

The Flexibility Paradox:

What the rise of remote
working means for
worker's well-being

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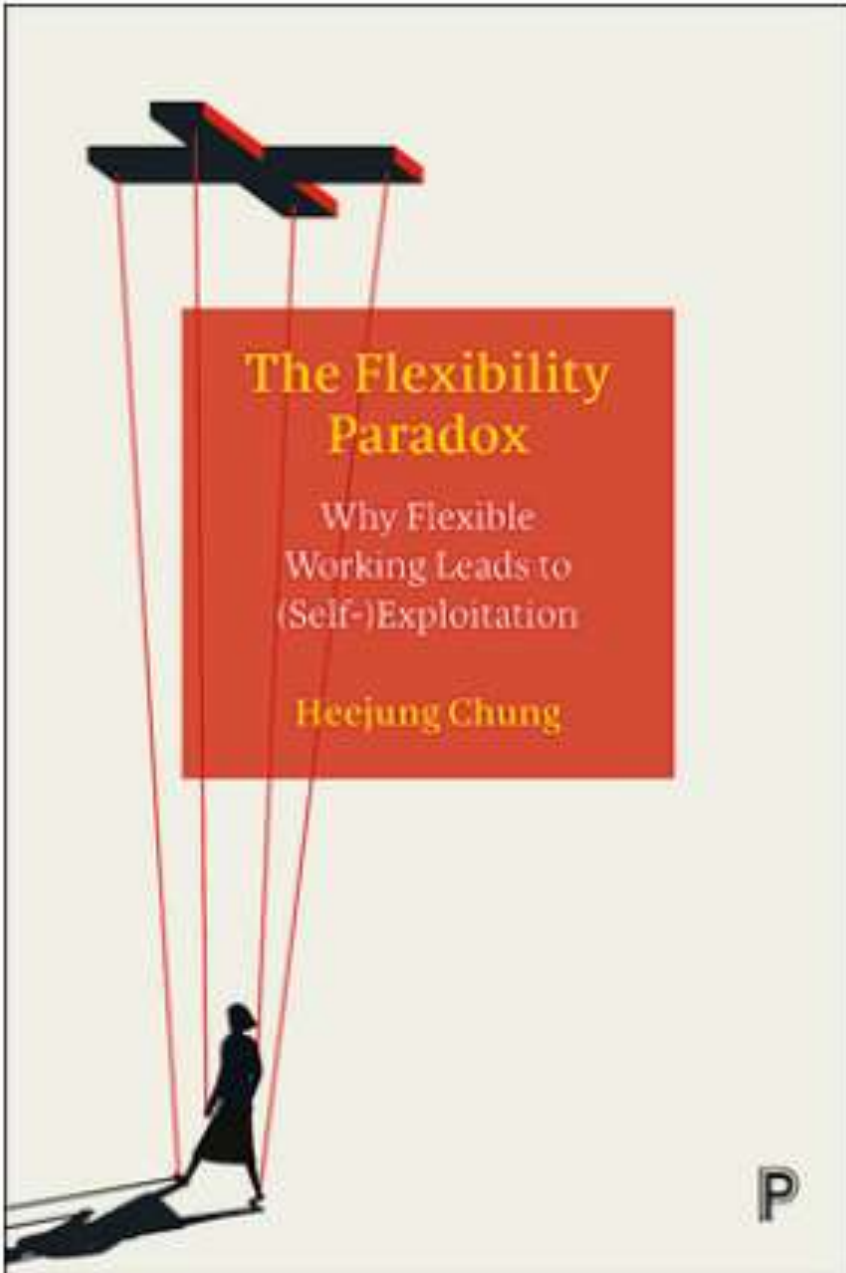
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Working from home all it was
promised to be? |



Or is it harming our health, well-being and work life balance?





Flexibility Paradox

When workers gain more control over when and where they work – e.g. flexitime, working time autonomy, teleworking/homeworking – they end up working harder and longer.

Rather than flexible working enabling workers to work anywhere and anytime they want, workers end up working everywhere and all the time

And with gender variations in where this happens, what it means for well being

Today's talk

What is flexible working

Benefits of flexible working

Empirical results remote working and well-being outcomes

The problems of flexible working – flexibility and gender paradox, digital presenteeism

What can we do to change this

Q&A!! (5-10 minutes!)





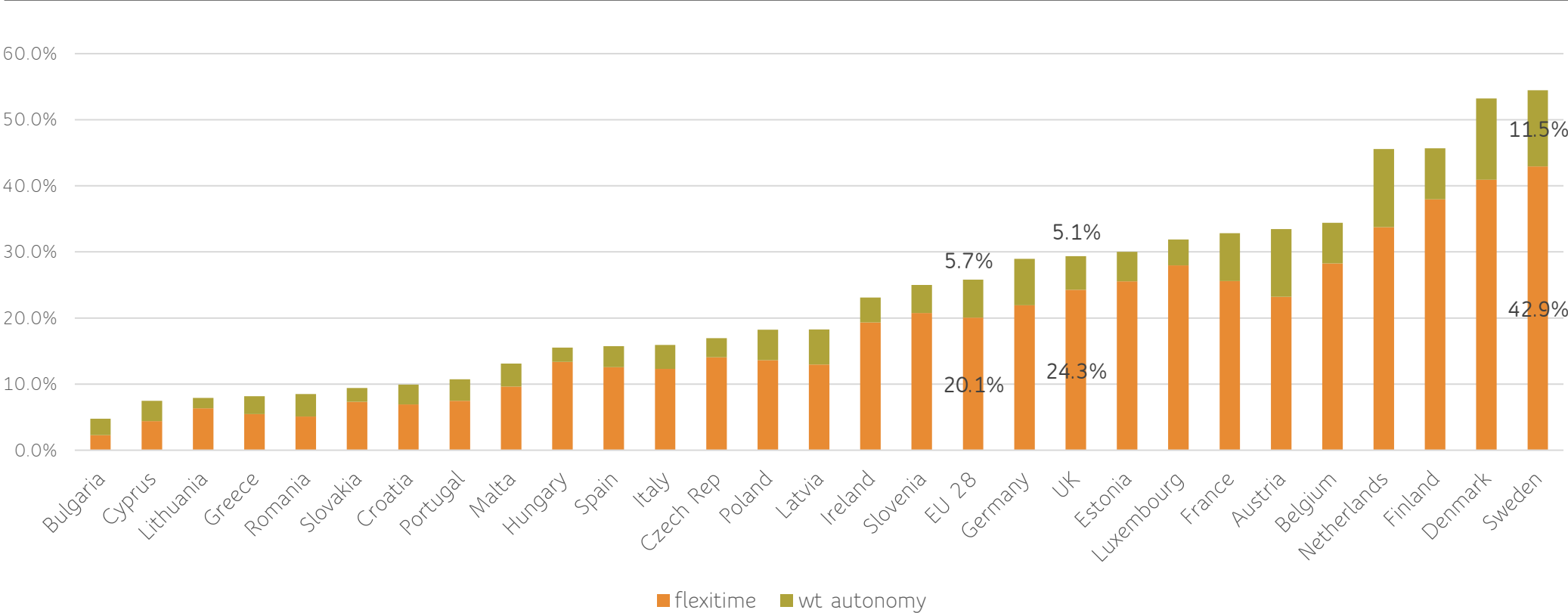
Flexible working

Flexitime - flexible starting and ending times of work

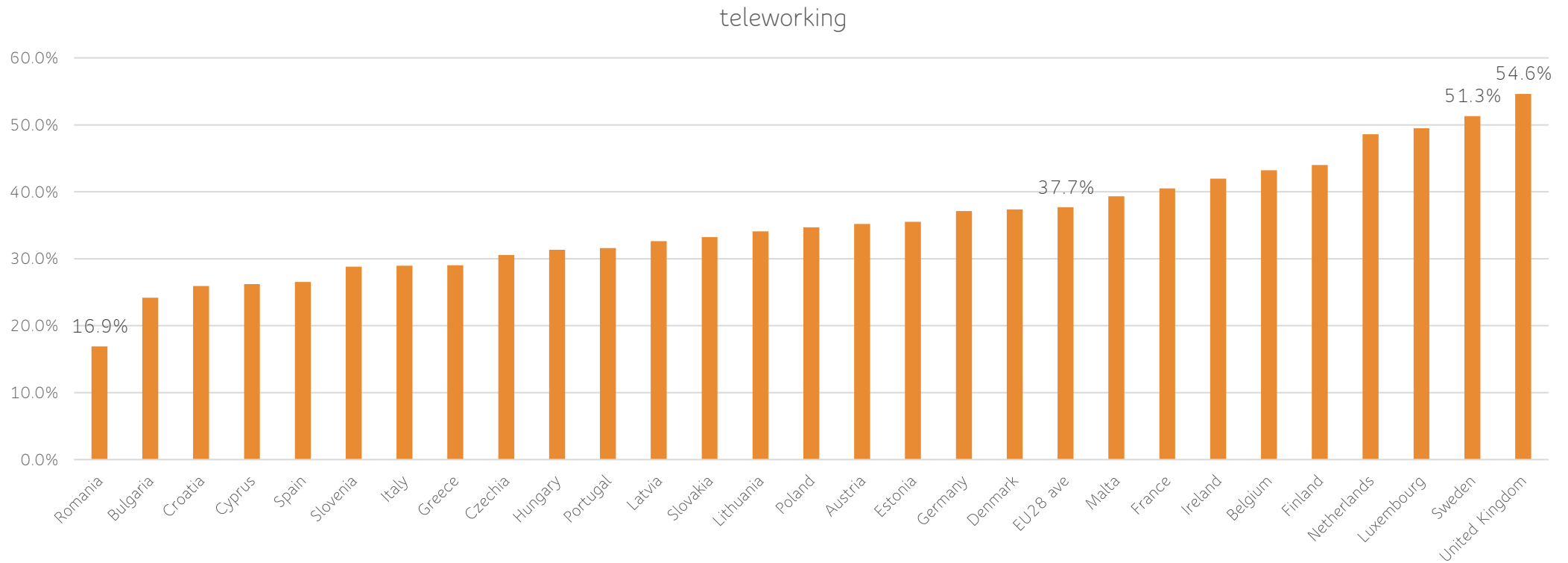
Working time autonomy - more flexibility in the number of hours worked per day, week + starting ending time

Teleworking - ability working outside your normal working space/office DURING normal working hours - working from home - hybrid working etc.

The proportion of workers across 28 European countries with access to flexible schedules in 2015 (source: EWCS, author's calculations)



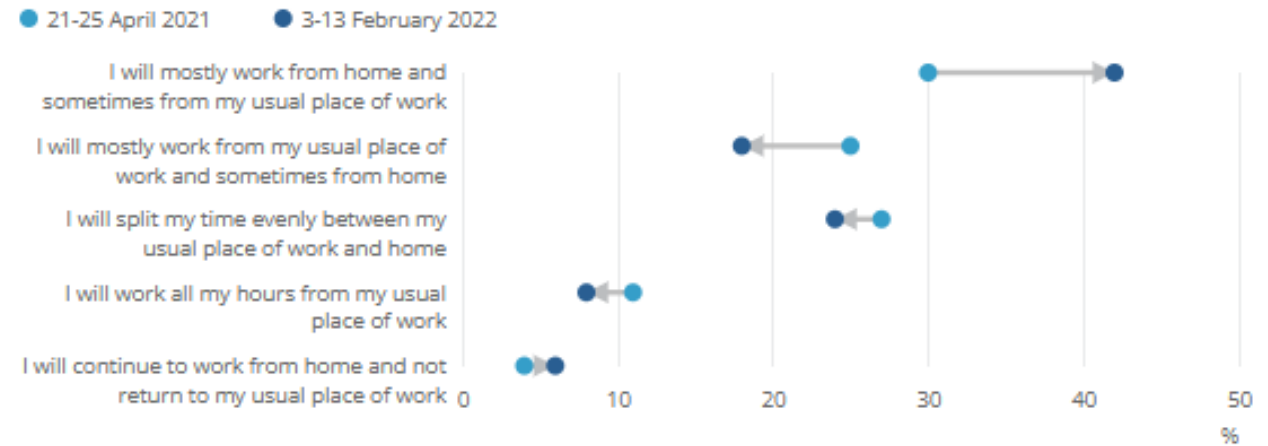
Workers who telework always, partially (hybrid), and occasionally in 2021 (EWCTS) – job needs to be teleworkable, uses ICT, from home (Eurofound definition – see [report 2022](#))



Home working is here to stay

The proportion of homeworkers planning to work mostly from home rose 12 percentage points between April 2021 and February 2022

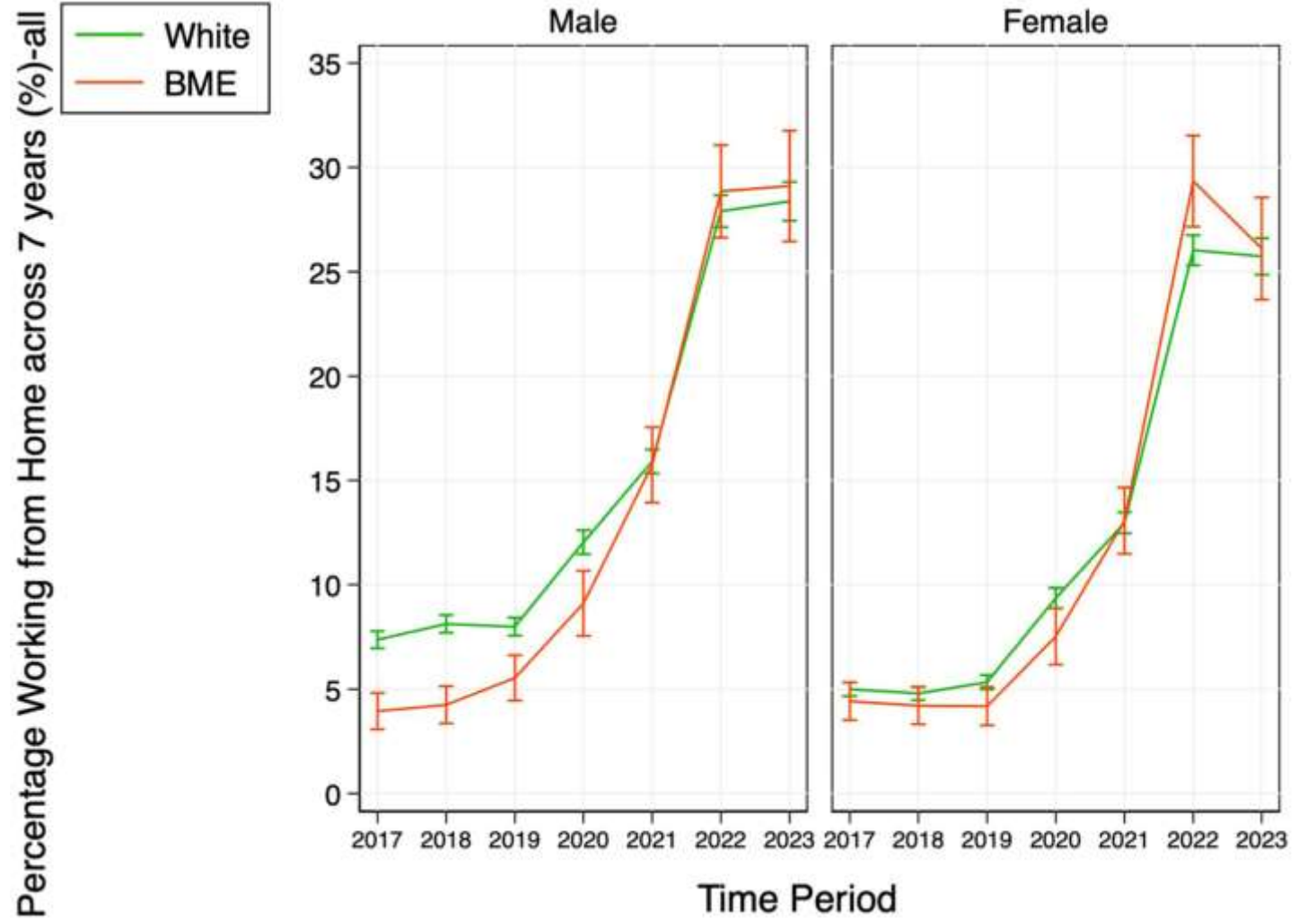
Future plans of workers who worked from home because of the coronavirus pandemic, Great Britain, 21 to 25 April 2021 and 3 to 13 February 2022



Source: Office for National Statistics – Opinions and Lifestyle Survey

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Home working is here to stay



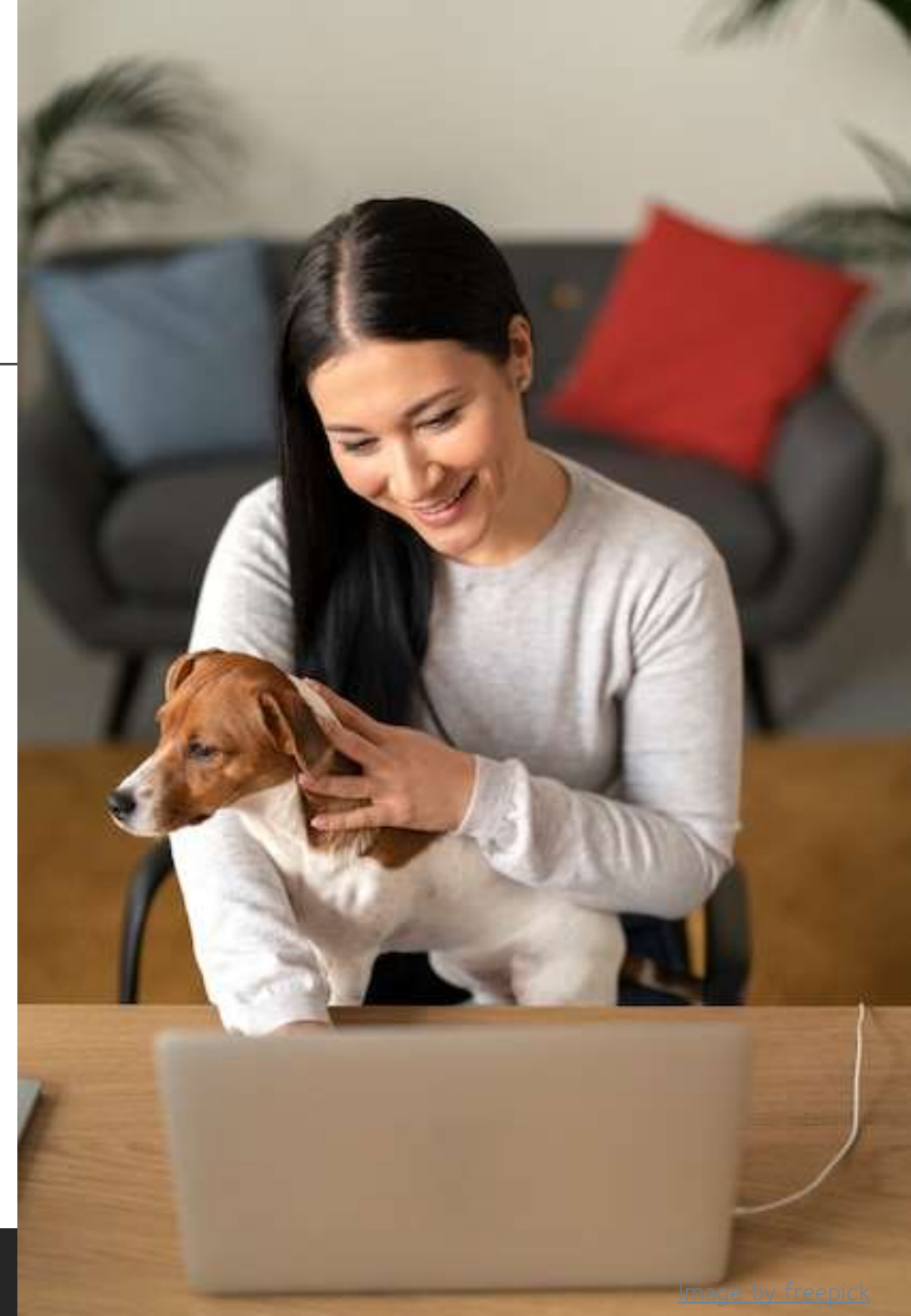
Flexible working enable marginalized workers better engagement in the labour market

- Flexible working allows mothers to stay employed, not reduce working hours (Chung & Van der Horst, 2018; Fuller & Hirsch, 2018; van der Lippe et al. 2018)
- Disabled workers (Work foundation; Hoque & Bacon 2022), BAME workers ([TUC project report](#)), Workers with care responsibilities (informal care)
- The ability to stay in employment + better employment trajectories with regards to pay and career progression
- Better **work-life balance satisfaction** (Role Expansion)



Positives for well-being

- Flexible working - reducing commuting time, allowing workers to work when are better able to work + enhance ability to combine work with family demands (Hilbrecht et al., 2013) → less stress... better well being
- Flexible workers are and generally happier with their working conditions, more autonomy (Laß and Wooden 2023, Baum and Rau 2024).
- Flexible working lead to fewer problems with regards to sickness, absenteeism and retention - **increasing loyalty, motivation, commitment for the job** (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Kelliher & de Menezes, 2019) → less stress.. Better well being



Flexible working ... and gender

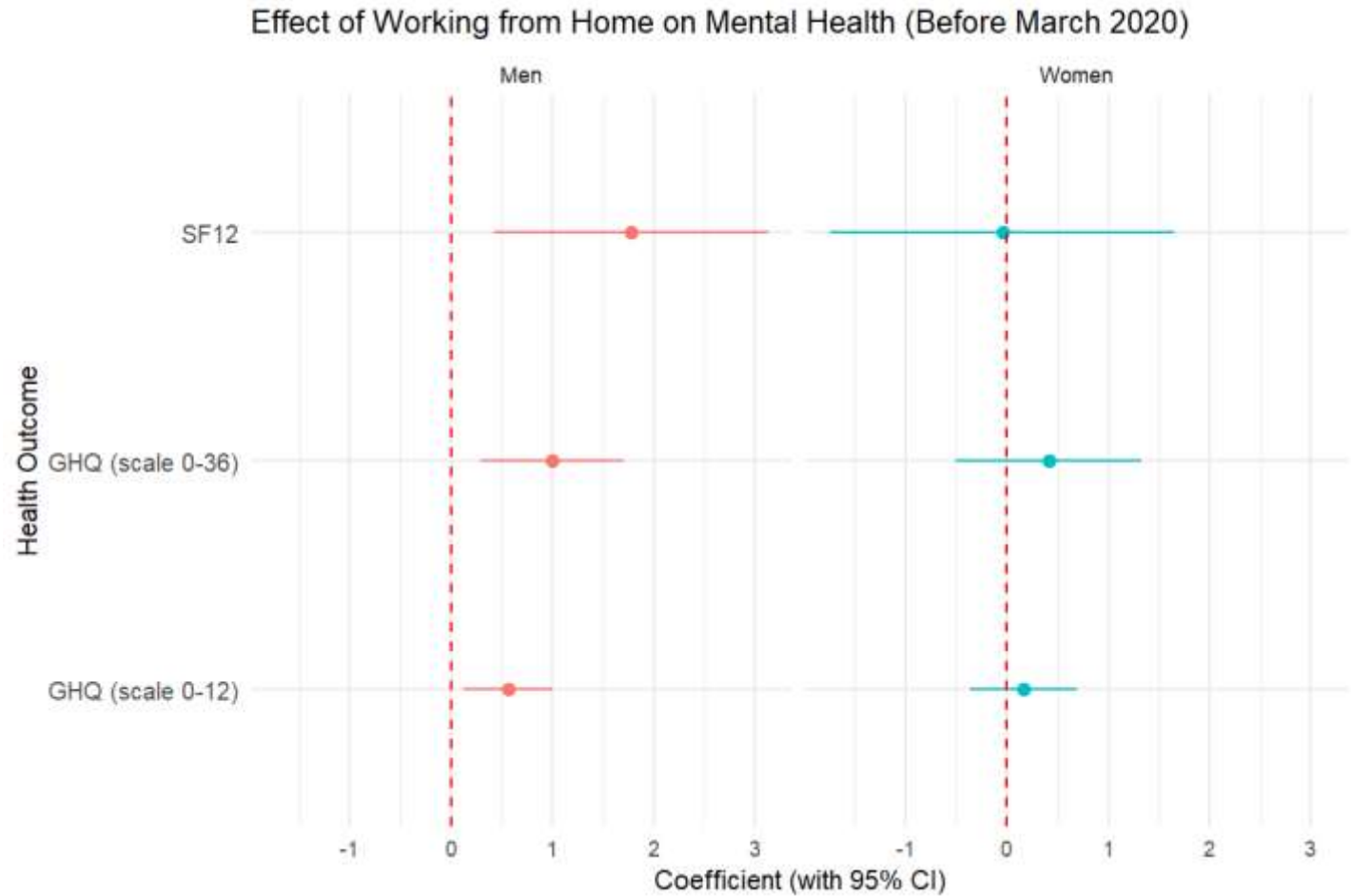
- Lots of studies on the positives of flexible working (Li and Wang 2022; Denzer and Grunau 2023)..
- Flexible working does not necessarily lead to lower stress for mothers (Chandola et al. 2018; Ruppaner et al 2018) can reduce well-being outcomes
- Lu et al (2023) find that women and lower occupational groups do not benefit from mental well-being outcomes as much as men and higher occupational groups



Remote working – wellbeing new approach

Key problem of reverse causality – do people work remotely because they have mental health or other health issues

We need to try to disentangle this selection effect → match data using LFS on occupational level (4 digit) use of homeworking to UKHLS individuals' outcomes on health (SF12(mental component of the short-form 12), GHQ (General health questionnaire))





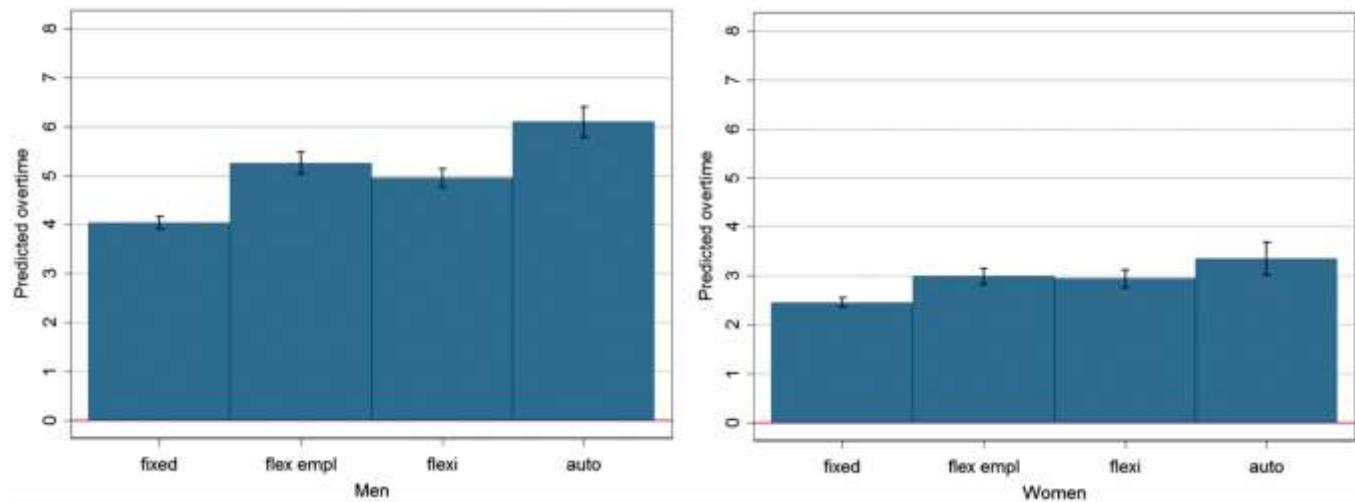
Flexible
working makes
workers work
harder and
longer

Flexible workers work longer hours

GSEOP hybrid models – examining between and within changes

On average 0.7 hours more overtime with flexitime, and 1.5 more hours with working time autonomy ([Lott & Chung 2016](#)). Similar results for teleworking (Glass & Noonan, 2016 and others)

They are more likely to think about work when not at work, have work encroach over private sphere (Chung, 2022; Schieman and colleagues; Lott 2020) and have higher work-family conflict



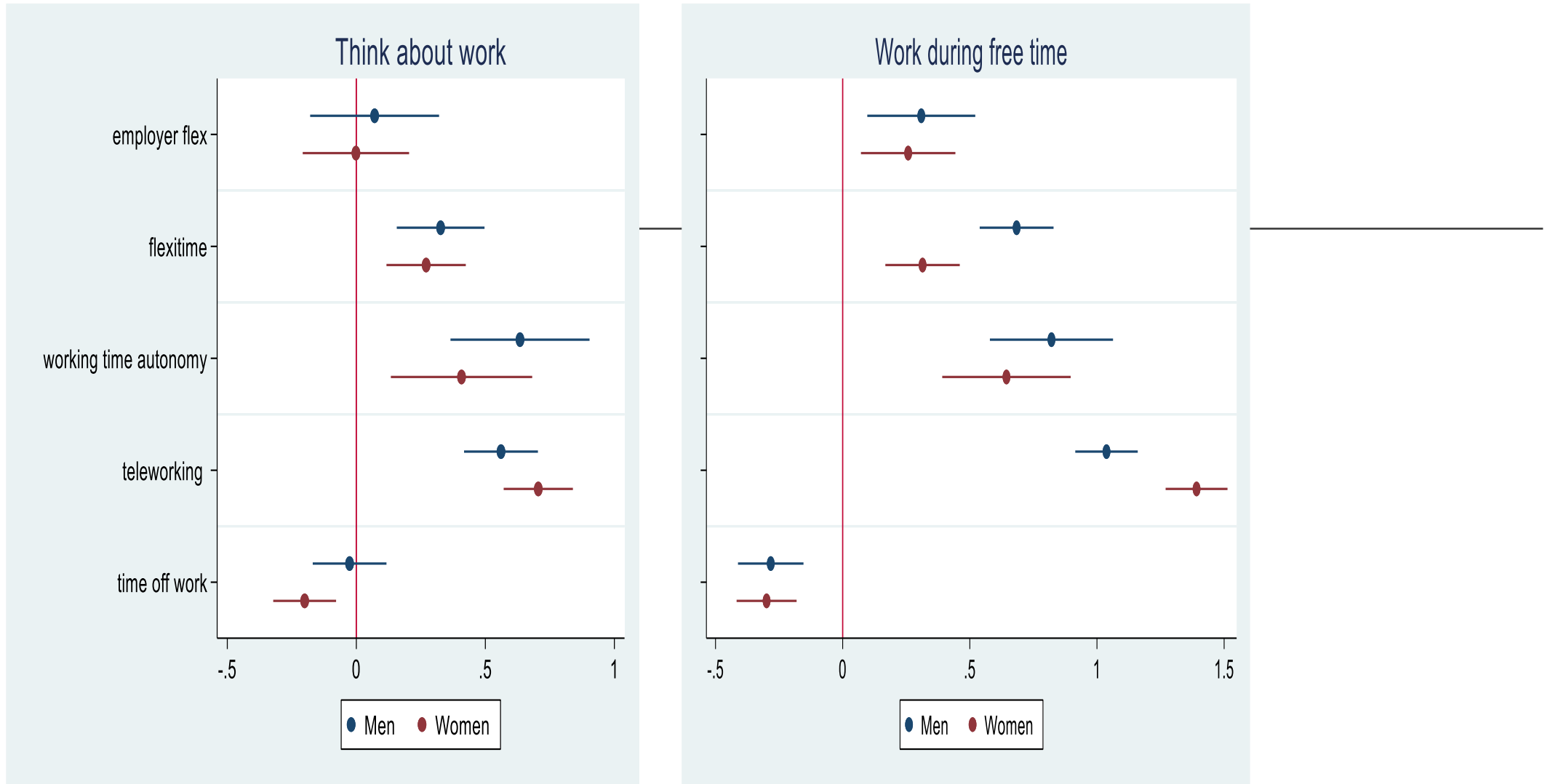


Figure 6-3. Association between flexible working and spill-over

Source: European Working Conditions Survey 2015, authors' calculations.

Self-exploitation (Chung, 2022)

- Workers feel like they can/or need to work harder and longer when the boundaries between work-private life are blurred
- Why? 1) **Internalised capitalism, ideal worker image** (busyness at work as badge of honour)/hustle culture & **passion exploitation** (esp the NHS) → flexible boundaries “enable” workers to meet their excessive workload demands
- 2) This is exacerbated by **flexibility stigma** – bias against flexible workers and **Insecurity** – rise in competition, insecurity at work pushes individuals to work harder/longer.





Exploitation at home

- Flexible working/esp homeworking **increases the (pressure to do more) housework/childcare for women** (Sullivan and Lewis (2001); Kim (2020) US ECLS-B ; Lott (2019) DE SEOP; Andrews et al. (2020) Time Use data during covid; Chung & Booker 2022 UKHLS ; Hilbrecht et al. 2013; Kurowska, 2020) mostly through sacrificing their personal/leisure time (Hilbrecht et al. 2013) (see also, [Strazdens, 2022](#)).
- Women also **work in communal spaces (dining room) whilst multitasking childcare/housework and work**, whereas fathers work in enclosed workspaces with clearer boundaries (Parry, 2024; Andrews et al 2021)

Flexibility stigma & digital presenteeism

Most bosses secretly want all staff back in offices, says head of CBI

Since Covid pandemic, 'whole world of work has gone crazy,' says Tony Danker



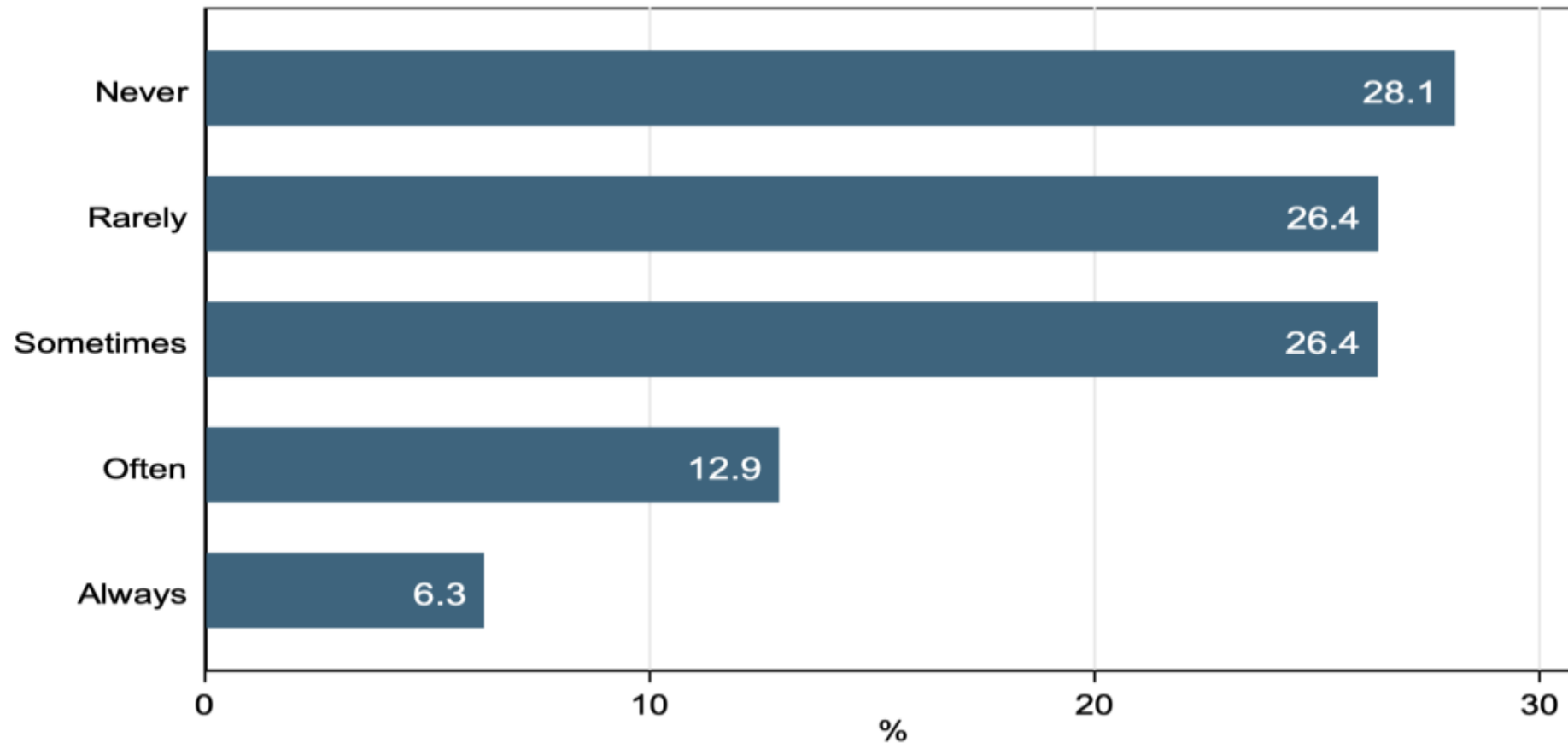
Some industries were quick to call staff back to offices when Covid restrictions were lifted but others have maintained flexible working policies. Photograph: Alamy

Most bosses secretly want to get all staff back to working in the office, according to the head of Britain's leading business lobby group.

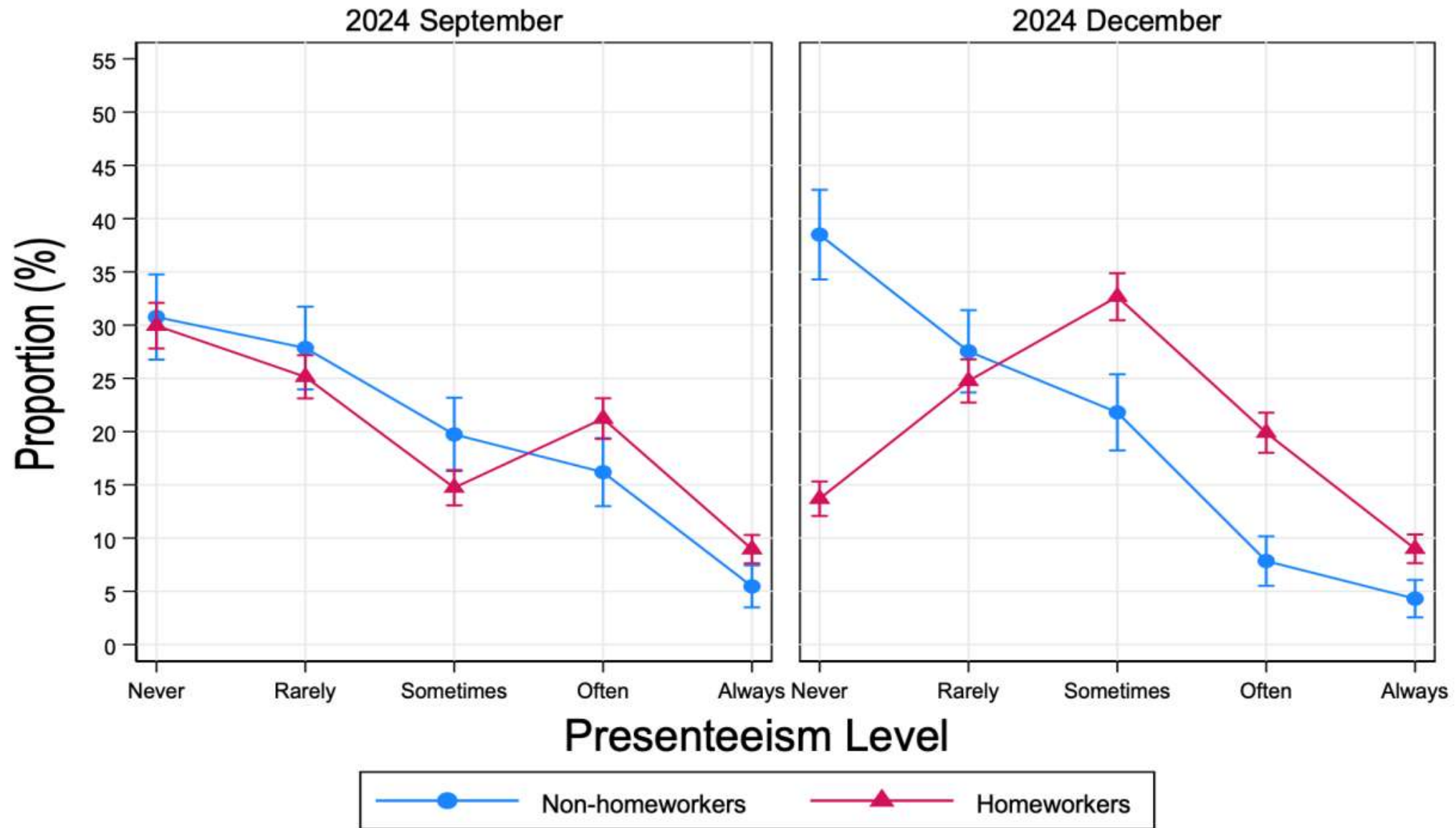
Tony Danker, the director general of the Confederation of British Industry

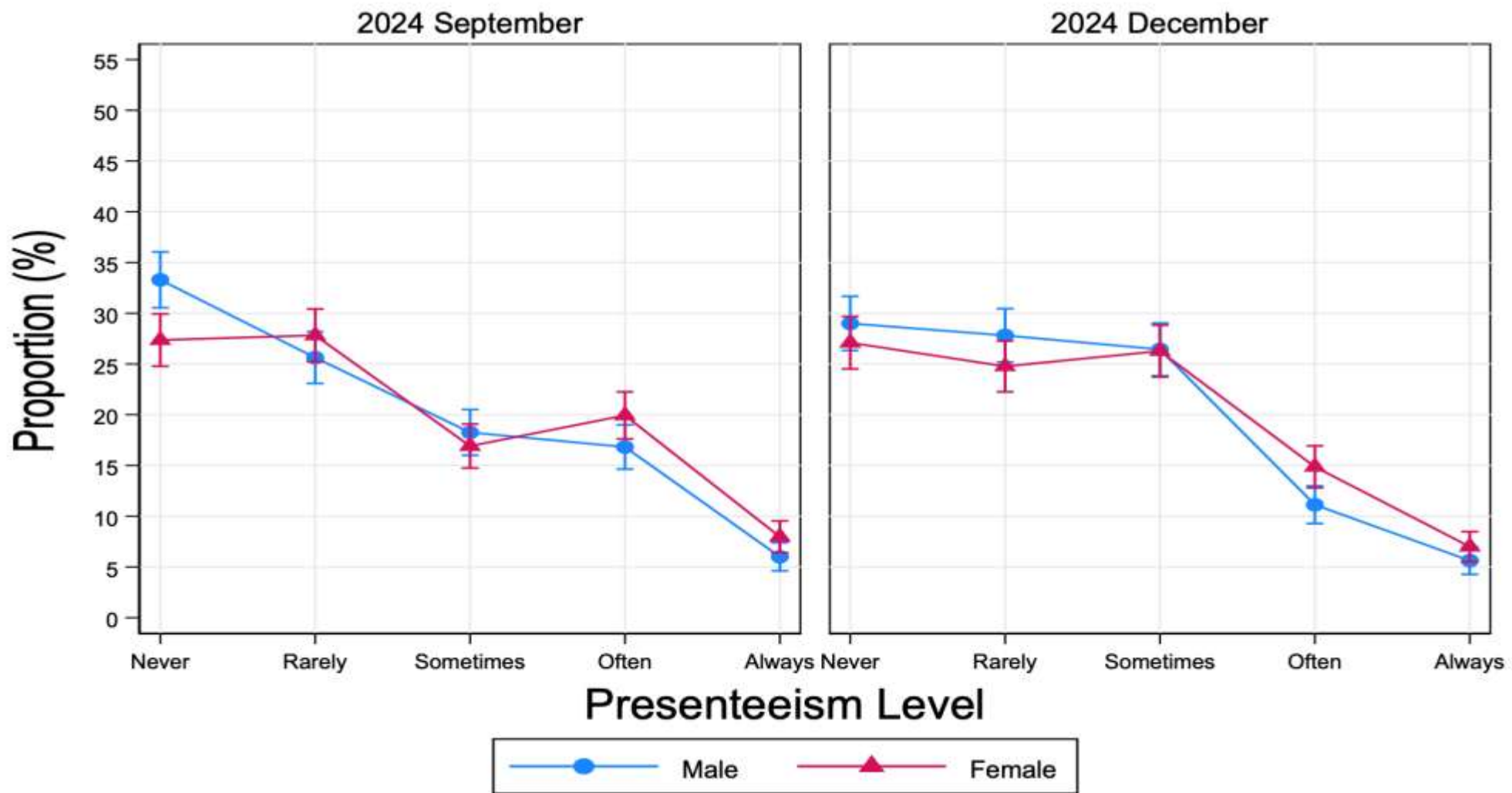
- the belief that flexible workers are not as committed, motivated, productive and make more work for others
- Rather than based on true evidence it is based on the ideal worker norm & the idea that having a good work life balance cannot be good for productivity
- Disadvantaged workers' (women, BAME, low-skilled) homeworking which may be perceived to lower productivity due to the already existing bias against these workers' work capacity → Resulting in these workers showing higher levels of paradox/**digital presenteeism** (Chung, 2024/ TUC report) especially for mothers/bme workers

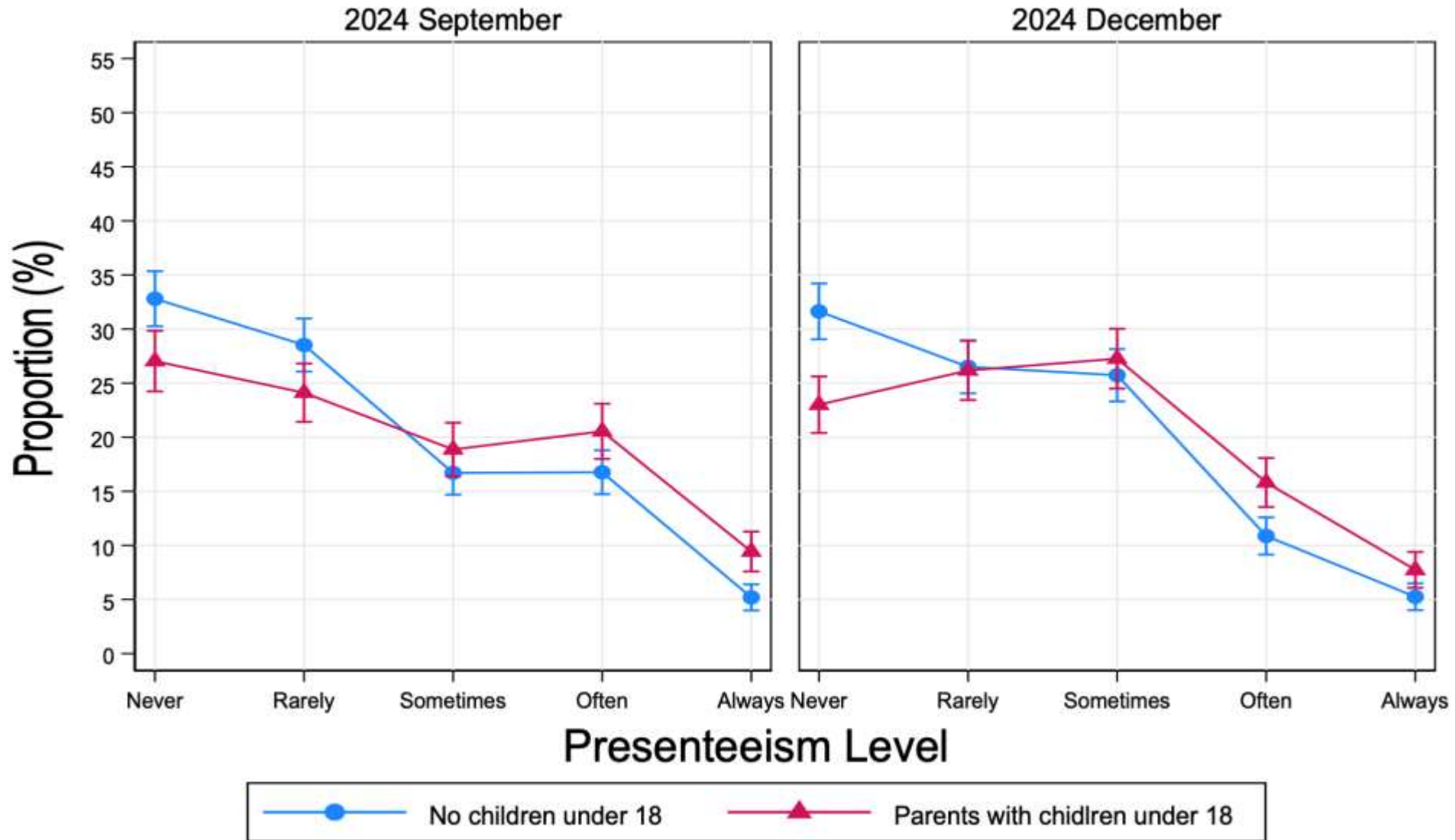
To what extent do you engage in digital presenteeism?

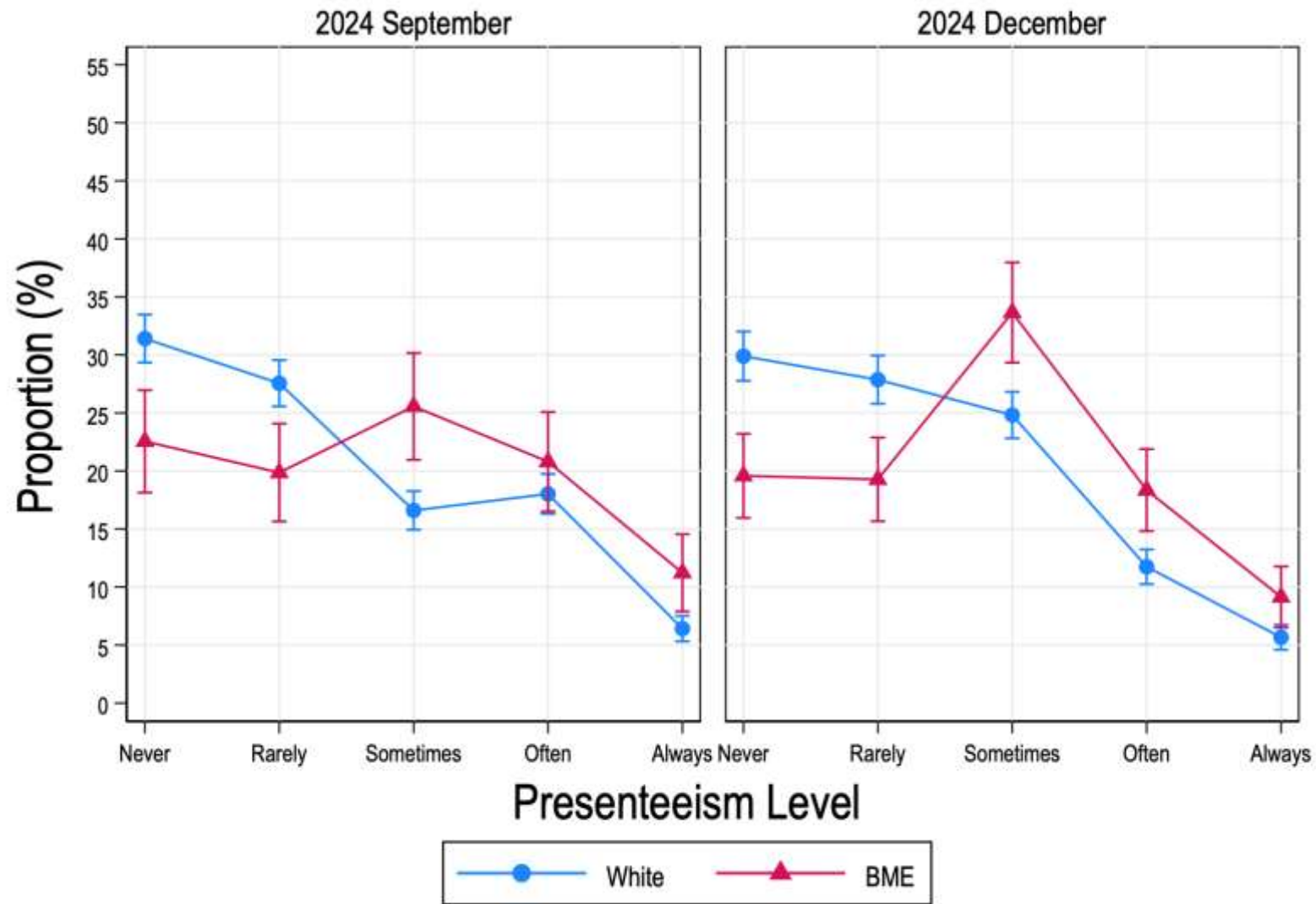


Notes: This is only for 2024 December and is weighted to match LFS representatives population by age-sex-teleworkability-region-degree. Individuals under 20 or over 64 years of age were excluded, as they comprised only very small proportion of the sample.











So what do we need
to do?

Stronger rights for flexible working

Women in the UK's public services repeatedly denied flexible-work requests

More must be done to accommodate requests

Posted on
15 February 2024

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flexible working

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Three in ten (30%) women working in schools, hospitals, care homes, town halls, police stations and other key services who have asked to work flexibly have had requests denied, according to a UNISON survey released today (Thursday)

The findings – based on responses from just over 44,000 women working in the public sector – suggest employers are being ‘inconsistent, rigid and unimaginative’ by denying individuals the flexibility needed, says UNISON.

The survey is released to coincide with the start of the union's annual women's conference in Brighton later today. A quarter (25%) of the women who were told they couldn't alter the way they worked reported that their requests had been denied multiple times.

The data shows more than two fifths (47%) of respondents had requested some flexibility in their jobs so they could achieve a better work-life balance. More than a third (37%) had done so to look after their mental health, 30% to fit around their childcare needs and 29% for physical health reasons.

The survey was done as a series of questionnaires by employees on 15

Latest news



'As a woman, my rights are not reduced by my LGBT+ comrades', says UNISON
Posted on 15 February 2024 by Janey Starlin

Women in the UK's public sector repeatedly denied flexible-work requests, says UNISON

Posted on 15 February 2024

- When flexible working is the norm (not just for parents/mothers), stigma likely to reduce – all workers use flexible working – even fathers for childcare/housework purposes. Right to request good start – but not strong enough (Unison 2024 report shows 30% denied flexible working)
- Flexible working should be pushed as a **smart working policy that helps productivity** – plenty of evidence of this exists (Bloom et al., 2015; Beauregard & Henry, 2009) – helps reduce stigma & paradox
- With a **right to disconnect (Labour's right to switch off)** – so that flexible working does not lead to an always-on hyper competitive labour market which can push women, disadvantaged workers out further

Changing views around gender roles

- Gender roles around whose responsibility it is to do the breadwinning/ caregiving is key in why flexible working arrangements result in negative outcomes
- Long generous ear-marked parental leave for fathers and second parents important
- Emphasize the **benefits of father's involvement** in childcare for children, the parents, and society overall (chung 2021)
- Supporting/encouraging **men's use of flexible working arrangements for care purposes** – monitoring the use with gender pay gap reporting?
- Good public childcare helps remove ideas of mothers using flexible working for care purposes and removes mother's double burden when working from home/flexibly



Problems of the ideal worker model

- So many of the problems in our society—stem from our **work culture, ideal worker norm**, the way we think about the worker.
- Our ideal worker is still based on the 1950s male breadwinner with a female partner who carries out all of his reproductive work (who earns a family wage) – disembodied person who has work and no other responsibilities outside of work.
- Devotion TO work, and the sacrifices you make for it is more important than what you do.
-



New Standard Worker

NEW STANDARD worker (Chung, 2023; 2024): **Based on the 21st century working mother** - someone who has multitude of responsibilities outside of work - may it be care (including self care and pet care!) or other hobbies and interest. And because of the wealth of different experiences they can be a better worker (cross boundary learning)

→ 4 day week?

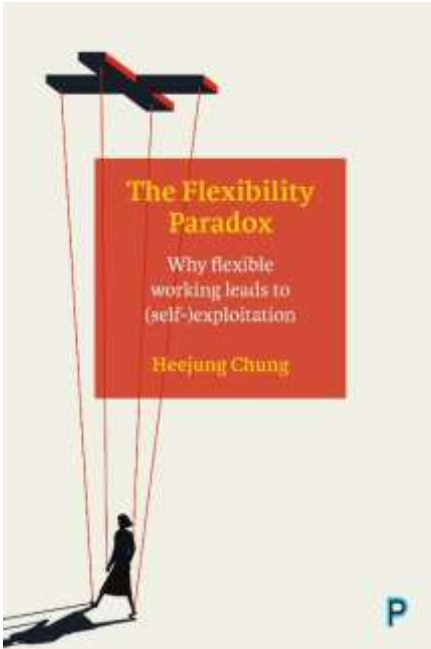


Summing up/take home message

Flexible working can be a great enabler especially for those in marginalised positions – great for work-life balance, worker's wellbeing AND productivity

YET it can result in negative outcomes when not implemented appropriately

Reflective policies and approaches can help flexible working help both workers and companies



The Flexibility Paradox: Why Flexible Working Leads to (Self-)Exploitation

By Heejung Chung

"Flexible work is a priority for many workers and yet remains a puzzle to many employers. This book provides much-needed clarity about the critical role schedule control will play in creating equitable work systems and cultures." **Brigid Schulte**, New America

<https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/the-flexibility-paradox>

Thank you

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