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Flexible working for all? How collective constructions by Austrian employers and employees perpetuate gendered inequalities

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Abstract

Objective: This paper pursues the question as to how extended flexible working possibilities in the labor market are legitimized among employers and employees and whether they have potential to mitigate inequalities.

Background: Persistent and increasing gendered inequalities in Austria are reflected in the unequal division of unpaid family work in parental couples and in men's stable full-time employment while women increasingly work part-time. In recent years, employers have expanded flexible working possibilities for all employees, regardless of their gender, also in leading positions and especially for those with family responsibilities.

Method: We conducted six focus groups and 16 semi-structured interviews with employers (n=30) and employees (n=25) from 29 contrasting companies across Austria. An in-depth reconstructive analysis facilitated our exploration of collective notions and concepts associated with flexible work and career opportunities.

Results: The respondents constructed part-time and flexible work as a new norm strongly connected to women with (potential) children. At the same time, employers and employees legitimized that these women must be protected from penalties resulting from the ideal worker norm still in force and must be variously supported by employers. However, men – the partners of women they could support by making use of these options and taking over childcare – are *not* constructed as a target group.

Conclusion: In a cultural context such as Austria, family-friendly flexible working opportunities perpetuate rather than level gendered inequalities, as men's need for those opportunities do not emerge in the constructions. The lack thereof is neither explicitly addressed nor challenged.

Key words: part-time work, women's labor participation, career opportunities, gender ideologies, gender equality



1. Introduction

The unequal division of paid work and (unpaid) care work between women and men is evident across many European countries, albeit to different extents. Austria is a comparatively conservative and familialistic welfare state with rather traditional gender norms and division of work (Berghammer & Schmidt 2019; Kurowska 2018; Evertsson & Grunow 2019). On the one hand, the growing labor market participation of women in Austria over the past decades has changed the unequal division of labor among couples. On the other hand, it has blurred norms of the ideal worker and increased the awareness of employees' family responsibilities. In this context, employers have made efforts to offer various flexible modes of labor for all employees, which comply with the ideal of being family-friendly as an employer. However, in the course of this process, gendered differences have remained significant in the working world as well: women increasingly and predominantly work on a part-time level and face long-term disadvantages while men are still able to more easily fulfill ideal worker norms.

The causes for and effects of these huge imbalances have been examined in numerous studies, focusing on various aspects of these inequalities and on various sites of reproduction of gendered ideologies. Despite growing knowledge on intra-couple mechanisms regarding the division of work, it has not yet been fully elucidated what is going on in the working sphere in the context of growing options for employed women and men to organize working times and places and to balance employment with private responsibilities. The ideals of parental responsibilities constructed in the working sphere also shape parents' negotiations and decisions on sharing those responsibilities and on organizing working hours in a highly gendered manner (Mauerer & Schmidt 2019; Liebig & Oechsle 2017; Alemann et al. 2017). So far, studies on gendered time investment in paid work (and, consequently, family work) and the impact of cultural norms at workplaces in German-speaking countries have concentrated on specific companies' cultures. It is not yet clear whether and how these constructions come into being in the working sphere as collective knowledge, how they may be relevant to employers' strategies in the ways they support their employees and – vice versa – to the ways in which employees organize their working hours.

This paper contributes to this body of research by pursuing a question at the intersection of the labor market and family responsibilities: How do various relevant actors at Austrian workplaces, i.e. female and male employers and employees, understand, legitimize and construct flexible working, reduced working hours and corresponding career opportunities in a collective way? How is gender included and gender relations reproduced in these constructions? These questions were addressed in the course of a reconstructive analysis of qualitative data that comprises focus groups among and interviews with employers and employees. The results reflect that both employers and employees construct working norms as highly gendered. While women are conceived as the group demanding and getting the most out of part-time and flexible employment due to their unquestioned responsibilities for childcare, men only appear as profiting from new modes of working in the course of their full-time employment and career orientation. Furthermore, this paper discusses whether and how these constructions around flexible working time possibilities have potential to change gender relations both in the labor

market and in the private sphere, as intended by political actors and discourses. Despite new norms and manifold options of working for both genders, our results unfold markedly the mechanisms that are perpetuating persisting gendered inequalities in paid and family work rather than enabling change towards a more equal division of labor.

2. Transformations and normative forces in the labor market

Over the last decades, the labor market has changed profoundly across Europe. Working-life and career trajectories have become increasingly destandardized and no longer follow clear and straight principles. They are shaped by consecutive employment relationships, by additional trainings and life-long learning processes. Furthermore, working time and the amount of working hours have become highly heterogeneous across career trajectories and also across several European countries (Eurofound/International Labour Office 2017; Saupe 2018; Sardadvar et al. 2018). Companies have facilitated flexibility in working hours and working places. In addition to the rise of part-time options, the European Union's directive 21 (Plantenga & Remery 2010) has intensified claims for a more flexible organization of working hours, e.g., in the form of flexitime models (EIGE 2019).

Scholars have thus drawn an ambivalent picture of mobile and flexible working hours and places that entail both chances and challenges (Lott 2019; Eurofound/International Labour Office 2017; Hermann et al. 2016). Employers no longer recognize male and female employees as available unlimitedly, but also as individuals with private and family responsibilities. They no longer automatically couple job performance to full-time presence at the workplace and thereby counteract the career norms of "competitive presenteeism" (Schönauer 2018). More flexibility, however, tends to come in two dimensions: on the one hand, it may be oriented towards the company's and employer's preferences, on the other hand, employees themselves are able to handle such flexibility according to their needs and preferences. Furthermore, part-time jobs vary greatly in their quality with regard to employees' qualification levels and flexibility needs, careers and further training options as well as the possibility to return to full-time employment (Bergmann et al. 2010; Warren & Lyonette 2018; Kitterød et al. 2013).

Employees hence are required to deal with increased flexibility as well as insecurity (Astleithner 2018; Saupe 2018). They are forced to organize themselves and their working life in an effort to present and offer themselves as ideal and flexible employees in the labor market. Throughout their working lives, they individually need to optimize their employability, fulfill the labor market's specific and varying requirements, and be the entrepreneurs of their own manpower. This development and highly precarious status have been subsumed under the concept of the 'entployee' (Pongratz & Voß 2003; Voß 2001).

Moreover, in the context of these changes, scholars have described the phenomenon of statistical discrimination or flexibility stigma. On the one hand, employers are subject to this form of discrimination when they tend to anticipate lower long-term productivity, availability and loyalty among women rather than men. This already applies to the process of application for employment, but also at a later stage, when they are not recognized as

suitable for higher positions or more responsible tasks (Tilcsik 2021; Traavik 2018; Williams et al. 2013). On the other hand, this inequality is also highly relevant to employed women (and men) themselves, who (do or do not) anticipate an interruption or reduction of employment early on in their biographies and simultaneously also (do or do not) accept reduced career options or economic disadvantages. Consequently, they tend to 'choose' jobs and invest accordingly in career development strategies and therefore contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy (Beblo et al. 2008; Collins 2020; Gatrell & Cooper 2016). Furthermore, women with children tend to change their working hours and workplaces more frequently than men and to remain in or enter gender-typical occupations (Fritsch et al. 2020). Some of these occupations are located in branches that have departed from standard employment and become increasingly precarious over the past years (Sardadvar 2019; Rubery 2015).

With regard to more flexible and family-friendly working possibilities, women and men develop a different sense of entitlement (Lewis & Smithson 2016) and are exposed differently to flexibility stigma (Chung 2019; Williams et al. 2013). Women tend to feel more entitled to reduced working hours and part-time career options in order to fulfill the ideal of maternal presenteeism (Edgley 2021) and intensive mothering (Diabaté & Beringer 2018), while less likely making claims to career advancement (Luekemann & Abendroth 2018) or to female breadwinning (Miller et al. 2021). For their part, men's sense of entitlement to these family-friendly options may possibly be reduced due to the ideal of the breadwinning father (Alemann et al. 2017; Dallos & Kovács 2021) and arise only in highly supportive organizational cultures (Bernhardt & Bünning 2017). Furthermore, men seem to be more likely to work flexibly in the context of their full-time employment than to reduce working hours, as do women (Langner 2018; Liebig & Kron 2017). Regarding working at home, women with children are more likely to set up home office work in order to spend more time on childcare, while men tend to use home office to work overtime and spend even less time with their children (Lott 2019).

To a certain extent, these processes can be explained by gender ideologies, i.e. social norms and attitudes towards women's and men's needs and responsibilities which act like lenses through which individuals view their social world and upon which they act and make decisions (Davis & Greenstein 2009; Grunow et al. 2018), not necessarily consciously or with the awareness of gendered consequences (EIGE 2019). These processes develop in ways of doing and undoing gender (West & Zimmerman 2009; Charles 2014) and thus become relevant and influential both in the working sphere and the private sphere on an individual and couple level (Grunow & Lietzmann 2021).

Furthermore, the norms of the ideal employee and ideal worker (Acker 2013; Williams et al. 2013) have remained highly important for career moves. Comprising availability to the company in full-time and rather unrestricted, enduring and loyal employment relationships, these norms continue to fit male rather than female career trajectories and biographies (Wentner et al. 2019; Stuth & Hipp 2017; Lott & Klenner 2018; Padavic et al. 2019). Thus, part-time and flexible work has turned out to be a threat to gender equality (Lyonette 2015).

These norms and attitudes are embedded in and reproduced as social constructions by collective processes, orientations and actions, which are not necessarily rational, conscious or easily changed (Schein 1992; Froschauer & Lueger 2006). On the one hand, all actors at

workplaces construct these norms through their everyday actions, interpretations and discourses; on the other hand, current norms and guiding notions shape employers' and employees' actions, discourses and attributions (Behrends 2006; Riegraf 2010). Consequently, working time and places must be understood as a social construction as well, shaped by continuously reproduced notions of gender roles, power and success, and professional and private responsibilities, potentially concerning not only norms of the ideal worker but also of the ideal and good mother and father (Williams et al. 2013; Pedersen 2012).

3. Gendered inequalities in the case of Austria

In Austria, possibilities to work part-time and in a flexible manner have increased over the past decades. Facilitated by women's increasing labor market participation, political actors have promoted these options and adjusted legal fundamentals. They have aimed at easing the reconciliation between paid and family work but also at counteracting gender inequalities – in contrast to existing evidence. These developments have also forced companies to apply new strategies. First, they have implemented programs to promote women, soon replaced or complemented by gender-mainstreaming measures. In order to increase employer attractiveness, companies have offered flexible working hours, telework, various working time models, often labeling such offers as family-friendly. In parallel, they have tried to promote highly qualified women to reach management levels (Wentner et al. 2019; Holzinger et al. 2019) by offering part-time leading positions.

Even though the gap between women's and men's employment in general has decreased in Austria and women indeed increasingly participate in the labor market (Schmidt et al. 2020), this country is characterized by high and growing part-time rates among women and a pronounced and gendered part-time culture, as compared to other European countries (EIGE 2014; Barbieri et al. 2019; Padavic et al. 2019; Plantenga & Remery 2010). This stands in stark contrast to countries with stronger norms of gender equality (such as Sweden, Denmark or Norway), where change has been driven predominantly by men's work adjustments (Nylin et al. 2021; Dunatchik & Özcan 2020; Kvande & Brandth 2019).

Compared to all EU member states, Austria has the second highest part-time quota among women after the Netherlands (European Commission 2018). Since 2008, the share of employed women age 20 to 54 years working between 20 and 35 hours per week has risen to 21%. At the same time, women's full-time employment rate, i.e. 36 hours per week or more, has dropped to 38%, while 76% of men of the same age range work full-time. Among men, the majority is employed full-time regardless of age, education and parenthood status, while for women in Austria, being employed part-time in various degrees of working hours is the typical mode of employment, especially for those with (young) children (Schmidt et al. 2020). Thus, the transition to motherhood seems to be the strongest factor explaining these differences (Kleven et al. 2020).

After the birth of a child, three major and gender-neutral measures regulate and compensate parents' time for childcare in Austria. First, all employed parents are entitled to parental leave with a dismissal protection in force up to the child's second birthday.

Second, regardless of employment status, all parents can apply for childcare allowance for up to 35 months (Kosłowski et al. 2020). Third, parents who are able to exercise the right to parental part-time are legally protected against dismissal until their child's fourth birthday. Thus, companies are required to implement part-time jobs, especially in rural areas (Stadler 2019), and parents can more easily return to full-time thereafter.

Statistics from the OECD (2016) suggest that in the European Union, Austria has the highest proportion (88%) of mothers on parental leave with a child under age one. However, most parents prefer longer leave models and despite access to equal sharing, up to 81% of the principal recipients of childcare allowance were mothers only (Austrian Federal Chancellery 2018). The share of fathers claiming childcare allowance has even slightly decreased over the recent years (Rille-Pfeiffer & Kapella 2021).

Returning into full-time employment after the period of parental leave is more than twice as likely for fathers as for mothers (EIGE 2014; Stadler 2019). Even though more men are eligible to parental part-time in Austria, approx. 85% of all parents in parental part-time employments are women (Stadler 2019; Dörfler et al. 2009). Among women with children age two to 14 years, the share of part-time employment (max. 30 hours per week) has increased markedly in the course of the past decade and accounts for the majority (54 to 60%, depending on the age of the youngest child), also when the youngest child in the household has left primary school (Schmidt et al. 2020). In addition, differences by educational level have decreased and highly educated and qualified women also increasingly tend to work for reduced hours or even leave the labor market (Stadler 2019; Berghammer & Riederer 2018; Berghammer 2014). Hence, women are still underrepresented in hierarchically higher positions (Seebacher & Wieser 2018; Biletta et al. 2018). Employers' efforts to offer leading positions in part-time employment have already taken effect: Women in leading positions increasingly work part-time (up to 27%), while men's working hours in leading positions almost exclusively still amount to 40 hours and more (Schmidt et al. 2020).

These gendered inequalities are also reflected among parental couples in Austria, where the modified male-breadwinner model is highly and increasingly prevalent (52 to 56%, depending on the child's age) (Schmidt et al. 2020). This also holds true for couples with highly educated women whose earnings were higher before their children's birth (Stadler 2019; Stadler & Mairhuber 2018), even though the likelihood of a dual-earner or dual-breadwinner model is larger among these couples (Klesment & van Bavel 2017; van Bavel et al. 2018). This development is accompanied by amplified time pressure not only on women but also on men: While women are under pressure because of their high level of investments in unpaid family work beside their (mainly) part-time employment, men are burdened because they are increasingly involved in family life and childcare but have not adapted their level of working hours accordingly (Wernhart et al. 2018a; Zannella et al. 2018).

Compared to other countries, Austria is specific in employers' and politicians' endeavors to increase family friendliness in labor market and to enhance options for both women and men to flexibly organize their working hours, also accompanied by the aim to reduce gendered inequalities (Ostendorp & Nentwich 2005; Wernhart et al. 2018b). Still, statistics have so far failed to show any changes towards more equality regarding gendered time use. Considering present evidence, we thus must rather expect that flexible,

destandardized and mobile working hours and places retraditionalize gender roles and reproduce gendered inequalities, particularly in a country like Austria that is characterized by rather traditional cultural norms (Berghammer & Schmidt 2019; Kurowska 2018).

4. Data & methods

The purpose of this study was to understand the processes and rationales behind these statistical findings in the Austrian context. We departed from the position that unquestioned and partly unconscious notions and ideals are constantly and intersubjectively constructed, produced and reproduced (Berger & Luckmann 2004 [orig. 1969]). Shared in a conjunctive realm of experience (Mannheim 1980), such as the field of paid work, they are expected to guide practices including offering and making use of flexible working hours and places.

Pointing to the importance of incorporating both genders as a relational category in the analysis of work (Becker-Schmidt & Knapp 2007), the study on hand adopted a relational perspective, both in addressing the working arrangements of women and men and in talking to working women and men. It focused on the collectively shared understanding of how paid work is and should be organized, how women and men want to and should work, and how these views are legitimized collectively. The data thus consist of multiple perspectives (Vogl et al. 2019) of both employers and employees, regardless of their gender, in an attempt to identify how various relevant actors at Austrian workplaces, i.e. both female and male employers and employees, understand, legitimize and construct flexible working, reduced working hours, and corresponding career opportunities in a collective way. We further pursued the question as to how gender is included in these constructions in order to analyze whether and why these constructions around flexible working time options may have or lack potential to change gender relations both in the working sphere and in the private sphere on the couple level.

In 2019, we systematically selected 29 companies across Austria, which differed from one another along theoretically relevant criteria, reflecting a scope of sectors (trade, social care and healthcare, information/media/consulting, industry, public, education/research, service, tourism, finance, traffic, construction, real estate), various levels of women's quota and part-time quota, and diverse company sizes in terms of number of employees. Furthermore, the companies were located in different provinces across Austria and differed regarding the national audit that had accredited them as family-friendly or not (see Table 1, [Online Appendix](#)). Finally, we invited female and male employers who participated in the study, either as focus group participants or as interviewees (see Table 2, [Online Appendix](#)). These employers forwarded our invitation to participate to their employees. In doing so, female and male employees contacted us and were willing to participate as well (see Table 3, [Online Appendix](#)). In conformity with qualitative research goals, the final sample of participants was highly diverse and contrasting. In both groups, i.e. employers and employees, the sample consisted of women and men of different age groups, with or without children, with one child or more children of different age groups, working highly different numbers of hours per week, and having different educational

levels and professional positions. All respondents – invited as actors contributing to the constructions in the analytical focus – thus facilitated deep insights into collectively shared knowledge.

We separately conducted three gender-mixed focus groups (Barbour 2010; Smithson 2000) with employers (ER_FG) as well as three gender-mixed focus groups with employees (EE_FG), ten problem-centered interviews (Witzel 2000) with female and male employers (ER_I) and six interviews with female and male employees (EE_I). In an attempt to prompt discussions or narrations according to the participants' and respondents' relevance structures – i.e. *without* narrowing the focus on potential differences between employers and employees –, the interviews as well as the focus groups started with an open question *without* narrowing the focus on gendered differences or parental status. This initial question thus focused on models of working time and working place in the companies in general, connected to the participants' and respondents' experiences and perceptions regarding these issues. Further questions related to general corresponding career opportunities.

We transcribed all interviews and focus groups verbatim. The first step of data analysis involved a thematic analysis of each document. For the subsequent reconstructive analysis of rich and relevant text passages, we employed hermeneutic techniques in a sequential analysis (Froschauer & Lueger 2003). This interpretive and reconstructive procedure comprised the following aspects and exemplary questions that were addressed to short text passages: (a) How can the unit of analysis be summed up and paraphrased?; (b) Which intentions inspired the respondent to verbalize this statement? What did the respondent want to emphasize?; (c) Which contextual and latent preconditions led to this statement? Which implicit assumptions, latent meanings and guiding notions led to it?; (d) Which actors were involved and what were their tasks and roles? Which interactions took place between the acting persons, organizations, things, etc.? During this analytical procedure, we continuously produced hypotheses regarding the collective knowledge concerning working time and careers. We went on to verify these hypotheses during the ongoing analysis and complemented them by constant and extensive memo writing.

5. Results

When the respondents discussed or talked about different possibilities and models of organizing working time and working places in general, they stressed the crucial role of flexibility for both employers and employees. Flexibility in working hours and working places was presented as an asset in the first place. The participants argued that employers would then remain attractive for employees and attract further skilled personnel. In turn, employees would appreciate flexible working conditions and would be able to adjust their working life to their private interests and realities. Ideally, such flexibility should be available to all employees even though its attractiveness may be rooted in highly different motivations and life realities, as will be reconstructed and analyzed in detail in the following.

5.1 “Part-time ladies”: Part-time is female

Without being explicitly asked, the respondents very quickly mentioned part-time work as the “classical” working time arrangement for women. Especially for women with children, this construction served as a norm and ideal, yet not necessarily – such as in the frame of the ideal worker norm (Acker 2013) – for employers, companies or employees’ careers. The strong connection between part-time work and women was reflected in numerous accounts, regardless of whether the respondents were employers or employees, whether they were male or female, or whether they had children or not. The respondents framed part-time options very positively in the discussions and explanations, as these have been shown to enable more women to enter, stay in and return to paid work. They also valued that employers increasingly perceive women as workers with family responsibilities who must consider corresponding needs that require to work part-time – although the political discourses and aims were gender-neutral. These needs apparently obtained an important status and their expected working hours were linked to and constrained by the collectively shared ideal and subjective need of mothers in terms of intensive mothering, i.e. spending as much time with their children as possible and as early as possible again after institutional care or education. The following account was a typical example:

The department managers had to fundamentally rethink it in their minds, to find common ground, for example, why not plan mothers’ working hours in the mornings, when their children are at school or in kindergarten, then they can go home, pick up their children, all right. (EE12_3_FG)

The respondents constructed part-time employment as being ideal for and automatically chosen by women after their phase of parental leave, regardless of their prior career positions or ambitions. Both employers and employees constructed these women as a specific social group they called “parental-leave ladies” or “part-time ladies”, but also “part-time moms”. Even when the respondents talked about childless women, they also automatically referred to women’s potential parental leave and subsequent part-time work, connected to anticipated female biographies (Collins 2020) and thus preparing ground for statistical discrimination (Tilcsik 2021). For example, they remarked that these women never have a break in their career, some “time for a deep breath”, some “time for themselves”, and that they would possibly arrange a sabbatical exactly for that reason, like one childless woman in the sample had done.

The amount and quality of the time women spend with their children was framed as a highly individual choice and decision. Women would have to take it on their own and nobody can or should intervene, not even employers who ultimately may not profit either. For example, one employer said:

Because in the long run, if you stick people into a role, a certain number of hours, and they don’t feel comfortable, then the employees won’t get anything out of it, nor will the company in further consequence. (ER2_1)

Consequently, this individual decision entails women's individual responsibility for organizing and balancing their own needs with those of their families. However, connected to the concept of being an entreeployee (Pongratz & Voß 2003), it also implicitly entails the individual responsibility for organizing their working hours and their presence at their workplaces. One employer, for example, assumed that for mothers, "*working too many hours will also be difficult to organize, I guess*" (ER3_I). As a consequence, economic and potentially disadvantageous penalties were also located in the women's individual responsibility. One employee talked about some women's long-term part-time work and stated: "*really nice, as long as they can afford it*" (EE4_I). When the discussions reached the point that most women may not be able to afford it in the long run, women were constructed as ignoring such disadvantages and being unable to act ("*it just won't work*") or as setting priorities and living according to their preferences ("*I want to be with the children*" or "*I can't, I don't want to work for 30 hours*").

As to parental part-time claims, the respondents saw women with children as the main target group, as they themselves can flexibly choose and organize their work schedules around the ideal to intensively care for their child(ren). Further, the data reflect the common sense that after the period of this legal claim (the child's fourth birthday), women tend to change their parental part-time into "*normal*" part-time with "*great willingness*" (ER8_I) instead of returning to full-time again as politically targeted. Women were thus anticipated as using parental part-time not as a temporary working arrangement but as a long-term "*way of life*" (ER5_I) with a "*brilliant quality of life*" (EE4_I) that may be "*affordable*" or "*easier to manage*" (EE5_I). These results reflect the problem with gender-neutral policies (Kvande & Brandth 2019), equally available for both genders and framed as being based on individual choices, yet strongly shaped by gendered norms: Even if classified as being of higher quality (Bergmann et al. 2010; Warren & Lyonette 2018), this gender-neutral part-time option therefore fails to counteract gender inequalities.

Such constructions and argumentations furthermore reflect a lack of gender awareness (EIGE 2019), as women's main responsibility for childcare duties and the lack of fathers' childcare responsibility is not included as the main driver. Men, in contrast, and their family responsibilities and arrangements of working schedules are constructed within the frame of their full-time employment. In general, part-time employment for men was seen as highly unlikely, if not completely unfeasible, even though the option theoretically also relates to them. When employees and employers reported their experiences with men working part-time, they argued that those men possibly had had other additional professional activities, educational plans they pursued or other voluntary activities that required part-time employment "*for a certain period of time*". Further, in contrast to constructions of women working part-time, economic penalties were much more relevant than the gain in quality of life achieved with part-time employment. Therefore, even though men are theoretically offered the same possibilities to organize their working hours, have the same legal entitlements, may have the same preferences and – analytically spoken – have the same childcare responsibilities as do mothers, the constructed legitimizations for part-time work are gendered.

5.2 Working flexibly but being inflexible

In general, some employees and employers framed the ability to work flexibly (home office, telework, mobile working) as very positive for themselves, for employees in general and for the company's benefit. Again, particularly for women, flexible and mobile working was constructed as very beneficial as it "could ease their lives" (EE4_I). However, the respondents did not explicitly substantiate this perception. Rather, they seemed to expect the reasons for these benefits were obvious and self-explaining. Some phrases and passages in the interviews and group discussions gave a hint of the assumptions behind such reasoning. Regarding the possibility of flexible and mobile work, the respondents constructed the notion of an employed woman who is enabled to work at home early in the morning before her child wakes up, then at the office during the child's stay in nursery, kindergarten or school, plus in the evening and finally from home when her child has fallen asleep. In this way, again employing norms of intensive mothering (Diabaté & Beringer 2018), she is constructed as being responsible for childcare duties not in the same way and to the same extent as an employed man, i.e. her partner, who works in a flexible or mobile manner. For a woman, being able to handle her working accordingly in a flexible way is framed as highly positive and beneficial, both for herself as an employee and for her employer, as exemplified in the following:

I also see mothers in part-time in our company, they say the flextime model is also important for them to be able to leave the workplace on time and pick up the children, but they also say it doesn't hurt me at all, to work another hour online from home later in the day, when the children are at home and provided with everything, when they're playing anyway or going to bed, to invest another hour, they want to have this flexibility to be not only at their workplace. (ER4_I)

In contrast, for men, flexibility was constructed as necessary because of their further educational efforts or their self-employment activities beside their employment, and, for men with children, because of the option to start work flexibly in the morning after bringing their children to daycare or school. For them, the benefits of mobile working or working from home were not framed in the same ways they were for women with children. Rather, men's mobile working was strongly connected to the ideal worker norm and to still working full-time (Acker 2013). Consequently, norms for fathers' parenting were adjusted to still being able to work while being together with their family and to gain time by reducing commuting within their full-time employment. One employee valued working from home explicitly as

a blessing for fathers, not because then, they can care for their children at the same time, but it's a big difference, even if you reduce it to commuting. [...] It's time fathers gain when being with their families three days in a row. (EE1_I)

In contrast, connected to the concept of flexibility stigma (Williams et al. 2013), the idea of women working flexibly or beside childcare or housework evoked ambivalence and many negative anticipations among both employers and employees, yet again in a

gendered way, as it was expected that nobody else was present to perform childcare while those women were working from home. Ambivalence was also identified when the respondents, in their role as employers or superiors, reported about mothers who had claimed more flexibility, even though they had already chosen their part-time working schedules in accordance with their childcare duties based on their legal entitlement to parental part-time. The respondents stressed their experiences and rather negative associations with women who insisted on being entitled to flexibly choose the time they start and finish working every day, but simultaneously appeared highly inflexible when employers asked for company-oriented or workload-oriented flexibility. This employee, for example, expressed his experiences:

When the mothers say they want to have it that way, legally, when their hours are normal, an employer can ask three times for nothing, we'd like to have you longer in the afternoons. If the working hours are normal, then that's all legally possible. (EE10_3_FG)

The conclusions that are shared collectively can be subsumed under the slogan “give and take” (e.g., EE4_1), pointing to flexibility that is necessary on both the employees’ and the employers’ sides. Furthermore, the respondents constructed employers’ “trust” in employees as well as “leadership” as crucially important when it comes to flexible working time and places. Again, this was commonly constructed by both employees and employers in the focus groups, as exemplified by these two statements:

She can come late when her child has an important football match. That goes without saying. But on the other hand, we also expect flexibility from the employees. And this is where it becomes rather difficult. (ER13_FG)

I think if you want to have flexibility as an employee, then you also have to give flexibility, then you can't tough it out. (EE10_4_FG)

The collective constructions regarding this discrepancy between the flexibility female employees request while presenting themselves as rather inflexible did not include awareness that women’s reduced flexibility stems from their main childcare responsibilities they (have to or want to) assume or organize. Therefore, this discrepancy was constructed for female employees only and the respondents did not address that it does not apply to men. Resulting disadvantages for employers, constructed by employers and also employees, were also seen in women’s area of individual responsibility, pointing again to the concept of the entremployee (Pongratz & Voß 2003).

5.3 Female careers

In general, the respondents presented one consensual perspective regarding the constructed preferences of women to work part-time when they have children and to request further flexibility in their organization of paid work: Women should not suffer any disadvantages from their part-time employment. They should “find good conditions” (EE1_1_FG) to work flexibly and from home and they should not be limited in their career

opportunities even if working part-time. Consequently, they should be enabled to reach or remain in manager or leading positions with models such as part-time leadership. However, at the same time, successfully pursuing a career was constructed as strongly connected to being present in the company, ideally full-time and especially in male-dominated occupations, and thus quite unlikely for women. Thus, the constructions reflect the discrepancy between promoting women by adopting a paternalistic attitude while simultaneously sustaining ideal worker norms and reproducing norms of gendered parental responsibilities.

In general, working full-time was not constructed as a legitimate objective to achieve for women with children, except when it is necessary for economic reasons, e.g., for single mothers who do not have a breadwinning partner, even though they do not have a partner to share or hand over childcare responsibilities as do partnered women. From a theoretical, analytic perspective, it may be easier and more legitimate for a parent to work more hours when there is a partner who also cares for the child, but in these constructions, the opposite would appear to apply: It is only legitimate for mothers to work more (and neglect their maternal duties and demands), when they do *not* have a partner. These constructions involve men as being responsible for providing the family's money but not the possibility that they take over childcare or also work part-time in order to enable their female partners to work full-time. Further, mothers' full-time work was constructed as being illegitimate, as it may harm their children's well-being – which, again, the mothers are exclusively and individually in charge of and to be held responsible for, and not their partners or the children's fathers.

With regard to female careers, women's career ambitions were discussed intensively and, in general, questioned heavily, particularly when women become mothers. Superficially, women's career ambitions were assessed as being overruled by their preference to work part-time and aligned to care-giving responsibilities and children's needs. This is how one employer, for example, recalled a typical situation:

We wanted to split one manager position for two part-time employees in order to make a career possible, but we noticed that this is not yet appreciated greatly. Well, the ladies appropriate for such a position said very clearly, I've decided for the kids, and I really want to stop working on time, want to stay at home without a bad conscience when the child has a cough, this is my number one priority, and I don't want to pursue a career in the company, at the moment. Perhaps some time later, but it's not an issue now. (ER5_1)

Women may also lose their former career ambitions after becoming mothers. Both employers and employees reported on their experiences with women who were still childless and pursued a career. They experienced anticipations or had anticipated themselves that these women may reduce or abandon their efforts in pursuing their career, that they may lose their ambition and willingness to remain in a certain career position. This was constructed as standing in stark contrast to men who maintain “*the ambition and professional progress*” (ER10_1) and thus may prepare ground for statistical discrimination (Tilcsik 2021). Moreover, after becoming mothers, women with career ambitions may change or adjust their former career ambitions. On the one hand, they appeared in the constructions as being able to fulfill their career positions in part-time

employment. On the other hand, a woman's full-time position was constructed as being feasible only due to ideal and unexpected, "lucky" circumstances, such as an older partner who had taken over childcare or adequate external childcare solutions that enabled both partners to remain on their career tracks. However, these women's intentions do not rest on opportunities or a free choice similar to men and would possibly require stronger efforts from them than from men. As one employee reported, women may have been forced to counteract normative ways and ideologies of being a female employee: "*they have to be a better man and may have a very bad reputation immediately*" (EE1_I). These women may have been under special observation and possibly had to constantly prove their individual abilities and confidence to keep on pursuing their careers, especially when they had children. Another employer stressed that the following has to be clear to women: "*Sometimes a career isn't a piece of cake*" (ER6_FG).

Some respondents also reproduced gender-essentialist notions of women in the labor market. In these constructions, women appeared as being different from and behaving differently compared to men, as not being made for a career, as they "*don't want to bear it emotionally and actually don't like these conflictual situations when being in management*" (EE14_3_FG) or because "*it's not important to them, it's not in their nature (laughing)*" (ER3_I). These gender-essentialist ascriptions were actualized continuously, also during the focus group meetings. One employee related:

I believe this is certainly true that women are more sensitive. I once had a female boss in a higher position and I sometimes thought she takes some issues so personally, which a man would not have. (EE10_4_FG)

5.4 The companies' role

Across these ideals, perceptions and rationales, companies were included in the specific role they play with regard to flexibilizing women's work arrangements and career possibilities. First, the respondents constructed it as beneficial for companies to offer flexible part-time options in order not to do without women as qualified and necessary employees. Second, in order to remain attractive for (particularly female) employees and applicants, companies should meet the employees' preferences and needs, should "*start from where the women are and see what's possible*" (ER19_FG), should enable and allow as many options of working time organization as possible, as well as leadership positions in part-time. These efforts and objectives, as a main rationale constructed by employers as well as employees participating in this study, again did not reflect gender awareness (EIGE 2019). Rather, they mentioned at the most, for example, that a male employee might also need parental leave or reduced working hours due to his care responsibilities. In this case, the companies were constructed as being obliged to meet this wish as well. The respondents also reported that men increasingly take over caring responsibilities or at least wish to do so. The employers and companies seem to widely accept these wishes, be it only on a rhetoric level. Nevertheless, the companies were not seen as being in the position to actively encourage men to take parental leave or to question the fact that mainly women interrupt or reduce their employment after becoming mothers, i.e. workplace conditions that would have an effect (Bernhardt & Bünning 2017). For men, the

constructions rather included the temporary, optional, supportive and enjoyable character of their role in family life, for example, when employees called for acceptance of men who “*also want to stay at home for once*”, who want to “*participate in childcare*”, to “*take part in family life*” and to “*have more time for their families*” (EE1_1). Along the guiding notion, the respondents did not actively question the highly taken-for-granted norm that caring responsibilities mainly lead women to arrange and adjust their employment in the longer term. Still, these wishes and increasing awareness of employees’ family responsibilities have also evoked changes in companies and working culture, as the respondents reported. For instance, meetings may no longer be scheduled after 4 o’clock p.m., companies no longer expect their employees to work long hours in the evenings, and they manage employees’ parental leaves and the resulting increased work load.

The respondents repeatedly constructed a notion of managers and directors necessarily having to change their views on ideal working norms and to include their employees’ needs “*in their minds*”. This would be particularly important for women, as managers still tend to expect full-time employment contracts as the norm and thus treat women and their wishes differently. Companies consequently would need to offer women more flexibility in working hours and working places as well as adequate childcare infrastructure. However, in these constructions, women with children would consequently remain the primary caregivers of their children in the managers’ minds. This was not framed as problematic and as necessary to be changed. As a matter of fact, the collective construction of women being the main persons responsible for their children and thus needing flexibility would be reproduced even by these kind of changes in minds. Further, these changes entail “*a bad aftertaste*”, as companies seemed to be forced to implement them and also forced to explain themselves if they do not offer these options.

6. Discussion & conclusions

Over the past decades, gender relations among married or cohabiting partners and in the labor market in Austria have undergone changes towards more equality. Women have increasingly entered the labor market, while inequalities in the division of unpaid work within (parental) couples have also slightly declined. Companies have increasingly been required to establish and offer more flexible and more family-friendly working conditions to both women and men. However, pronounced gender inequalities persist in the private sphere, e.g., regarding time use and adjustments in paid work, as well as in the labor market, e.g., increasing differences in part-time employment. The present article addresses the question as to whether and how the expansion of flexible working options in the Austrian labor market – available to both women and men – may have the potential to mitigate the specific and pronounced gender inequalities in the division of labor between women and men, as originally targeted by political efforts.

The analysis focused on collectively shared rationales for flexible working and corresponding career options for women and men among various actors in the working sphere. It was based on qualitative data stemming from 6 focus groups and 16 interviews with employers and employees (n=55 respondents) who were diverse in terms of age,

gender, company affiliation and sectors across Austria (see tables in the [Online Appendix](#) for details). The results reveal how these respondents, regardless of their status or gender, constructed the necessity for more flexible working options – above all, part-time employment – as strongly connected to women’s needs and preferences, while serving as an ideal working norm for women, especially those with children and childcare responsibilities. The constructions implied that their possibilities in the labor market as well as their career ambitions, if present, should not be limited because of these responsibilities women (are supposed and anticipated to) assume after the birth of their child(ren). The accounts from both employers and employees corroborated how various actors at workplaces create guiding norms, while at once, these norms also shape their actions, discourses and attributions in return (Behrends 2006; Müller et al. 2013).

The central reason for all these developments and necessities is constructed in women’s main responsibility for family, housework and childcare duties, which women (who seem to be put on a level with mothers) can more easily assume. This is only rarely questioned and rooted in gendered ideologies (Grunow et al. 2018). The results impressively illustrate that the reason is *not* constructed as the fact that men with children – thus their women’s male partners – do *not* assume and have the same degree of responsibility as women with children do (and are also not expected to) and, therefore, do *not* to the same degree have to rely on parental leave, part-time or flexible working options. The constructions implied that ideally, women with children have to be supported by a variety of increased imaginable working time and working place options, by models such as part-time leadership, by institutional care or nannies. They would *not* need support from their male partners who may also take parental leave and reduce or flexibly adjust their working hours to take over childcare responsibilities – one crucial measure towards more gender equality in the division of paid and unpaid labor (Nylén et al. 2021; Dunatchik & Özcan 2020). This also has consequences for gender relations in parental couples, between parental partners, regarding their division of paid and unpaid work. Confirming conclusions from recent research, men are thereby relieved from their responsibility (Sørensen 2017) and women’s full-time employment may still be seen as a luxury, especially for mothers and regardless of their partners’ support (Adams & Golsch 2020).

All of the actors at the workplaces, i.e. the female and male employees, female and male employers involved in this study, collectively reproduced the norm of female employees as (potential) mothers who interrupt their employment, return to part-time, are rather inflexible and not career-oriented, and constrained by their family responsibilities. Simultaneously, the respondents referred to and reproduced the norm of ideal (male) workers (Acker 2013) who are available full-time and long-term, flexible, loyal, not constrained and instead career-oriented – a norm that is not well compatible with the ideal working norm for working (potential) mothers and also shapes parenting norms for fathers who are women’s partners and thus contribute to intra-couple gendered inequalities. These guiding notions are also reflected in the quantitative results of research into employees’ behavior in Austria: Apart from women’s preference to work for 20 to 30 hours a week, there is an increasing prevalence of both female part-time leaders and modernized male-breadwinner couples, even among couples including highly educated women (Schmidt et al. 2020; Stadler 2019; Berghammer & Riederer 2018). Reconstructed

norms of female family responsibilities are thus encompassed by new norms of female careers that are oriented towards the norm of the part-time ideal for female employees.

Consequently, statistical discrimination and flexibility stigma at the workplace is reinforced by these constructions and expected to persist (Tilcsik 2021; Williams et al. 2013): Women are treated as (potential) mothers, and relevant actors at workplaces may – more or less explicitly – anticipate employment leaves, reduced working hours, reduced flexibility and reduced career orientation, also women themselves (Collins 2020). Simultaneously, employers and companies continue to (and are expected to) support mothers in being able to adhere to their roles as mothers as much and as flexibly as possible by offering adequate employment possibilities, career options and childcare support. The consensus among the respondents, i.e. both employers and employees, was that women should be able to decide by themselves and according to their circumstances how and how much they would prefer to work without having to fear negative consequences. However, enhancing women's (and also men's) individual freedom of choice with various options to engage in paid and unpaid work locates the choices in the individual sphere (Pongratz & Voß 2003; Voß 2001). Moreover, women (and men) are also constructed as being individually in charge of regulating, economizing and organizing everyday reconciliation and – consequently – economic or professional consequences that affect women in particular. Two forms of flexibility thus have different consequences for gender equality: While both women and men are offered more flexibility, women are perceived and accused of being less flexible due to their childcare responsibility (Williams et al. 2013). Men, in contrast, are relieved from their responsibility and able to increase working time flexibility (Sørensen 2017).

According to gendered roles and gendered ideal worker norms, men may also receive more negative treatment than women when planning to take up part-time employment or management positions (Hipp et al. 2017; Sardadvar et al. 2020). More research on these aspects would be fruitful. Further, due to the COVID-19 pandemic that arose after this study was completed, working conditions, especially with regard to working from home, have inevitably become even more flexible. Initial results are still ambivalent but already indicate that inequalities between women and men are suspended or mitigated only temporarily (Mader et al. 2020; Kellner et al. 2020; Barbieri et al. 2020). However, these developments are to be examined further.

Summarizing these findings, this article reflects two sides of the same coin: On the one side, increasing possibilities of flexible working, although targeted for both genders, have enabled women with children to work as much as possible in a cultural context such as Austria. On the other side, these possibilities tend to reproduce gendered ideologies, responsibilities and capabilities and, consequently, inequalities in both spheres, the private family and the public labor market sphere. We thus argue that employment conditions, flexible working hours, and increasing options to organize working time and working places may be family-friendly. At once, however, they are gender equality-unfriendly as long as they are presented in a gender-neutral way. Rather, if they would explicitly address gender and gently force men to adjust their paid work as well and women to hand over childcare responsibilities and intensify their labor market participation, flexible working for all might have potential to reduce gendered inequalities in the division of labor and in time pressure for women and men. This applies particularly

to Austria, where flexible working options – as our results show – are connected to women (with children) and both employers and employees anticipate and experience that women assume the main responsibility for childcare.

Data availability

If you wish to get access to the data used to do the analyses for the study, please contact the author.

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Flexible Arbeitsregelungen für alle? Wie kollektive Konstruktionen in der Arbeitswelt Geschlechterungleichheiten aufrechterhalten

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit der Frage, wie erweiterte Optionen flexibler Erwerbstätigkeit von Arbeitgeber*innen und Arbeitnehmer*innen legitimiert werden und ob diese Potential haben, ungleiche Arbeitsaufteilung zwischen Frauen und Männern zu verringern.

Hintergrund: Geschlechterungleichheiten halten sich in Österreich sehr hartnäckig. Zum einen zeigen sich diese in der bestehenden ungleichen Aufteilung von unbezahlter Familienarbeit zwischen Elternteilen, zum anderen in der unveränderten Vollzeitbeschäftigung von Männern, während Frauen zunehmend in Teilzeit erwerbstätig sind. In den vergangenen Jahren wurden die Möglichkeiten flexibler Arbeitszeiten und Arbeitsorte für Arbeitnehmerinnen und Arbeitnehmer zunehmend ausgebaut, insbesondere für jene mit familiären Verpflichtungen und auch für Führungskräfte.

Methode: Zur Beantwortung der Forschungsfrage wurden sechs Gruppendiskussionen und 16 leitfadengestützte Interviews durchgeführt und analysiert, mit Arbeitgeber*innen (n=39) und Arbeitnehmer*innen (n=25) von insgesamt 29 kontrastierenden Unternehmen aus ganz Österreich. Die rekonstruktive Analyse ermöglichte es, die kollektiven Orientierungsmuster zu erfassen, die flexiblen Erwerbsarbeitsmodellen und Karriereoptionen zugrunde liegen.

Ergebnisse: Insbesondere Teilzeiterwerbstätigkeit und die damit zusammenhängende Flexibilität wurde als neue Norm konstruiert, vor allem für Frauen, die (potentiell) Kinder haben. Gleichzeitig legitimierten die Arbeitgeber*innen und Arbeitnehmer*innen jedoch, dass Frauen von jeglichen daraus resultierenden Nachteilen geschützt werden müssten, die wiederum auf der nach wie vor bestehenden Norm der idealen Arbeitskraft beruhen. Männer – die als Partner dieser Frauen unterstützend wirken könnten, indem sie ebenso von diesen Optionen Gebrauch machten, um die Kinderbetreuung zu übernehmen – wurden nicht als Zielgruppe konstruiert.

Schlussfolgerung: Im kulturellen Kontext von Österreich führt das Angebot an familienfreundlichen, flexiblen Arbeitsmodellen demzufolge eher dazu, Geschlechterungleichheiten zu reproduzieren und aufrechtzuerhalten, weil Männern kein Bedürfnis und kein Bedarf nach diesen Optionen zugesprochen wird und dieser Umstand von den Befragten auch nicht explizit problematisiert wird.

Schlagwörter: Teilzeiterwerbstätigkeit, Arbeitsaufteilung, Kinderbetreuung, Geschlechterungleichheiten, Karriereoptionen, Geschlechternormen

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