

## How flexible is paid work organised in the public sector before and during the COVID 19 pandemic? A qualitative study

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### Abstract

*Parents' workload is permanently high due to the combination of paid work and unpaid care work for the family. The workload accumulates in the middle phase of life when small children are taken care of and the professional career is being prepared at the same time. Possibilities to make paid work more flexible allows to reconcile paid work and unpaid care work. The study aims to answer the following questions: Before the pandemic, what possibilities had young mothers in the German public sector to making paid work more flexible? Has the organization of it changed during the pandemic? How do mothers assess the change? What kind of organization do they wish for future? The results of the study can help to initiate a family-friendly work organization and personnel policy. In a qualitative research design, five individual cases were analysed by a content analysis.*

*It was shown (with the exception of case B) that there were no or only limited options for flexibility before the pandemic. All mothers wished to have more possibilities to make their paid work more flexible after the pandemic for combining paid work and family. The positive effects of flexible paid work for mothers became clear across all cases. However case B gave hints to risks because of flexible paid work. Also it became clear how heterogeneous the working conditions in the public sector are. The pandemic-related flexibilization showed that many tasks can be done in the home office, some of them even more efficient. Some employees would expand their volume of paid work if they could work from home. Since these are individual case studies, the results cannot be generalized.*

*Parents workload is permanently high due to the combination of paid work and care work. The burden results from the fact that the two areas of life compete for time. The workload accumulates in the middle phase of life when small children are taken care of and the professional career is being established at the same time. This time of life is called rush hour of life. A family- and gender-sensitive personnel policy could reduce the rush hour of life. This study shows the status quo of work organization and personnel policy in the public sector in Germany.*

**KEYWORDS:** FLEXIBILITY OF PAID WORK, HOME OFFICE, PUBLIC SECTOR, CARE WORK

### Introduction

In Germany, parents' and especially mothers' workload is constantly high due to the combination of paid work, childcare and housework. It leads to stress because of a high demand on time (Bujard & Panova, 2016; Destatis, 2015; Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 2012; Jurczyk et al., 2009; Klünder & Meier-Gräwe, 2017; Leopold, 2018; Lewicki & Greiner-Zwarg, 2015; Panova et al., 2017). The task of reconciling family and paid work is stressful for parents of almost every social milieu (Henry-Huthmacher, 2008). The way work is organised in companies, especially due to presence culture and full-time employment, makes it difficult for parents to combine paid work and unpaid care work for the family (Bujard & Schwebel, 2015; Jurczyk et al., 2009; Possinger, 2013). The private sphere is structurally inferior to the commercial sphere, so that family concerns are pushed back. It is the

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parents' task to find a way of dealing with the conflicting conditions (Becker-Schmidt, 2010; Henry-Huthmacher, 2008; Krüger & Levy, 2000). A comparison of European countries showed that Sweden has a large portion of companies with a pronounced family-friendly attitude and family-friendly measures. Compared to other European countries, Germany is considered average regarding the two aforementioned aspects. The study also showed that politics had a direct or an indirect influence thereon in all six European countries examined (Seyda & Stettes, 2011).

The burden currently results from the fact that these two areas of life, paid work and unpaid care work for the family, compete with one another. It currently accumulates in the middle phase of life, when small children need to be looked after and at the same time the professional biography is being established. This phase of life is called *rush hour of life*. It is particularly intense between the ages of 27 and 35, but can be extended to the age range between 25 to 40. Around the age of 30 is a time where the most pressure is assumed. However, not the age of the parents but that of the children is crucial. The rush hour begins with the birth of the first child and decreases again when the youngest child has reached school age (BMFSFJ, 2006; Bujard & Panova, 2016). As the children get older, the parents regain personal free time (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000).

To this day, in Germany, it is mostly mothers who are primarily responsible for care work in addition to their paid work. The more egalitarian the couple divides paid and care work, the more fathers are affected by the rush hour too (Bujard & Panova, 2016; Dechant et al., 2014). Companies can relieve parents by making work more flexible in terms of space and time (Henry-Huthmacher, 2008). Parents must be able to organise their paid work autonomously to really be relieved (Jürgens, 2003).

### **Aim of the study and methodological approach**

On March 16, 2020, guidelines to reduce social contacts were announced in Germany as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (German Federal Government, 2020). For this reason, employees increasingly worked from home. Taking that as a starting point, the following research questions were explored in this study: What options for making paid work more flexible were available to young mothers in the public service before the pandemic? How much agency do they have to organise their paid work during the pandemic? How do the mothers evaluate the reorganisation? How do they want their paid work organised in the future?

The study followed a qualitative research design that allows for analysing the human being as an object of investigation in his context and his individuality (Lamnek & Krell, 2010). Qualitative social research aims to understand social reality through the eyes of the subjects (Garz, 2007). Five individual cases were analysed. Case studies are the description and investigation of a typical individual case in practice. Rules are to be derived from this example; however, individual case studies are not generally valid. Subsequent quantitative studies can falsify or verify the results. Case studies are predestined for qualitative research approaches because they can uncover connections between different areas of life and make it possible to analyse institutions. They reveal maxims for action that establish institutional structures (Mayring, 2016).

The data for the study was primarily collected through problem-centred interviews (Mayring, 2016). These took place between April 23rd and May 11th in 2020 and were conducted via internet-based videotelephony. In addition, questionnaires were used to collect socio-demographic data and background information for each case. Only mothers whose youngest child had not yet reached school age were interviewed because it was assumed that they had the main responsibility for care work. All participants worked in an organisation of the federal German public service.

The transcribed interviews were processed and examined based on the qualitative content analysis, according to Mayring (2016). The transcripts were examined line by line for passages that contributed to answering the previously research questions. The selected contents were abstracted into categories, so that a category system was created. A category definition was formulated for each category developed. This mainly inductively derived category system was created during a first run of 20 percent of the entire material. It was revised process-wise until a final system was available with which the entire material was coded. The main categories found were *The participants' need for flexibility*, *Advantages / disadvantages for participants through flexibility*, *Advantages / disadvantages for participants through presence in the office*, *Conditions for flexibility*, *Organization of work before and while the pandemic*, *Attitude of the organisation towards flexibility*, and *Advantages / disadvantages for the organisation through flexibility*.

The most important information of the individual cases were bundled in *case summaries*. In the *case structuring*, the cases were presented according to the categories. It is the basis for the *case interpretations*. Finally, the individual cases were compared with each other (Mayring, 2016).

## Results

### Case summaries

#### Case A

The participant is 33 years old and is employed in a local organisation of the public sector (full-time, collective bargaining, permanent, management position). Before the pandemic, she worked 39 hrs (office: 39 hrs, home office: 0 hrs), during the social contact restrictions she worked 39 hrs (office: 19.5 hrs, home office: 19.5 hrs). While working from home, she looks after the two-year-old child at the same.

#### Case B

The participant is 35 years old and is employed in an organisation of federal state level (part-time, collective bargaining, fixed-term, no management position). Before the pandemic, she worked 25 hrs (office: 10 hrs, home office: 15 hrs), during the social contact restrictions, she worked 20 hrs (office: 0 hrs, home office: 20 hrs). Her child is two years old and is looked after by someone else while she is working in the home office.

#### Case C

The participant is 43 years old and is employed in an organisation of state-level (full-time, civil servant, no management position). Before the pandemic, she worked 40 hrs (office: 40 hrs, home office: 0 hrs), during the contact restrictions, she worked 40 hrs (office: 20 hrs, home office: 20 hrs). The five-, ten- and twelve-year-old children are looked after by her while she is working in the home office.

#### Case D

The participant is 39 years old and is employed in a corporation under public law (part-time, collective bargaining, permanent, managerial position). Before the pandemic, she worked 29 hrs (office: 29 hrs, home office: 0 hrs), during the contact restrictions, she worked 15 hrs (office: 4 hrs, home office: 11 hrs). At home, she mainly works when the four-year-old child is sleeping or is being looked after by the grandmother on the phone. Sometimes she looks after her child by herself while working in the home office.

#### Case E

The participant is 33 years old and is employed in a local organisation (part-time, civil servant, no management position). Before the pandemic, she worked 20 hrs (office: 20 hrs, home office: 0 hrs), during the contact restrictions 12 hrs (office: 8 hrs, home office: 4 hrs). The two-year-old child will be looked after by someone else while she is working in the home office.

### Case structuring

#### Case A

**Organisation of paid work:** Regular, what means *before* the pandemic, participant is given opportunities to make work more flexible in the form of flexible working hours from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. with compulsory working hours from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. and from 1.30 p.m. to 3 p.m., shortened on Fridays. Home office is not welcomed by superiors. Repeated applications by the participant to work from home were rejected on the basis that her reasons for wanting to work from home would be inadequate. The reasons are 1) not being able to adequately accomplish all daily tasks due to disruptions from colleagues and 2) reducing working hours due to the problem of reconciling work and family. These reasons were refused by her superiors citing the following arguments: 1) the fact that home office would be a novelty in the department and that 2) a workstation for working at home office would only be approved if more than one day a week were worked from home, which, however,

cannot be reconciled with the range of her tasks. Usually, she only works in the office, during the social contact restriction, she does not reduce her working hours, instead she chooses to work from home half of the time and looks after her child. In doing so, she can arrange her working hours flexibly to a limited extent, but must be reachable within the usual compulsory working hours. In her provisional home office she has access to her emails, but not to the organisations database. She procures the necessary work documents on the days she works in the office.

**Home office—Productivity:** The participant can only carry out some of her tasks in the home office. The ones which she can do from home can be fulfilled more reliably and efficiently than in the office, because there are no disruptions from colleagues. As a result, these tasks often remain unfinished while working in the office.

**Home office—Advantages for the participant:** In the context of her full-time employment, the participant calls it “a personal plus” (Participant comment A122) that she has less commute time and more time with her son.

**Need for work flexibility by the participant:** After the pandemic, she wishes to be allowed to work from home regularly one day a week. She suggests a division of tasks. Those tasks that can only be fulfilled in the office will be fulfilled there, those that can be fulfilled even more effectively in the home office will be fulfilled there. However, it must be ensured that someone is looked after the child so that she can work effectively and efficiently in the home office. In addition, she needs access to the organisation’s database since collecting the necessary documents in the office is time-consuming: “(...) but I need this access because otherwise it is double the work” (Participant comment A124f).

**Home office—Advantages for the organisation:** The organisation could benefit from allowing home office, as the participant can fulfil some of her tasks more reliably at home than in the office. In addition, the participant is thinking about reducing her working hours. The possibility to work from home one day a week has a major impact on this decision.

### *Case B*

**Organisation of paid work:** Usually, the participant is allowed to organise her paid work herself in terms of place and time. In this way, she can determine her working hours independently, taking into account the lecture times and the students’ timetables. If there is nothing against it, she can offer her seminars on the dates she prefers. The student’s timetables require that she is at the university two days a week. She worked exclusively from home and only went to the office every two to three weeks to talk to colleagues and to get new work materials which also were sent to her private address sometimes. Before the pandemic, there was no online teaching and during the lecture-free time, She can also access some of the materials online. As her tasks allow to work from home, under normal circumstances, she mostly works in the home office. For family reasons, she lives relatively far away from the office. During the social contact restrictions, she does not reduce her working hours and works exclusively from home while her child is being cared for.

**Home office—Productivity:** The participant can complete all her tasks in the home office, although in some cases she notices quality losses compared to working in the office. She reports that personal contact with students and colleagues enriches and simplifies work. She also finds it annoying that there is less storage space available in the home office compared to the office.

**Home office—Advantages and disadvantages for the participant:** Usually, the large scope for work flexibility allows her to continue doing her job, although she moved away because of a changed family situation. Due to the pandemic, she saves herself the commute. The disadvantage for the participant, however, is that her few days in the office are always very intense due to the many meetings. She is so involved that she hardly has time to eat and she is exhausted in the evening.

**Need for work flexibility by the participant:** The participant has no further need for flexibility.

**Home office—Advantage for the organisation:** By giving the participant extensive opportunities to make work more flexible, the organisation can keep her as an employee despite her change of residence.

*Case C*

**Organisation of paid work:** Usually, the participant only works in the office. She can organise her paid work autonomously within the compulsory working hours from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m., but the colleagues must ensure that at least one person from the department can be contacted. She has to work at least two hours a day. Despite the great needs of the employees, only a few home office workplaces (with access to the organisation's network) were available before the pandemic. Further expansion was relatively slow, but due to the pandemic, it got sped up. During the social contact restrictions, she does not reduce her working hours but does half of them from her home office and looks after her children at the same time. In the home office, she is not connected to the organisation's network and can neither access its database nor her emails. She works offline with files on her company laptop.

**Home office—Productivity:** Her tasks sometimes require direct, discursive and creative interaction with colleagues, so that there are limits to spatial and temporal flexibility. As a result, she can fulfil her tasks only to a limited extent during the pandemic-indexed home office. Those tasks that can be fulfilled from home can be fulfilled even more efficiently than in the office because of fewer disruptions.

**Home office—Advantages for the participant:** The participant and her partner both work full-time and look after their three children. Everyday family life is characterised by a great need for organisation and diverse arrangements. Opportunities to make work more flexible relieve the couple, for example, by saving on commuting time. The regular flexibilization of working hours enables the participant to maintain her workload and to adapt it to private obligations.

**Home office—Advantages for the participant:** After the pandemic, the participant would like to fulfil her paid work mainly from the office. However, if family obligations require it and no business reasons speak against it, she wishes to be able to work from home but with access to the organisation's network and ensured childcare. In addition, she wishes to extend her working hours to 10 p.m., as she would like to start work again when the children are in bed.

**Home office—Advantage for the organisation:** The participant can fulfil some of her tasks more efficiently from home office than from office.

*Case D*

**Organisation of paid work:** The organisation offers flexible working hours from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. with compulsory working hours. Regular work from the home office is only permitted in exceptional cases: "(...) that is clearly up to the board of directors" (Participant comment D63). Normally the participant works only in the office due to the lack of alternatives. During the social contact restrictions, she reduces her working hours and works mostly in the provisional home office during regular working hours. She works mainly when her child is sleeping or otherwise looked after it while working. In the home office, she can access the organisation's servers. If she is in the office during the pandemic, she provides herself with files for work at home, which she locks there for data protection reasons.

**Home office—Productivity:** She can fulfil her activities in the home office without restrictions: "(...) So I am not missing anything that would somehow (...) interrupt the workflow (...)" (Participant comment D139f). She just misses the usual meetings with the other team leaders, for which no virtual alternatives are scheduled.

**Home office—Productivity:** The participant saves on commuting time (2 hrs per day), which relieves her a lot in everyday life. That's why she now has a lot more time for sports. She expresses that she now has an increased quality of life.

**Home office—Advantage for the organisation:** The participant repeatedly expresses the desire to be allowed to work from home at least one day a week after the pandemic to save on commuting time. While working from home, her child must be cared for. She mainly wants to work in the office because she appreciates the exchange with colleagues very much.

**Home office—Advantage for the organisation:** The participant can work more productively at home because she is undisturbed: "(...) that is just plainly noticeable" (Participant comment D181).

*Case E*

**Home office—Productivity:** Normally, the participant can work during the flexible working hours from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., whereby one person from the team must always be present. Spatial work flexibility is seen by superiors “as a personal, burdensome wish of an individual employee” (Participant E360f). There is a pronounced presence culture in the organisation. Even during the social contact restrictions, home office was only granted “(...) if it absolutely has to be, and only as long as it absolutely has to be and then everything goes back to normal” (Participant comment E356ff).

This participant works exclusively in the office. During the social contact restriction, she reduces her regular working hours in favour of childcare. A third of the working hours are done from home during the regular flexible working hours. She has the usual access to programs and many folders. She supplies herself with physical work documents on her days in the office. While she works in the home office, her child is looked after by someone else.

**Home office—Productivity:** The participant is positively surprised by how well she can work in the home office: “I haven’t missed a lot” (Participant comment E227).

**Home office: Advantages for the participant:** This participant reports that she can work more effectively at home than in the office because she is disturbed by her colleagues less. The time she saves by commuting relieves her in everyday family life. She also finds it advantageous to be able to provide childcare and paid employment at the same time for short periods if there is no other way (“So you didn’t have to leave everything on the spot”, (Participant comment E30) and to be able to switch quickly between care and paid work: “(...) you can get to work quickly and quickly leave again (...)” (Participant comment E26).

**Need for work flexibility by the participant:** Despite her positive experience in the home office, the participant has no need to work regularly from home post-pandemic. Her part-time job can be easily combined with her family obligations despite the presence culture. If she would increase her working hours, however, she would like to work partly from home. Nevertheless, she would like to keep the newly set up home office workstation even during the current working hours in order to be able to react flexibly if care and paid work obligations require it. She would also like to have a business telephone so that she no longer has to use her private telephone.

**Home office—Advantage for the organisation:** For important projects, the participant would like to work additional hours during the week and the weekends if she had a permanent home office workstation and if she was allowed to work from home outside of absolutely exceptional situations. She is currently refraining from doing this and is instead sticking to the regular working hours, as she suspects that flexibility is not desired by her superiors.

**Case interpretations***Case A*

Before the pandemic, there were limits to make working time flexible due to the compulsory working hours, and there was no possibility to make it more flexible spatially. In the context of the pandemic, work has been made more flexible in terms of space and time. Post-pandemic, the mother would like to work from home one day a week. It is to be expected that she could fulfil her professional tasks more efficiently, and that she would have more quality time with her son.

*Case B*

Even before the pandemic, the participant was able to make her paid work largely flexible in terms of both space and time. Usually, the participant was rarely in the office. These days were intense because of a high workload and many appointments. Due to the social contact restrictions, her paid work has been made spatially completely flexible, which results in a loss of quality. She was relieved by the further flexibility, as well as by saving time on the commute. Because of the loss of quality, she still wants her regular work organisation back, with which she has already been able to combine family and work.

### Case C

Before the pandemic, making paid work more flexible didn't have "the highest priority (...)" (Participant comment C325f) for superiors of the organisation. It was expanded in the context of the social contact restrictions. The already existing large scope of working time helps the participant to reconcile private and professional obligations. Because of her private obligations, she wishes for increased spatial and temporal flexibility post-pandemic. It is expected that she would be relieved because of the increase in efficiency in paid work.

### Case D

Normally, the organisation adheres to a culture of presence. Due to the pandemic, the participant works from home, which is again in quality of life for her. There are clear relief effects. The participant works more efficiently and has more personal time so that she can do sports more often. Post-pandemic, she wishes to be allowed to work from home regularly at least one day a week.

### Case E

Both regularly and during the pandemic, the work organisation was "(...) handled restrictively (...)" (Participant comment E355f) by superiors. In the context of her current low working hours, the participant has no need to make her paid work more flexible, although she mentions relief effects. Post-pandemic, she would like to be allowed regularly to organise her work flexibly in order to combine unforeseen care obligations with her paid work.

### Case comparison

Although the positive effects of flexible paid work for the mothers became clear in all cases, it was also shown—with the exception of Case B—that there were no or only limited options for flexibility before the pandemic. Post-pandemic, all mothers would like to be able to make their paid work more flexible, either regularly or depending on the situation in daily life, in the context of the compatibility problem. In addition to the positive aspects mentioned, Case B also gives indications of stresses that can arise through the flexibilization of paid work.

It was also shown how heterogeneous the working conditions are in the organisations examined. Since these are individual case studies, the results cannot be generalised.

### Summary and outlook

More flexible paid work can relieve parents in the rush hour of life and helps them to maintain a good work-life balance. The five analysed cases showed that for the public sector, there were no or only limited options for making paid work more flexible outside of the pandemic, although there were positive aspects for the organisation as well as positive aspects for the mothers. Some tasks can be done more efficiently in the home office than in the office, as the pandemic-related flexibility showed. Previous company patterns of work organisation should be questioned. They can be replaced by new ones that minimised the stress during the rush hour of life so that parents can provide care for others and themselves. Superiors act as change agents. They should receive practical suggestions for a family- and gender-sensitive personnel policy, be informed and trained. After all, they should act as good role models themselves, in order to break down inhibitions among employees. Politicians should provide the regulatory framework for family-friendly structures in companies. In addition, a high-quality and quantitatively broadly developed infrastructure for childcare should be offered.

Doing so would pave the way to an alternative economic understanding that also allows time for care work, which is too often discredited as unproductive. Home Economics and women's studies, however, have demonstrated the social and economic value of this work (Becker-Schmidt, 2010; Hausen, 2000; Ohrem et al., 2013).

### Author biography

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