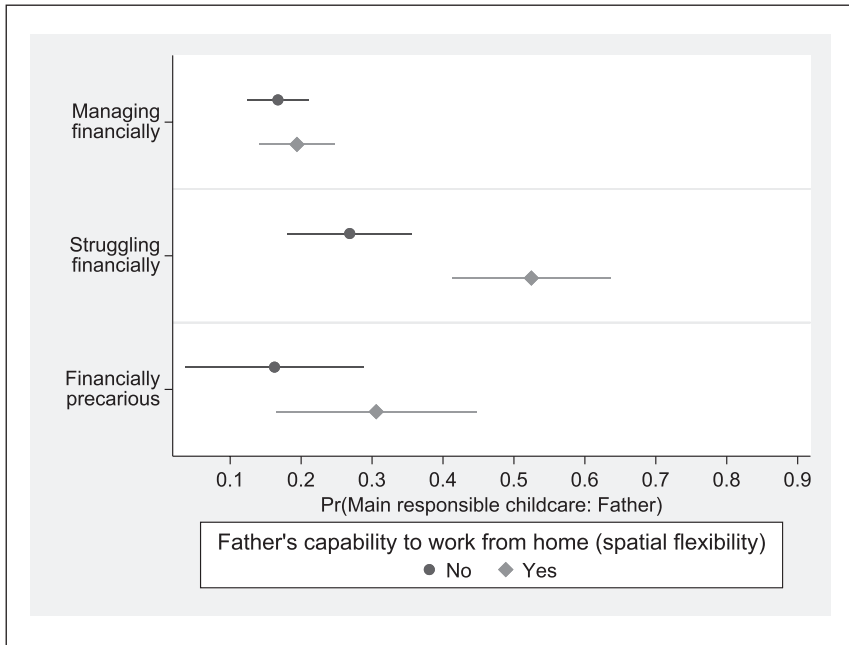


Figure 3. Average marginal effects for fathers' capabilities for spatial flexibility and the likelihood of primary responsibility for childcare, by financial situation.

Additionally, findings provided only partial support for the hypothesized positive relationship between capabilities for spatial flexibility and primary childcare responsibility being stronger for fathers in disadvantaged economic situations (Hypothesis 2a). This was the case for fathers struggling financially, but the effect does not extend to fathers in precarious financial situations. These results contrast with previous research (Chung and Booker, 2023), showing that working from home among fathers in lower-income occupations was associated with greater housework, although not specifically with childcare. While prior studies generally found a positive correlation between fathers working from home and childcare engagement, potential variations in financial situations or occupational contexts remain largely unaddressed (Carlson et al., 2021; Lyttelton et al., 2020; Pabilonia and Vernon, 2022, 2023). As a significant exogenous factor facilitating remote work across occupations that may have previously lacked such capability, the larger context of the COVID-19 pandemic remains critical for interpreting these findings. Through a capabilities lens, financially struggling fathers benefited the most from spatial flexibility as a care-oriented resource.

Robustness checks

First, the IIAs assumption for the multinomial logistic regressions was tested. Wald tests (Table F in the online supplemental material) confirmed that outcome categories (father, mother primarily responsible and equally shared childcare) should not be combined,

ensuring the models' goodness of fit. To further ensure robustness, models were also conducted using a binary measure of FWAs (Table G in the online supplemental material): *only* the use (1) or non-use (0) of each FWA (i.e. statement C in Methods). New predicted probabilities were estimated based on these models (Table H in the online supplemental material). Relative risk ratios remained stable, though significance levels varied slightly. Second differences mostly disappeared when measuring FWA use, suggesting no interaction with fathers' financial situation. This suggests that capability measures could be effectively capturing preferences and values around FWAs together with actual use – how fathers navigate their opportunities – while measuring use alone may reflect constraints imposed by financial circumstances.

Discussion and conclusion

This article provides an exploration of whether fathers' ability to utilize different FWAs impacts childcare responsibility across financial situations from a capabilities perspective (Robeyns, 2017; Sen, 1990, 2000). Results show that fathers with capabilities to adjust the start/end times of their working day (i.e. temporal flexibility) were *not* more likely to be primarily responsible for childcare than fathers without such capabilities, rejecting Hypothesis 1. In addition, fathers' capabilities for temporal flexibility were not associated with equally sharing childcare with the mother. This resonates with previous studies that found no significant association between fathers' flexitime and childcare involvement (Noonan et al., 2007; Rapoport and Le Bourdais, 2008). Moreover, upon further exploration, this study shows that among fathers struggling financially, capabilities for temporal flexibility had a negative association with the likelihood of being primarily responsible for childcare (rejecting Hypothesis 1a), and no significant effect among fathers in other financial circumstances. While findings suggest that flexitime is not necessarily a resource for fathers to accommodate childcare demands within financially struggling households (Verhoef et al., 2016), flexitime could be a resource for performing more routine housework, as others find (Chung and Booker, 2023). It is also possible that varying the start/end time of the working day creates inconsistencies in fathers' work schedules, making it more difficult to fulfil childcare responsibilities (Genadek and Gill, 2017). Furthermore, even if fathers struggling financially value, have sufficient opportunities and are able to use schedule flexibility, they may face significant stigma if they use their capabilities to make changes in their work schedule for care purposes (Chung, 2022), especially if it gives the impression of tardiness or unavailability in the workplace (Williams et al., 2013). Overall, fathers' temporal flexibility did not appear to be a meaningful resource for primary childcare involvement and could reinforce traditional divisions of caregiving responsibilities, sustaining relations of inequality (West and Zimmerman, 2009). Nonetheless, fathers with capabilities to work from home (i.e. spatial flexibility) were more likely than fathers without such capabilities to be primarily responsible for childcare, confirming Hypothesis 2. Fathers that value, have sufficient opportunities and are able to work from home might be more able to negotiate parenting strategies and accommodate working time and place to fulfil childcare demands (Becker and Moen, 1999). For example, by reducing commute times, doing childcare and work activities simultaneously (Andrew et al., 2020) or fulfilling tasks asynchronously (Carlson et al., 2021).

A crucial contribution of this study is demonstrating that the positive relationship between capabilities to work from home and responsibility for childcare is especially true among fathers struggling financially. However, no effect was found among fathers in precarious economic conditions, thus only partially supporting Hypothesis 2a. This difference could indicate that while fathers in very dire financial conditions might seek external childcare support, financially struggling fathers may find it more cost-effective to accommodate childcare demands without outsourcing (Sullivan, 2004; Verhoef et al., 2016). It could also suggest that financially struggling fathers potentially face less pressure to conform to traditional gender roles than fathers in very vulnerable financial situations, for whom masculinity and breadwinning tend to be a central element of their identity (Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004). However, these results could also imply that, in contrast to other FWAs, working from home allows financially struggling fathers to fulfil their caring ambitions (Bear, 2019) without making their caregiving role openly visible at the workplace, thus not overtly challenging traditional gender and 'ideal worker' norms and putting their jobs at risk (Williams et al., 2013). This is particularly important given that fathers in working-class occupations enjoy little managerial trust and often have their care aspirations met with scepticism and high control (Fiske and Berdahl, 2007; Perry-Jenkins, et al., 2017).

Overall, real opportunities to work remotely seem a crucial resource for childcare involvement among fathers struggling financially, thus contributing to a more equal division of caregiving. Since research shows that when both parents work from home, mothers tend to disrupt their working time more often than fathers (Dunatchik et al., 2021; Pablonia and Vernon, 2023), this could be particularly true if fathers were working from home alone while caring for their children. In turn, increased exposure to domestic and care needs and activities could have a positive and lasting impact on fathers' involvement in childcare (Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004; Carlson et al., 2021; Wray, 2020). The importance of the previous findings is highlighted by the fact that the first data exploration showed that lower socioeconomic conditions push primary childcare responsibility to one parent: the father, if struggling financially, and the mother, if financially very precarious. This suggests that vulnerable financial situations might reinforce traditional divisions of childcare (shouldered by the mother or relying more on informal childcare options) and, more importantly, that only fathers who are already more likely to be primarily responsible for childcare (those struggling financially) might find a care-oriented resource in their capabilities to work from home.

The contributions of this study are manifold. First, it provides much needed empirical evidence of the variation in flexible work depending on the type of arrangement and household financial conditions, which are crucial for childcare distribution and possible outsourcing. Second, by exploring the effect of fathers' flexible working capabilities on their primary responsibility for childcare, including and beyond shared responsibility with the mother, it provides novel insights into paternal involvement. Third, by conceptualizing capabilities for flexible working as a valued aspect of work that are enabled and can be realized, this study advances a contextualized understanding of FWAs beyond being (formally) available resources. In doing so, it offers a unique insight into the differences between fathers' work-care aspirations and behaviour. Lastly, this study challenges dominant assumptions about who benefits from FWAs for care by focusing on capabilities over

uptake, highlighting that when fathers in lower-income occupations have capabilities to work from home, they tend to take on more childcare responsibility.

Limitations and further research

There are some limitations to this study. First, it does not utilize couples' data. Rather, it relies on individual reports of childcare divisions, which may be subject to bias as men tend to overestimate the egalitarianism of childcare distributions (Bueno and Grau-Grau, 2021). Additionally, the non-representative nature of the data (although stratified by sex and age at the country level) limits the ability to establish cross-country comparisons. Finally, despite using survey data specifically designed to capture latent constructs such as capabilities for working flexibly, the absence of relevant measures of potential confounders (e.g. occupation) could obscure some findings.

Further research could explore whether findings remain consistent in the absence of persistent COVID-19 precautions, and whether (child)care relations have changed since. Investigating flexibility stigma among working men from different socioeconomic backgrounds is also crucial (Blair-Loy, 2003) in understanding how differently stigma affects fathers' capabilities to use flexible working for caring. Additionally, future studies should examine factors like migration background influencing fathers' work arrangements and caregiving, which is beyond this study's controls.

Despite limitations, this study provides valuable insights into the complex interplay between flexible working, childcare, gender and class (Chung and Booker, 2023; Williams et al., 2013). These insights highlight the need for tailored work flexibility policies that address fathers' financial circumstances while encouraging discussions about using FWAs for care, reducing stigma around caring masculinities (Tanquerel and Grau-Grau, 2020) and refraining flexible work from reinforcing traditional gender roles and divisions of childcare.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. These countries were selected as case studies of the ERC CAPABLE project given their varying levels of state involvement in supporting family caregiving (i.e. defamilialization; Leitner 2003), and the degree to which welfare states decentralized responsibility to lower levels of government (i.e. decentralization; Kazepov, 2010).
2. Notably, most mothers reported being primarily responsible for childcare (70%) or sharing it equally (22%), versus the father being primarily responsible (8%). This echoes studies finding an ‘overestimation’ of fathers’ contribution at home (Bueno and Grau-Grau, 2021).

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