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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Flexibility Stigma Across Europe: How National Contexts can Shift the Extent to which Flexible Workers are Stigmatised

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Abstract

Although flexible working has expanded rapidly, especially during the pandemic, biased views against flexible workers – namely, flexibility stigma - are still prevalent and returning. Flexibility stigma hinders worker's take up of flexible working arrangements and can make flexible working arrangements result in negative outcomes for worker's well-being and productivity. This study examines how national cultural and policy contexts shape flexibility stigma levels within a country. We use a multilevel approach using the Eurobarometer dataset of 2018, covering 28 European countries, matched with national level aggregate data on policy and culture. Results show that in countries with a more work-life balance work culture and egalitarian gender norms, we see less prevalence of flexibility stigma. Similarly, in countries with generous family-friendly policies, workers are less likely to have negative perception towards flexible working. Finally, stronger bargaining positions of workers, may it be through stronger union power or through better labour market conditions, helps remove stigmatised views around workers who use flexible working arrangements. This study evidences the importance of contexts that shape views around flexible working, to help us better understand policy changes needed to ensure better flexible working practices.

Keywords Flexible working · Stigma · Cross-national variation · Europe · Culture · Policies

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1 Introduction

Alongside the increase in workers' demand for flexible working arrangement (FWA)s that allow workers more control over when and where they work such as flexitime and teleworking, we have seen progress in the legislative developments in the provision of FWAs over the years (Alexander et al., 2021; Deloitte, 2018). With the technological advancements that allow work to be carried out in a more flexible manner with regards to the location and time, we could have expected a much steeper rise in the use of such FWAs across Europe. However, examining data from the past two decades before the COVID-19 pandemic, we do not see a notable increase in workers access to and use of FWAs (Chung, 2022). Scholars have noted that this may be due to the prevailing negative perception against workers who use FWAs, namely, flexibility stigma (Munsch, 2016; Williams et al., 2013). Flexibility stigma is the idea that workers who use FWAs are less productive, motivated, and committed to their workplace compared to workers who do not work flexibly. Flexible workers subsequently experience negative career outcomes. When such views exist, workers are less likely to (request to) work flexibly regardless of their policy entitlements, as there may be potential negative consequences on their careers and promotion chances (see for evidence, Fernández-Cornejo et al., 2019; Kasperska et al., 2024; Petts et al., 2022; Tanquerel & Santistevan, 2022; Thébaud & Pedulla, 2022). What is more, biased views against workers using FWAs are a major reason why workers end up working harder and longer when using FWAs, with work encroaching on the private lives of workers (Chung & Van der Horst, 2020; Glass & Noonan, 2016; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Lott, 2020). This results in negative outcomes for workers' well-being and gender equality, and in negative consequences for productivity especially in the longer run (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007).

Although the rise in homeworking practices during the early phase of the pandemic has reduced biased views against flexible workers to a certain extent (Chung et al., 2020), we see that such views still exist and are returning (Li, 2022). Evidence gathered in recent years show that flexibility stigma still acts as a barrier for workers in accessing FWAs, furthering inequality patterns in the labour market (Crush, 2022; Wyatt et al., 2022). In sum, for workers to make better use of FWAs in the post-pandemic labour markets, without incurring negative consequences, we need to find ways to tackle the flexibility stigma.

Stigma against individuals, rather than coming from factual based information, are driven by societal conditions, cultural norms, and institutional policies (Goffman, 1990). Similarly, when people hold bias against flexible workers, they are not evidence based. Rather, such views arise due to the normative views around the image of a good or productive worker (Williams et al., 2013). As such views are not only shaped by norms around work and gender roles, but also by national family policies and workers' negotiation power, flexibility stigma is likely to vary across the diverse national context across Europe. This is tested using a multilevel approach and the 2018 Eurobarometer data covering 28 European countries (the then EU member states) which is the most recent data set including measures of flexibility stigma that is cross-nationally comparable. This paper provides not only a better understanding of the potential causes of flexibility stigma, but also evidence for policy actions to be taken when introducing flexible working policies to ensure that flexible working can support both workers and companies.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Defining Flexibility Stigma

Flexibility stigma is defined as the discrimination workers face when using various types of FWAs for family responsibilities (Williams et al., 2013). One core reason behind this stigma or discrimination comes from the prevailing 'standard' or 'ideal worker' norm within a society. In many of our societies, the ideal worker is viewed as a worker who works long hours in the office, prioritises work above everything else in life, without any other obligations outside of work (Acker, 1990; Williams, 1999). Proximity bias, namely the preferential treatment managers show towards workers that are more visible to managers, also explain why homeworkers can be stigmatised (Bloom et al., 2015; Cristea & Leonardi, 2019). Thus, not working long hours in the office and not sticking to fixed working hours regime, especially to address caring responsibilities, stigmatises the worker as someone who are not devoted, committed, or productive as other workers (Berdahl et al., 2018; Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Fernández-Cornejo et al., 2019). This is despite the evidence that shows that flexible workers are often more productive (for example, Bloom et al., 2015; Boltz et al., 2022) and more motivated, loyal, and committed than other workers (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Kelliher & de Menezes, 2019).

There are different ways in which the literature operationalises flexibility stigma (Chung, 2020). *The poor worker stigma* entails the negative assumptions workers have towards flexible workers' work capacity (e.g., Munsch, 2016). The *negative career consequences* dimension of flexibility stigma measures the impact of flexible working on promotions, career prospects, and income trajectories (e.g., Leslie et al., 2012; Lott & Chung, 2016). In this study, we explore both types of stigma, namely what respondents believe is the general (negative) perception (not only the respondents' own) towards flexible workers, and the perceived negative career consequences of flexible working (again perceived by the general population, not only that experienced by the worker).

2.2 National Contexts and Stigma

Stigma is shaped by social interactions and structures rather than being embedded in biological characteristics (Goffman, 1990), or in our case, objective truths around flexible workers' true work capacity or motivation. Such views are shaped by social norms around what a good performing, 'ideal' worker looks like (Berdahl et al., 2018), which is shaped by national institutions. This paper specifically examines the role of national norms around work and gender roles, and national level family policies, labour market institutions, and labour market conditions. It is important to note that these factors have been identified as some of the key factors explaining access and use of flexible working arrangements in previous studies (Chung, 2019; den Dulk et al., 2013; Wiß, 2017).

2.2.1 Cultural Contexts and Stigma

In contexts where the perception of 'the ideal worker' is someone who can devote themself to work without other responsibilities outside of work, bias against flexible workers are more likely to occur (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020; Williams et al., 2013). The stereotyp-

ing of the flexible worker stems from these workers' deviation from this particular ideal or standard worker norm. Not surprisingly, many of the studies (e.g., Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Chung, 2020; Munsch, 2016) that evidence flexibility stigma are from countries (e.g. US or UK) and occupations (e.g. STEM) where such work cultures prevail. However, we know that such cultures do not necessarily exist across all countries, and there are variations. In countries where there is a more balanced notion of work and private life and where workers expect and are expected to have a good work-life balance, having responsibilities outside of work is likely to be seen as the standard (Been et al., 2017). In such contexts, using flexible working to meet family and other life demands is less likely to be seen as deviating from the ideal or standard work type, which makes flexible workers less likely to incur any negative career outcomes (see also, Petts et al., 2022; van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2020). Work centric cultures are therefore expected to increase negative connotations towards flexible workers, which will increase their likelihood of experiencing negative career outcomes.

H1 *Workers in work-centric cultures are more likely to perceive/experience flexibility stigma.*

Similarly, gender norms also influence how and for whom flexible working is stigmatised and leads to negative career outcomes. Gender norms can shift employers' and co-workers' assumptions around men and women's flexible working. Biased views around women's flexible working are largely based on the idea that women will prioritise family roles when working flexibly, while men prioritise work (Chung, 2022; Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020). However, such gendered patterns of flexibility working is more evident in countries where gender roles are more traditional, especially in relation to men's breadwinning roles and women's caregiving responsibilities (Kley & Reimer, 2023; Kurowska, 2020).

In addition, egalitarian gender norms can also help shape the general work cultures of society, shaping the general prevalence of flexibility stigma. Long-hours based ideal worker culture is inevitably linked to masculine work cultures (Acker, 1990; Berdahl et al., 2018), based on the male-breadwinner female-caregiver model. This is where the male worker can devote themselves only to work without any other responsibilities outside of work, because of all the reproductive work is carried out by the female partner in heterosexual relationships. This is why it is especially in male-dominated occupations long-hours work devotions are expected, and biased views against flexible workers are more prominent (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Williams et al., 2013). In egalitarian cultures, men and women are expected to take on similar roles in the household – e.g. men are expected to take on as much childcare and housework as women, and women are expected take on as much paid work as men – and all workers, not only women, are expected to (have to) balance work with responsibilities outside of work (Knight & Brinton, 2017). In such cultures, we expect the notions of what constitutes as an 'ideal worker' to change, to be someone who has demands coming both from work and family (Chung, 2024a). Accordingly, not only are FWAs more widely available in such countries (Kley & Reimer, 2023), biased views against flexible workers are likely to be reduced.

H2 *Workers in countries with traditional gender norms are more likely to perceive flexibility stigma.*

2.2.2 Institutions and Stigma

Institutional theory argues that institutions, laws, and policies shift the norms and culture in society and change the way individuals and organisations behave (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In countries with generous family policies, the access to and the use of family-friendly FWAs are likely to be seen as part of the general terms of employment rather than 'a gift' that needs to be reciprocated (Been et al., 2017; van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2020). Capabilities theory also argues that national policies can change the prevalent norms in societies in terms of what are acceptable work-family reconciliation practices for individuals (Hobson & Fahlén, 2009). For example, when there are generous ear-marked parental leaves for fathers, fathers are able to take a larger role in childcare and housework without being stigmatised for deviating away from the 'masculine' image (Petts et al., 2022). Similarly, generous family policies at the national-level – such as childcare policies or leaves – can shape cultural norms around work-life balance and shift the notion of the 'ideal worker' to assume a good work-life balance as the norm for both men and women (see also, Bünning & Hipp, 2022; Chung, 2024a). This can help reduce negative views against those who use flexible working for care purposes and reduce the likelihood they experience negative career outcomes.

What is more, generous family policies can shape employer's perception of how workers will use flexible working for care purposes. When work facilitating policies (Misra et al., 2011) such as childcare provision are not available, parents may have no other option but to use flexible working arrangements to meet family demands whilst working (Chung & Van der Horst, 2018). In such contexts, employers may be more suspicious about workers' flexible working – expecting a blurring of or encroachment of family life into working time/space when workers work flexibly (e.g. caring for children when working from home). On the other hand, when generous policies exists, for example cheap accessible public childcare, workers may be better able to manage their work-family boundaries better when working flexibly (Kossek et al., 2006). This will allow workers to better focus on work even when working flexibly (e.g. children in childcare when worker works from home). This may change the perceptions around flexible workers and their work capacities when working flexibly reducing bias against them, and subsequently reducing the likelihood of experiencing negative career outcomes.

H3 *Workers in countries with generous family policies are less likely to perceive flexibility stigma.*

2.2.3 Workers' Bargaining Power and Stigma

Worker's bargaining power can be an important factor explaining the extent to which FWAs lead to negative career outcomes. According to the power resource theory, strong trade unions can protect not only the workers in their own trade union or company, but also ensure the strong protection of workers in general by providing "contagion from the left"(Korpi, 1989). This includes supporting workers taking up FWAs and enabling them to be better protected from any potential discrimination, which further supports policy take up (Budd & Mumford, 2004). Similarly, we expect that in countries where stronger unions are pres-

ent, negative views against flexible workers to be less present, largely by normalising the use of FWAs or other types of family-friendly arrangements (Lyness et al., 2012). Studies have shown that unions influence worker's bargaining power by shaping national-level policies and levelling-up the general working conditions of workers in general, ensuring the development of family-friendly working condition (Berg et al., 2004), or stopping the retrenchment of FWAs (Jacobi, 2023) at both company and national levels. This explains why stigma against flexible working is expected to be weaker in such countries. However, in this case, we expect that union power would be more relevant in protecting workers from negative career outcomes rather than reducing the bias against flexible workers more directly.

H4 *Workers in countries with strong unions are less likely to perceive flexibility stigma.*

One last yet important context factor for consideration is the labour market conditions of the country. Attitudes around work and work-life balance changes due to labour market and economic conditions, largely due to the changes in workers' individual and collective bargaining power and along with it different levels of competition amongst workers for jobs (Lyness et al., 2012). When there is greater supply of labour than demand, namely high unemployment, workers will have weaker negotiation power over employers, and higher competitions among workers for jobs. Under such conditions, it is more likely that workers are asked to put work first, and prioritise work above all else (see also, Schor, 2008) leaving little space for the use of FWAs especially for care purposes. Under these circumstances, biased views against workers who use FWAs for work-life balance purposes will be more commonplace. On the other hand, when demand for workers outstrips supply, i.e., low unemployment rates, workers may have more power to demand better work-life balance from their employers (den Dulk et al., 2013). What is more, when there is greater demand than supply of workers, employers may use family-friendly flexible working arrangements as incentives to help recruit and retain workers (Batt & Valcour, 2003). Flexible working, even for care purposes, is less likely to be viewed with negative connotations under such contexts. Similarly, flexible working is less likely to lead to negative career outcomes, as employers are more likely to support worker's work-life balance demands when there is a labour shortage.

H5 *Workers in countries with high unemployment rates are more likely to perceive flexibility stigma.*

2.3 Variation Across Gender

Women's views around the prevalence of flexibility stigma may be influenced more by national contexts than that of men. Some scholars argue that women are more likely to be stigmatised when taking up flexible working arrangements (Chung, 2020; Munsch, 2016). This is partly due to the gendered outcomes of FWAs where women end up doing more domestic work when working flexibly whereas men do more paid work (Kim, 2020; Wang & Cheng, 2023). What is more, women's relative bargaining position is weaker both at home and in the labour market, and usually are penalised more in the labour market (Jones

et al., 2023). Thus, women may be more sensitive to contextual changes when it comes to flexibility stigma perception. For example, previous studies have evidenced how women's employment patterns are shaped by national institutions such as family policies more than that of men's (Korpi et al., 2013) and company contexts influence women's flexible working outcomes than that of men's (e.g., van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2020).

Other scholars argue that men are more likely to be the bearers of biased views against flexible working (Chung, 2020; Munsch, 2016; Thébaud & Pedulla, 2022), because they are more likely to (be able to) adhere to the work devotion culture of a company (Berdahl et al., 2018; Blair-Loy, 2009). However, when men take up FWAs they may experience stronger stigma, as men's, especially father's FWA use for family purposes, makes them deviate away from both the male-breadwinner image and the ideal worker image (Rudman & Mescher, 2013). This is why we can also expect that men's perception around flexibility stigma may be influenced more by its embedded contexts.

Summing up, we do not set concrete hypotheses on the direction of the association but expect that there will be gender variations in the way contexts influence worker's perception.

3 Data/Methods

3.1 Data

This paper uses the data from the Eurobarometer survey on work-life balance (European Commission, 2018), which was conducted in June-July 2018 by TNS Political & Social (at the request of European Commission) via telephone. This dataset was chosen as it is one of the few if not the only available dataset that captures workers' attitudes towards flexible working that is comparable across a wide range of countries. It covers 28 European countries, including EU member states and the UK. The total sample size is 26,582, but we restrict the analysis to those who are currently employed and working in a company that uses any type of FWAs[1]. Here FWAs include part-time, flexitime (adapted beginning and finishing working times), working from home (telework) or being able to take some time off for private emergencies (medical issues, a sick child, etc.). This includes a total of 69% of all employed workers. Having checked for cross-national variance in the proportion of workers that are excluded, we did not find a large variance (Appendix C). However, we understand that biased views against flexible workers may be underrepresented in countries with lower proportion of workers included in the analysis. This is because previous studies (Kasperska et al., 2024; Munsch et al., 2014; van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2020) indicate that the more experience people have towards flexible working, and the more flexible working is widespread, it is less likely to be met with stigma. In this sense we may be under-estimating the stigma levels in countries where fewer respondents are working in environments where flexible working is present, and not present in the data set. Given that many of the context variables that explain the levels of flexibility stigma across countries also explain workers' access to flexible working, what we can expect is that importance of context may be even

[1] The survey assumes that you needed to have some exposure to flexible working/workers to be able to answer these questions, even if you yourself do not have access to it directly. Employees includes those who answered to be employees or manual workers, therefore excluding the self-employed and those without professional status (namely, inactive).

greater than what we find in this paper. We further remove all cases where there were any missing responses in the variable used for this study, leaving us with a total of 6,319 cases across the 28 countries. For more details about the sample reduction, see Appendix B. For more information about the data see: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2185.

3.2 Dependent Variable: Flexibility Stigma

The Eurobarometer includes two variables that measure flexibility stigma, specifically measuring how respondents think flexible workers are negatively viewed (by others) and the subsequent career consequence. Note that the question does not measure the respondents' own negative stereotypes against flexible workers. Respondents were asked "regardless of if you personally used, or not, these flexible work arrangements in the company or organisation where you currently work (or last worked), please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements about the way these arrangements are perceived." "(Flexible working) is/was badly perceived by colleagues" and "(flexible working) has/had a negative impact on one's career (i.e., promotion, bonus, type of work allocated etc.)". Respondents can choose between totally disagree, tend to disagree, tend to agree, or totally agree. All variables are coded so higher score entails stronger stigma against flexible workers. As the correlation between the two variables is only at 0.4 (significant at 0.001 level), we look at the two variables separately, and as dichotomous variables due to the skewness of the response. Those who totally agree and tend to agree are coded as 1, the rest as 0. However, as a robustness check we also examine the variables as ordinal variables (see Appendix Table G).

3.3 Independent Variables: National Contexts

There are various ways in which we can measure the extent to which a society is an ideal worker/long-hours work culture. One way is to look at the average working hours of full-time workers (Schor, 2008) which can indicate the extent to which long-hours work is expected in the country. This is derived from the EUROSTAT 2018 data. Other studies use work-centrality attitudes of the country (den Dulk et al., 2013). Work centrality is the national average factor score based on five variables measuring how central work is to individuals' lives measured through questions such as "Work should always come first, even if it means less spare time". Gender norms are measured by the national average of factor scores of one factor consisting of four items measuring gender role attitudes of individuals, including questions such as "When a mother works for pay, the children suffer". We use the 2017 European Value Study survey to capture work-centrality and gender norms of the country. Although a year lagged, this was the closest year data available that covered majority of the countries included in our data. For detailed list of variables used and the factor analysis results please see Appendix A.

This paper focuses on three different aspects of family policies to examine how they impact perceptions toward flexible working. Firstly, general generosity of family policies is measured through public expenditure on family policies as a % of GDP. Secondly, we include a measure indicating the generosity of work-facilitating policies (Misra et al., 2011), as it was found to be key in explaining access to (family-friendly) flexible working policies (see also, Chung, 2019; den Dulk et al., 2013; Lyness et al., 2012). More specifically, we

use the proportion of children using formal childcare for age group 0–2 years. Both data comes from Eurostat and is from 2015, as we can expect a lagged effect of policy on individual's attitudes. Thirdly, we include paternity leave as a separate family policy variable as previous studies have shown how such policies can change the gender norms around whose responsibility it is to care (Hobson & Fahlén, 2009) and with it, stigmatisation of policy use (Petts et al., 2022). Paternity leave is measured as the length of paid paternity, parental and home care leave available to fathers for the year 2015 and is derived from the OECD Family Database. Note that models including paternity leave do not include all countries due to the availability of data. Union density and collective bargaining coverage rates (as a percentage of wage earners) are used to measure workers' bargaining power. Both variables are from the ICTWSS data set 5.1 for the year 2018 or the closest year available. Finally, labour market condition is measured through the unemployment rates for the year 2018 derived from EUROSTAT. All context variables have been centred and standardised in the model, allowing us to compare the coefficient sizes. For more details on the operationalisation and descriptive analysis of the data please see the Appendix A and B.

3.4 Control Variables/Individual Level

Based on previous studies (e.g., Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Chung, 2020), we include the following variables as control variables: *age* is used as a categorical variable 15–24 (reference group), 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64, 65 + as we expect a non-linear relationship; *gender* (female reference); *education* is included as binary variable with 0 referring to "upper secondary or below" and 1 "tertiary or above"; *care responsibility* is measured into four categories, namely, no caring responsibility (reference) caring for children under 3, children between the ages 3–6, children between the ages 7–14, and other caring responsibilities (e.g., elderly or disabled household members); and a binary variable indicating whether the respondents' place of residence, where they live in a city (reference) or a rural area. For work characteristics we include *working hours of workers* distinguishing between full-time (reference) and part-time workers (self-defined) and include *occupation* as categorical variables using the Eurobarometer definition. More detailed notes on the construction of variables along with the descriptive statistics of the variables used in this paper can be found in Appendix A and B. Although there may be other factors that can contribute to explaining our dependent variables, we have restricted the number of controls due to availability of appropriate variables in the dataset (e.g. sector) and the sample size of the data.

3.5 Method

Two-level random intercept multilevel multivariate regression models are conducted to examine how national contexts are associated with flexibility stigma (see Hox, 2002). Multilevel modelling assumes that the lower-level sample (i.e. individuals in this paper) is subject to the influences of groupings (i.e. countries). Thus, it is useful to examine how the national contexts influence the perception of individual workers on flexible working. We first examine the cross-national variations in the flexibility stigma, including all individual-level variables. We include each national context variables one at a time in each model to examine how different national contexts derived from the theories discussed in Sect. 3 can explain such variations. We also test context factors against each other by including two

national-level variables at a time, which is the maximum number we can include in our model given the small number of country cases we have in the data set (Stegmueller, 2013). As we expected that national contexts may shape workers' perceptions for men and women differently, we run the analysis separately for men and women to examine gender differences. As a robustness check, an interaction term with gender and country context variables with gender random slopes are used to statistically test for the gender variation in the association between country contexts and flexibility stigma levels. As a final robustness check we examine the variable as ordinal rather than dichotomous variables. We use the meqrlogit, meologit function of STATA 15.1 for all models.

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive Results

Firstly, as we can see in the Figs. 1 and 2, about 1/3 of European individuals in the survey in 2018 thought that flexible working was viewed negatively or that it leads to negative career outcomes. There are large cross-national variations. In the Nordic welfare states, such as Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Estonia, not many hold stigmatised views against flexible workers and respondents are less likely to feel that FWAs lead to negative career outcomes. On the other hand, in many Southern European countries, like Greece, Cyprus, Romania, and Spain, and liberal countries like Ireland and the UK, stigma against flexible workers are more prevalent. There are some differences depending on the type of stigma we explored again showing the need to examine these two separately.

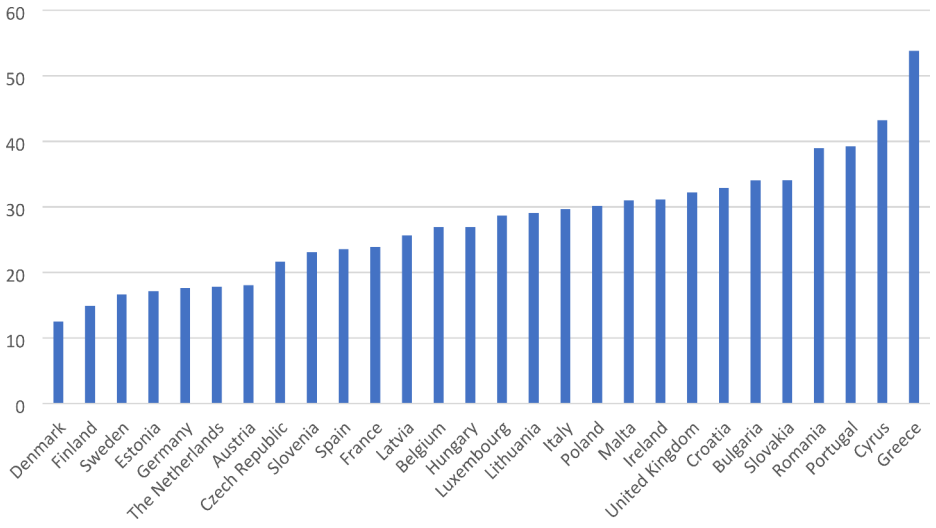

Fig. 1 Flexibility Stigma 1 (flexible working is badly perceived by colleagues) across Europe (% of workers who totally agree or tend to agree)

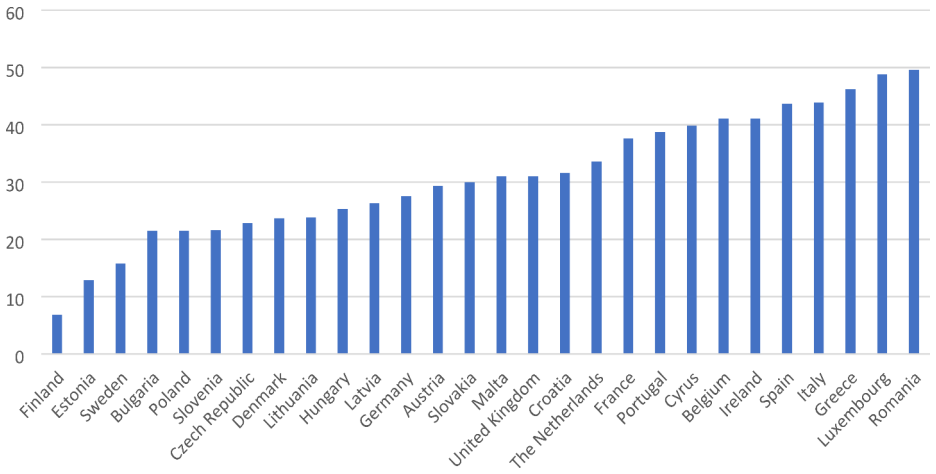

Fig. 2 Flexibility Stigma 2 (flexible working has/had a negative impact on one's career) across Europe (% of workers who totally agree or tend to agree)

4.2 Multivariate Results

Examining the empty model (available upon request), the interclass correlation for the perception that colleagues view flexible working negatively (Stigma1) has 5.7% of its variance at the country level (men 6.0%, women 5.7%), and for the perception that flexible working results in negative career outcomes (Stigma 2), it is 8.1% (men 7.9% and women 7.7%). Although this is not a large variance attributed at the country level, this is not uncommon in multilevel models where countries are set as 2nd levels (Bryan & Jenkins, 2016). What is more, as we will see in the later section, country contexts significantly explain large parts of the variance allowing us to better understand how best to tackle such biases against flexible workers.

Table 1 explores the individual level characteristics that can explain the variance across European individuals in their perceptions that flexibility stigma exists in their societies. Women are more likely to think that flexible workers are viewed negatively, both in terms of colleagues' perception and expected career outcomes. This mirrors previous studies (e.g., Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Chung, 2020; Munsch, 2016) that have shown that although men may be more likely to hold negative biases against flexible workers, women are more likely to fear (or have directly experienced) negative career outcomes. Variation across age groups is found in people's perception of how flexible working can be perceived negatively by colleagues, but not of flexible working leading to negative career outcomes. Younger workers (15–24 and 25–34) are less likely to think flexible working is negatively viewed. In closer inspection (3rd column), we find that among women, young workers (15–24) are less likely than all other age groups to think this way. Somewhat opposite tendency was found among men where younger workers (15–24) are more likely than some older age groups (25–34, 35–44, 45–54) to think that flexible working will negatively impact their career outcomes. Those who have higher education are less likely to perceive flexibility stigma, whereas manual workers are more likely to perceive it. Those with caring responsibility for young children (under the age of 3) are more likely to say that flexibility stigma exists.

Table 1 Multivariate analysis explaining flexibility stigma across 28 countries

	Colleagues perceive negatively			Negative career outcomes		
	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
Age (ref: 15–24)						
25–34	0.275+ (0.146)	0.007 (0.198)	0.583** (0.222)	-0.247+ (0.133)	-0.453* (0.185)	-0.066 (0.195)
35–44	0.411** (0.145)	0.133 (0.197)	0.723** (0.218)	-0.199 (0.131)	-0.364* (0.184)	-0.036 (0.191)
45–54	0.334* (0.141)	0.136 (0.195)	0.596** (0.210)	-0.138 (0.127)	-0.360* (0.182)	0.080 (0.182)
55–64	0.368* (0.144)	0.128 (0.199)	0.644** (0.215)	-0.130 (0.130)	-0.280 (0.185)	0.032 (0.187)
65+	0.351 (0.221)	0.100 (0.312)	0.651* (0.318)	-0.011 (0.210)	-0.231 (0.306)	0.248 (0.293)
Gender (ref: female)						
Male	-0.188** (0.221)			-0.188** (0.057)		
Education (ref: upper secondary or below)	-0.241*** (0.063)	-0.245** (0.094)	-0.245** (0.086)	-0.161** (0.061)	-0.191* (0.091)	-0.124 (0.083)
Care responsibility (ref: no responsibility)						
Child under 3	0.248* (0.110)	0.124 (0.165)	0.346* (0.150)	0.216* (0.108)	0.281+ (0.159)	0.154 (0.150)
Child 3–6	0.035 (0.097)	0.101 (0.145)	-0.020 (0.133)	0.071 (0.095)	0.008 (0.143)	0.112 (0.129)
Child 7–14	-0.057 (0.077)	-0.134 (0.118)	-0.001 (0.105)	0.021 (0.075)	-0.194+ (0.116)	0.168+ (0.100)
Other	0.125 (0.078)	-0.096 (0.127)	0.277** (0.100)	0.102 (0.076)	-0.120 (0.123)	0.248* (0.097)
Live in rural area or town (ref: city)	0.022 (0.060)	0.077 (0.090)	-0.064 (0.082)	-0.057 (0.059)	0.048 (0.088)	-0.153+ (0.079)
Occupations (ref: professional)						
General management	-0.045 (0.154)	0.124 (0.205)	-0.195 (0.240)	-0.311* (0.153)	-0.346+ (0.205)	-0.213 (0.234)
Middle management	0.124 (0.104)	0.327* (0.149)	-0.035 (0.148)	0.084 (0.101)	0.082 (0.142)	0.134 (0.142)
Civil servant	0.159 (0.109)	0.462** (0.168)	-0.048 (0.143)	0.021 (0.105)	0.093 (0.161)	0.020 (0.140)
Office clerk	0.009 (0.111)	0.187 (0.190)	-0.107 (0.140)	-0.136 (0.106)	-0.183 (0.180)	-0.071 (0.136)
Manual	0.583*** (0.116)	0.636*** (0.164)	0.544** (0.165)	0.421*** (0.115)	0.357* (0.160)	0.483** (0.167)
Other	0.259** (0.094)	0.442** (0.141)	0.149 (0.127)	0.126 (0.091)	0.188 (0.133)	0.137 (0.125)
Working part time (ref: full-time)	-0.148+ (0.077)	-0.043 (0.145)	-0.219* (0.094)	0.188** (0.072)	-0.058 (0.139)	0.284** (0.087)
Constant	-1.298*** (0.185)	-1.420*** (0.240)	-1.441*** (0.251)	-0.611** (0.185)	-0.593* (0.231)	-0.859*** (0.236)
Var level 1	0.207 (0.062)	0.226 (0.077)	0.203 (0.066)	0.319 (0.094)	0.309 (0.100)	0.302 (0.095)
Var level 2	$\pi^2/3$	$\pi^2/3$	$\pi^2/3$	$\pi^2/3$	$\pi^2/3$	$\pi^2/3$

Table 1 (continued)

	Colleagues perceive negatively			Negative career outcomes		
	All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
Log likelihood	-3962.555	-1807.726	-2157.481	-4155.788	-1890.760	-2272.680
N level 1	7141	3333	3808	7106	3335	3771
N level 2	28	28	28	28	28	28
ICC	0.059	0.064	0.058	0.088	0.086	0.084

Note *** $p<0.001$, ** $p<0.01$, * $p<0.05$, + $p<0.10$,

N Level 2==28, N level 1==6913 (Total); N level 2==28, N level 1=3242 (Men); N level 2==28, N level 1=3671 (Women)

This result is largely driven by the mothers in our study. Mothers of very young children (<3) and women with other care responsibilities are more likely to believe that colleagues hold negative views against flexible workers, compared to women without children or other care responsibilities. Mothers with children between ages 7–14 and women with other care responsibilities are more likely to say that careers can be negatively impacted by flexible working than women without care responsibilities. For men, fathers with children age under 3 are somewhat more likely ($p<0.1$) to think flexibility stigma exists in terms of negative career outcomes, than those without care responsibilities, but the opposite was found for fathers with children between ages 7–14 ($p<0.1$). This confirms the idea that those who may have responsibilities outside of work, who may have already experienced negative bias against their own work capacity and motivation, can be more cautious about the potential impact of working flexibly (Chung, 2020; Munsch, 2016). Somewhat opposite results were found between the two flexibility stigma perceptions when comparing those who work part-time and full-time. Part-time workers are less likely to think that colleagues perceive flexible working negatively, while they are more likely to think that their career outcomes would be negatively impacted. These perceptions can be based on their actual experience of working part-time, which is considered working flexibly in the survey. These patterns are largely driven by women.

4.3 Explaining Cross-National Variance

Table 2 presents the results of the assotiation between national-level context variables and respondents' perceptions of flexibility stigma. Note that each context variables are included one at a time in the model. We find that many factors explored in this paper help to explain the cross-national variance in how respondents feel that flexible working is negatively viewed by colleagues. Whereas these contexts do little to explain the cross-national variation in the perception around how flexible working can result in negative career outcomes. More specifically, in countries with ideal/long-hours work cultures – as measured by the average hours worked by full-time workers and work centrality norms – workers are more likely to say that flexible working is badly perceived by colleagues. On the other hand, countries with egalitarian gender norms, and where national family policies are more generous and childcare coverage is wide, workers are less likely to think the same way. Similarly, in countries where unions are strong – higher union density and collective bargaining coverage, and workers have more bargaining power – low unemployment rate – workers are less likely to say that flexible working is badly perceived by colleagues. These associations

Table 2 Multilevel model with context factors explaining the cross-national variance in flexiblity stigma

	Colleagues perceive negatively			Negative career outcomes		
	all	men	women	all	men	women
Ideal worker norm						
Working hours average 2018	0.242**	0.271**	0.206*	0.019	0.004	0.020
	(0.080)	(0.088)	(0.087)	(0.111)	(0.114)	(0.111)
Work centrality 2017	0.241**	0.253**	0.241**	0.083	0.057	0.125
	(0.078)	(0.089)	(0.083)	(0.126)	(0.126)	(0.128)
Progressive gender norms / family-friendly labour markets						
Gender norm 2017	-0.283***	-0.334***	-0.243**	-0.117	-0.124	-0.120
	(0.072)	(0.079)	(0.083)	(0.125)	(0.124)	(0.129)
Child care coverage for 0–3 2015	-0.224**	-0.286**	-0.175+	0.015	0.003	0.009
	(0.081)	(0.085)	(0.089)	(0.111)	(0.114)	(0.112)
Paternity leave 2015	0.068	0.008	0.123	0.144	0.099	0.172
	(0.097)	(0.102)	(0.103)	(0.118)	(0.124)	(0.114)
Family policy expenditure2015	-0.246**	-0.330***	-0.169+	-0.157	-0.180+	-0.140
	(0.077)	(0.079)	(0.087)	(0.104)	(0.107)	(0.106)
Union/worker bargaining power						
Collective bargaining coverage 2018	-0.239**	-0.311***	-0.182+	0.014	0.019	-0.002
	(0.088)	(0.086)	(0.100)	(0.127)	(0.130)	(0.127)
Union density 2018	-0.152+	-0.203*	-0.123	-0.106	-0.091	-0.118
	(0.087)	(0.095)	(0.092)	(0.110)	(0.114)	(0.110)
Unemployment rate 2018	0.206*	0.190*	0.223**	0.215*	0.243*	0.198+
	(0.084)	(0.095)	(0.085)	(0.104)	(0.105)	(0.105)

Note *** $p<0.001$, ** $p<0.01$, * $p<0.05$, + $p<0.10$,

The odds ratio are standardised, meaning the strength of each context variable can be comparable across each group/each dependent variable. For the analysis with Gender Norm and Work Centrality, the analysis includes 21 country cases

Data: European Working Conditions Survey, EUROSTAT, European Value Study, ICTWSS, OECD family data, authors' calculations

Each cell represents the result from one multi-level model (meaning the above table represents 54 different analysis results), where only the standardised coefficient of the context variable is provided. Each model controls for a range of factors, including gender, age, education, caring responsibility for children and others, part-time working, occupation, and where they live. Detailed results are available in Appendix D

Colleagues perceive negatively: N Level 2==28, N level 1==7141 for 'all' models, except for Work Centrality 2017 and Gender Norm 2017 (N level 2=21, N level 1=5717), Paternity Leave (N level 2=23, N level 1=6274) and Collective Bargaining Coverage 2018 (N level 2=25, N level 1=6241). For models for 'women', N level 2==28, N level 1=3808, except for Work Centrality 2017 and Gender Norm 2017 (N level 2=21, N level 1=3024), Paternity Leave (N level 2=23, N level 1=3323), and Collective Bargaining Coverage 2018 (N level 2=25, N level 1=3312). For models for 'men', N level 2==28, N level 1=3333, except for Work Centrality 2017 and Gender Norm 2017 (N level 2=21, N level 1=2693), Paternity Leave (N level 2=23, N level 1=2951), and Collective Bargaining Coverage 2018 (N level 2=25, N level 1=2929)

Negative Career Outcomes: N Level 2==28, N level 1==7106 for 'all' models, except for Work Centrality 2017 and Gender Norm 2017 (N level 2=21, N level 1=5677), Paternity Leave (N Level 2=23, N Level 1=6219) and Collective Bargaining Coverage 2018 (N level 2=25, N level 1=6224). For models for 'women', N level 2==28, N level 1=3771, except for Work Centrality 2017 and Gender Norm 2017 (N level 2=21, N level 1=2993), Paternity Leave (N level 2=23, N level 1=3281), and Collective Bargaining Coverage 2018 (N level 2=25, N level 1=3294). For models for 'men', N level 2==28, N level 1=3335, except for Work Centrality 2017 and Gender Norm 2017 (N level 2=21, N level 1=2684), Paternity Leave (N level 2=23, N level 1=2938), and Collective Bargaining Coverage 2018 (N level 2=25, N level 1=2930)

are true for both men and women.However, for women, the significant levels of some these variables (childcare, family policy expenditure and collective bargaining coverage) are at the $p<0.10$ levels or lower.

We've also examined how the significance of the variables changes when context variables are included two at a time (Appendix Table E-1). We found that compared to some policy and institutional variables (childcare coverage, union density, collective bargaining coverage) and even unemployment rate, gender and work cultural norms seem to be more robust in explaining the level of stigma, pertaining to how colleagues perceive flexible working negatively. This can be due to, on the one hand, because stigma is influenced more by norms and cultures than institutions. However, on the other hand, as we've mentioned in the theoretical section, it may be because policies and institutions influence flexibility stigma more indirectly via changing cultural norms (see also, Chung, 2024b). In fact, we see how cultural norms and some of our institutional variables have high correlations (Appendix H). In other words, our cultural norms variables may be mediating the influence of the institutional variables on flexibility stigma.

When explaining the cross-national variance of the perception on flexible working leading to negative career outcomes, we find that in countries where there are generous family policies (as measured here as expenditure data), men are less likely to believe this to be the case but only at a $p<0.10$ level. It is insignificant for the female sample. The unemployment rate is the only significant factor explaining the cross-national variance in the perception of flexible working leading to negative career outcomes – namely in countries with high unemployment rates, respondents are more likely to say that flexible working leads to negative career outcomes. In Appendix Table E-2, we also examined what happens when two context variables are included in the model at the same time. What we found was that family policy becomes more significant in its association once work and gender norm, childcare coverage, or collective bargaining coverage is controlled for. This indicates that there may be potential influence of institutions but only in certain contexts. Further investigation is needed to confirm this.

As a robustness check, we examine the models using a cross-level interaction term between gender and the context variable to see how the contexts have significantly different impact for men and women (Appendix F). The results show that the negative association between family policy expenditure and flexibility stigma levels is stronger for men (interaction coefficient -0.144 $p<0.05$). This entails that it is especially men's views around flexibility stigma that may be influenced more by generous family policy contexts. There were no clear gender variations in the association between other context variables and flexibility stigma, indicating policies and norms may influence both men and women's perceptions equally. Finally, we conducted ordinal analyses to check if results vary when we consider our dependent variable as an ordinal rather than a dichotomous variable (see Appendix G). Results are consistent for the main models with Table 2 in terms of the significance and the direction of relationships, but with few models showing stronger associations (see highlighted results in Appendix G). In other words, the choice of operationalisation of flexibility stigma did not have influence our general conclusions.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Flexibility stigma prohibits workers from making use of existing policies (Petts et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2013), this may especially be true for certain groups of workers, such as fathers (Fernández-Cornejo et al., 2019; Kelland et al., 2022). This in turn can further exacerbate gender inequality patterns in the labour market as flexible working becomes a 'women's arrangement' (Chung, 2024a), resulting in negative career outcomes for workers - both men and women (Chung et al., 2021, 2022; Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020). Flexibility stigma is also a major factor explaining why flexible working sometimes results in unintended negative outcomes such as overwork, blurring of boundaries, and work encroaching on private life (Chung, 2022; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). This leads to bad well-being and work-life balance outcomes for workers, negative outcomes for companies with regards to productivity, and can even be costly for society especially in the longer-run (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Thébaud & Pedulla, 2022). The goal of this paper was to better understand the cultural and institutional contexts that enable such biased views to exist, which help us find policy solutions to tackle these issues.

The results of the paper evidence that cultural norms matter and are perhaps some of the most important factors explaining the levels of flexibility stigma perceived in a country. Long-hours work centric cultures and traditional gender norms may be a good breeding ground for biased views against FWAs use. However, we also found that well planned out national-level interventions can tackle this. Ensuring a more family-friendly policy environment through the introduction of more generous family policies such as public childcare services can help tackle flexibility stigma (Petts et al., 2022). Providing generous family policies at the national-level can help change norms around work-life balance, where rather than being a work-centric society, a good work-life balance becomes a norm for all workers, and make gender norms become more egalitarian (Been et al., 2017; den Dulk et al., 2013). In such scenarios, biased views against flexible working are likely to be reduced. Similarly, providing workers with more bargaining power, whether it be through stronger union bargaining power or due to shifts in labour market conditions being preferable, could potentially shift work and gender norms, which helps workers feel less stigmatised when taking up FWAs.

Although our analysis was conducted at the national-level, we can expect similar conclusions at the company-level. In other words, companies that want to encourage the take-up of FWAs and ensure that workers do not fear the negative consequences from it, may want to or need to introduce a wider range of other policy interventions concurrently (Kelly et al., 2014). This includes policies that encourage the development of a more family-friendly culture, or providing workers with better protection when taking up flexible working arrangements, or changing the notion of flexible working not only as a work-life balance measure but also as a performance enhancing arrangement (Wood & De Menezes, 2010). Deliberate change in work cultures to eliminate the long-hours ideal worker culture is also needed, may it be through setting new indices to measure productivity and commitment, or new key performance indicators and targets for individuals, groups, and the company so to move away from the long-hours, always-on culture (Perlow, 2012). Changes in gender norms through policies such as ear-marked parental leave for fathers could be of benefit as well. Such policies can also be useful in changing the notion of the standard worker, so all workers are expected to have work-life integration demands.

There are some limitations to this study. The results of this study show that the contexts observed in this paper better explain the cross-national variance of workers' views on how colleagues perceive flexible working negatively rather than views around how flexible working results in negative career outcomes. With regards to the latter perception, there may be other contexts that are more useful in explaining the variations. Future studies should examine this in greater detail. Given the cross-sectional nature of our data, we cannot guarantee the direction of the relationships. For example, although the associations exist, changing national contexts may not necessarily mean that there will be a change in the stigma perceptions of workers. More data needs to be collected measuring flexibility stigma cross-nationally, or across different contexts, possibly through longitudinal surveys or field/survey experiments to help us untangle the causality of the directions. Some studies already exist (Kasperska et al., 2024; Kelly et al., 2014) providing some supporting evidence. As the data used for this paper was collected before the pandemic, the question arises whether results of the findings are applicable in the 'post-pandemic' labour markets. Although we did see a decrease in the biased views against flexible workers during the peak of the pandemic (e.g.Forbes et al., 2020), we are increasingly seeing biased views around flexible working re-emerge. What is more, evidence gathered during the pandemic (e.g., Chung et al., 2022; Dunatchik et al., 2021; Lyttelton et al., 2022) shows that many of the negative outcomes of flexible working observed during the pre-pandemic times largely remained the same. This was because the important contextual factors, such as work and gender culture, national institutions, have not changed much during this period. Based on this, we expect that much of what we find in this paper, even though we use data from pre-pandemic times, is likely to be applicable to the 'post-pandemic' labour markets into the future.

Despite abundance of evidence from both before (Bloom et al., 2015; Boltz et al., 2022) and during the pandemic (Awada et al., 2021; CIPD, 2021; Etheridge et al., 2020; Farooq & Sultana, 2022; Forbes et al., 2020; Nikita et al., 2024) showing how flexible working can enhance rather than reduce productivity, biased views against flexible workers' work capacities are still prevalent. This explains why many managers are increasingly asking workers to return back into office (Sasso, 2023). This paper provides evidence to show that although these biased views against flexible working exist, they are not inevitable, and we can actively work to change the context in which flexible working is used to challenge these views. More specifically, we can do this by removing long-hours work culture, ensuring work-life balance and gender egalitarianism as the norm, providing more generous family policies, and providing more workers more security and protecting their bargaining power. By doing so, we can enable a better use of flexible working practices that can benefit both workers and companies, and consequently society as a whole.

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Data Availability The data used for this paper is available to the public via GESIS data archive. See: https://www.gesis.org/en/eurobarometer-data-service/search-data-access/data-access.

Declarations

Ethical approval Secondary data has been used for this study.

Conflict of Interest There is no conflict of interest to declare. This paper has not been submitted to other journals than this current one.

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