

## FAMILY QUALITY TIME FOR EMPLOYEES WORKING FROM HOME. BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC COMPARISONS

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*Data from a two-wave study (2018–2019 and 2020) on working conditions and on work-life balance for those working from home (WFH) point to the fact that the contribution of WFH to family quality time is distinct when gender, children and different levels of education are considered. Our first wave showed that for those who do not have children, the more they work from home, the greater the extent to which they agree that “WFH allows more quality time with the family”. For men, WFH does not change the representation of quality time with the family. Implications point to an unequal representation and distinct gendered experiences of quality family time that hide different time use patterns in family members, with an even more clear division with the cultural shift around work generated by the current pandemic. Men tend to be more protected from household chores and possibly have different standards of what quality time means, which would explain our results. Moreover, data from 2020 suggests that the appreciation of WFH as contributing to quality family time is lower than the 2018–2019 data suggested, even when we control for education, age, number of children, living in Romania or outside it, gender, and number of members in the household. This further expands the discussion about different theoretical conceptualisations of quality family time, and about how the COVID-19 pandemic, with forced and sudden working from home policies, contributed to a deterrence of home as a restorative place.*

**Keywords:** *working from home; family quality time; work-life balance; COVID-19 pandemic.*

### INTRODUCTION

The concept of *quality time* is difficult to define, mostly because it is very closely related to both the family and its housing context, and to the ways in which time use is generally unevenly distributed among social groups with different

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characteristics (so-called *time inequalities*) (Merz and Rathjen 2014). This difficulty can point to a fruitful site of exploration when members of a family gather for quality family time, in the context of working from home. Personal/familial characteristics are not the only ones that shape the process, the socio-political context of the organization of work in which working from home is promoted is also very important for how family time is imagined. Whether it is a form of transferring certain work-related expenses to the employee (work-related energy consumption at home, not supported by the employer, or the use of other personal resources: laptop, internet connection, etc.); whether it is a company policy to give the employee more autonomy in organising their own work, and to ensure long-term loyalty (days worked from home or other forms of tele-work, attractive salary package, high flexibility of the programme and paid vacation, etc.) or, in even more extreme cases, if it is a major component of the distancing measures adopted in the context of pandemics, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The current analysis addresses the ways in which quality family time for those working from home evolves from a context where working from home is an option, to the one generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, where working from home (WFH) re-emerges in a live-from-home environment. Our objective is twofold. First, we look at how WFH contributed to the overall perception that it enhances quality family time, both before the COVID-19 pandemic, but especially shortly after its breakout, during the revitalization of remote work for some companies. Second, we examine how these changes are unevenly distributed across people with different work and domestic commitments, as well as different social backgrounds.

### **TIME FOR WORK AND TIME FOR FAMILY**

How we spend our time carries with it the significance of social activities we engage in. Time use is unevenly distributed, and some people have more power than others in owning and being able to prove agency in how they handle time in various spheres of their lives. Data looking at family relationships, work – life balance, and different distributions of time use point to the fact that a clear division between work and private life can be better for healthy family relationships (Alonso-Dominguez, Callejo and Diaz-Mendez 2020). However, this division can be difficult to put in practice, since spillovers are quite common, and they can entail competing emotional cultures (Hochschild 1997). Moreover, from a time-use perspective, the difficulty of securing what is imagined as quality family time can be a matter of incompatible timetables, disparate interests, and of desynced rhythms between partners' daily schedules (Hochschild 1997). For Romania, surveys on time use show that the distribution of invested time differs fundamentally by gender, with women spending an average of 4h 40 minutes a day on household and family care activities, compared to 2h for men (INSSE 2013).

Meanwhile, men spend 4h 23 minutes a day on average on leisure activities, while the average for women is about 3h 40 minutes per day (INSSE 2013).

Time is also seen as a fundamental resource, related to social class, influencing the financial and other material possibilities of families, as well as their social practices (Jarosz 2016, Merz and Rathjen 2014). Some authors consider time scarcity, or the feeling of not being able to afford time for various activities, as an indicator of poverty (Cohen 1998; Jabs and Devine 2006; Merz and Rathjen 2014), and a marker of technological changes that can affect time practices (Wajcman 2008). People who can afford time-saving services report greater life satisfaction (Hochschild 1997; Whillans *et al.* 2017). Furthermore, time-saving practices can further affect how time-deprived members of the family understand the quality of relationships. This was especially true for the COVID-19 pandemic, considering that not all families stranded at home and forced to telework can afford to “buy time”. However, time-use approaches, although considered objective forms of measuring uneven time-allocation, do little to acknowledge the “social” dimension of time distribution: norms, expectations, and standards that come into play in time assessment (Southerton 2020). This work focused on the social aspects of time-use is mostly developed through evaluations of time dedicated to various activities and people, as it is the case with an assessment of the family quality time. In terms of COVID-19 changes, the homebound structure of time has meant that more people were forced to share their time with families, partners, roommates, or with friends. Therefore, their time became more dependent on changes in time-allocations for activities, and on breaks in the rhythm associated with other household members.

### **WORKING FROM HOME, WORK LIFE BALANCE, AND COVID-19**

Telework was considered a viable solution for a better reconciliation of professional and private life. It has often been promoted as an advantageous option for both companies and employees through greater but critiqued flexibility (Tieze and Musson 2002, Timsal and Awais 2016, Williamson and Pierce 2022, Smite *et al.* 2023), as well as through modifying patterns of transportation activity (Moeckel 2017; Hensher, Beck, and Wei 2021). Working from home is presented as having implications for work – life interface (Crosbie and Moore 2004; Van der Lippe, and Lippényi 2020; Tejero, Seva, and Fadrillan-Camacho 2021; Sladká and Kreidl 2022), while at the community level it reduces traffic congestion (Hopkins and McKay 2019, Loo and Huang 2022). However, one of the issues associated with telework, especially in the case of work from home, is the creeping invasion of the private lives of individuals by their professional lives, and the rise of conflicts between the two spheres (Aguilera *et al.* 2016, Hilbrecht *et al.* 2013). The flexibility, considered a major advantage for employees, can also lead to an

increase in stress levels, as individuals have to adapt to fulfilling their professional and personal roles in the same space (Crosbie and Moore, 2004; Powell and Craig, 2015). Moreover, the pressure they face when forced to choose between different tasks and responsibilities that coexist in their living space (Tietze and Musson, 2005) can increase imbalances, though managerial support can moderate the relationship between working from home and work – family conflict (Van der Lippe and Lippényi 2020). There also may be different understandings of time between work and personal life: on the one hand, working time is governed by the need to demonstrate its quantifiable value in remuneration, and on the other hand, domestic time is considered less rigid, less effective, and more sensitive to changing circumstances (Tietze and Musson 2005).

Working from home does not seem to produce dramatic changes in roles previously assumed by family members: in couples where women were traditionally responsible for household care, they continue in this capacity, even as they transition to working from home (Sullivan and Lewis, 2001; Hilbrecht *et al.* 2013). WFH, however, allows for a reconfiguration of the daily schedule to include several household tasks involving less effort, and less disruption of working time (*e.g.*, laundry). At the same time, the conflict between professional and personal life is felt more strongly by women (Van der Lippe and Lippényi 2020). Women are those who more often organize their schedule around childcare and household needs, take to working in common spaces (*e.g.*, kitchen, living room), assume the role of “protectors”/ “guardians” of their partners’ working time, by preventing “interruptions” from children, unexpected visitors, triage of telephone calls, etc. (Sullivan and Lewis 2001), and experience higher levels of emotional stress, because of to decreased personal time and the feeling of being constantly “on the run” (Hilbrecht *et al.* 2013).

Although the use of ICT has facilitated the process, the expansion of telework has been a slow phenomenon until recently, when the constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic led to a considerable intensification of work from home. Work – life balance becomes a challenge, in a context, on the one hand, marked by a culture of time-consuming work in the total time budget, on the other hand a labour market substantially unprepared for remote work. In Romania, legal changes addressing labour rights and processes of telework only started to be put into law in 2016. According to Eurostat, in 2019, 5% of employed adults in the EU28 were employees who were working from home(fully); in Romania, the percentage was below 1%, one of the lowest in the European Union, but expanded to 2% of employed adults in 2021(Eurostat, online data code: LFSA\_EHOMP).

When it comes to changes in work associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, the potential of home-based work studies is to provide a better understanding of the boundaries used by people when multiple spheres of their lives compress in the

same space. Eurofound's 2020 study *Living, working and COVID-19* survey data show that 18 % of Romanians moved to working from home after the pandemic began. Still, Romania has the lowest rates of people who say they started working from home because of the pandemic. The distribution of this change indicates, more broadly, which countries are more able to transition to work from home, reflecting inequalities of access in the long term. At the same time, prior to the pandemic, the number of hours worked weekly in Romania (not just from home) was one of the highest in the European Union (Eurostat database, online code: LFSA\_EWHUIS). Moreover, different transition processes can reflect unequal home-based labour cultures (telework cultures) in this improvised context, with undifferentiated and additional hours of work, not only due to changes after March 2020 related to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also because of a history marked by overworking environments as a status quo.

#### **FAMILY (QUALITY) TIME. SHORT HISTORY OF CONCEPTUALIZATION AND DEFINITIONS**

The concept of family time is intricately related to changes brought by the industrialisation of working time that pushed some family members, usually men, out of the household, and into a rather standardised world of work, with the hope of reclaiming connectedness and togetherness (Hochschild 1997; Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik 2015; Vuk *et al.* 2016). According to recent data, feelings of being *time-squeezed* are a common denominator nowadays, as is the desire to spend more time doing different activities. European Quality of Life survey data from 2016 shows us that 34% of Europeans want to spend more time with their families (Eurofound 2016).

But what does family time mean? There are two conceptualizations of family time: one as time set aside for special activities dedicated and planned (Vuk *et al.* 2016), often seen as family priority time (in or outside one's household), the other one as time distributed among already known activities, not necessarily planned, or thought of as separate "family time", but more focused on the quality of interactions and attributed meanings (Hochschild 1997; Kremer-Sadlik and Paugh 2007). The pressure of time distribution along a series of activities can force family time out from daily or even weekly schedules (Roxburgh 2006). Therefore, a strategy to deal with this is to re-signify everyday household chores as meaningful time spent with family (Kremer-Sadlik and Paugh 2007). Unstructured social interaction during those activities can build and foster family wellbeing. Moreover, meanings associated with how working time contributes to family time matter. In a study on Finnish mothers with non-standard flexible schedules, understanding non-standardised flexibility as their own autonomy in planning time helped build a better interest in family time (Murtorinne-Lahtinen *et al.* 2016). However, some

studies show that the understanding of the time available to invest in individual or family activities varies between income classes (Merz and Rathjen 2014). Available free family time depends on available resources and competes with labor time invested in paid activities, which often leads to the availability of family time turning into a dimension of poverty (Merz and Rathjen 2014). Furthermore, the distribution of household tasks most likely depends on the representation of partners as to what is considered right or fair in the allocation of time with the family. Thus, we can have two main value guidelines, which affect the stability of married couples (Bellani, Esping-Andersen and Pessin 2018), depending on how partners adhere to one or the other, and which most likely also extend to the symbolisation of family time. The first one is based on the proportionality of tasks, while the other one takes into account the cultural references related to what is deemed acceptable in the wider society or within the close groups of friends (for example, a lower support for women in domestic work might be the norm) (Bellani, Esping-Andersen and Pessin 2018).

Under the conditions of time loss and activity compression within the same physical space, this dichotomy between domestic work and family time tends to disappear. Instead, what is imagined as quality time could be built around existing practices (cooking or other domestic activities), with the individual time investment used to preserve a “fair” distribution. The pressure to not only have family time, but for this time to be designed as “quality time” has pointed out to emotional meanings and labour associated with the concept. Hochschild (1997) defines quality time as a „small castle of time protected from the demands of the outside world” (p. 23), while also singling out “time deficit «paybacks»” containing emotional work (idem: 218). These time deficit mentions point to the underlying idea that there is a substantial tension between work and family time. Tension is often dealt with by using micro-strategies for negotiating the distribution of domestic work, one of the indicators of social and personal relationships of “cold intimacy” (Illouz 2007), a supposedly rational framework to emotionally charged relationships (Hochschild 1997; Illouz 2007). This re-signification reflects the need to resolve the inevitable mixing of borders and to bring negotiating patterns into intimate relationships. Moreover, we argue that the pandemic could bring a major shift in what is considered acceptable designated family time, consisting less of time in quantitative terms and more of time away from the household in the context of forced WFH.

## PANDEMICS AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Depictions of different pandemics throughout history show us that there are sudden social changes brought up by sanitary crises (Dehner 2012, Holmberg 2017). The most recent influenza pandemic, the 2009 and 2010 “swine flu” H1N1, has had a less obvious impact on societal changes in Europe. This was, in part, due

to the (perceived) low mortality of influenza which has created a general ease in dealing with its effects, leading to it historically being treated more lightly than other pandemics (Dehner 2012, Dingwall, Hoffman and Staniland 2013, Holmberg 2017). Pandemics are random events, but their unpredictability comes with a series of lifestyle changes that can disturb social arrangements, and which have the potential to uncover new, otherwise unknown rules of social order (Dingwall, Hoffman and Staniland 2013).

Family contexts are consistently affected by pandemics, in terms of sudden changes brought by distancing measures, illness, or the death of family members, alongside socio-economic consequences (job losses, changing working environments and conditions). From a life-course perspective, pandemics have the power to accelerate private life events, like birth, death, divorce, or marriage, depending on other social circumstances. This structural intervention has redefined the rules of everyday social private arrangements to prevent or treat illness, and has been proved to affect family dynamics, as well as the quality of family relationships (Dingwall, Hoffman and Staniland 2013; Bellani and Vignoli 2021). The broad debate over how disruptive structural events affect relationships or family quality revolves around the idea that these events either bring families closer or tear them apart (Balzarini *et al.* 2020, Bellani and Vignoli 2021; Sladká and Kreidl 2022). However, more detailed analyses point to the fact that lockdowns and quarantines associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have forced intense evaluations of relationship quality within families (Fraudatario and Zaccaria 2020; Sladká and Kreidl 2022). Moreover, the gendered expectations of caring for the ill, disproportionately falling under the purview of women, tend to increase in pandemic contexts (Godderis and Rossiter 2013). There are, however, accounts of a more egalitarian distribution of tasks within the household between genders (Fraudatario and Zaccaria 2020), although women also face more emotional labour during lockdowns.

In this context, the aim of the current study is to observe changes in how quality family time is assessed, in the two survey waves, before (2018–2019) and during the pandemic(2020). Considering the literature on the relationship between family time and working time, we developed the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): We assume that, during the pandemic, working from home may not enhance quality family time to the same extent as before.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): We expect that when people work longer hours while at home, they may perceive working from home as contributing less to quality family time.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): We anticipate that marital status, gender, number of children, and educational level affect how people perceive the contribution of working from home to quality family time. Specifically, we expect married individuals to view working from home as contributing less to quality family time, and individuals with children to be less likely to agree that working from home enhances quality

family time. At the same time, women may be less likely than men to consider working from home as enhancing quality family time, and individuals with higher levels of education may perceive working from home as enhancing quality family time to a greater extent.

## DATA AND METHODS

The project “Work from home and quality of personal life” (Voicu et al. 2020), carried out in Romania, aimed to map different ways of working from home and strategies to delineate borders in private homes. Data consisted of two waves of online surveys, the first wave with data collected in 2018–2019, the second one at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, in April 2020, immediately after lockdown implementation in Romania. By contrasting data from the two waves, we had the opportunity to test our hypotheses.

Samples from the two waves (N Wave1= 239 respondents, N Wave2= 211 respondents) are non-probabilistic: personal networks, individual recommendations, snowballing and dissemination on Facebook were the main strategies to recruit respondents. Therefore, we cannot assume a generalisation of our results from the current research, but we can compare various indicators to see their evolution before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Țălnar-Naghi 2021). The overall sample of respondents to the dependent variable (item survey: “Working from home allows more quality time with my family”) was comprised of 197 people (N Wave 1=53 respondents, N Wave2=144 respondents). The final sample we used to carry out our analysis consists of 153 respondents from the two survey waves, after we selected only respondents who answered all variables of interest (see *Table no. 1*).

Our dependent variable is quality family time for the situation of working from home, measured at ordinal level through one statement with response choice on a four-item scale, level of agreement to the statement „working from home allows more quality time with family”: 1. Strongly agree, 2. Agree, 3. Disagree, 4. Strongly disagree.

There are some premises that are hidden behind the statement “Working from home allows more quality time with family”:

1. Whether members of the family are in the same physical space of the home or not, and regardless of the marital status or the number of children, each respondent has a certain representation of what “family” means.

2. Even if the person who answered is alone (lives alone and/or is (not) in partnership with another person), there are reference persons who are considered family (parents, other relatives, or other persons outside the household).



3. For those who live together and consider themselves a family, there is a certain imaginary about what it means for them to build good relationships within that family, relationships that are facilitated or not by working from home.

These subjective situations and meanings are unknown in our survey, therefore there may be some limits associated with the implicit different understanding of “quality” and of “family time”, as well as of the overall concept of interest “quality family time”. However, behind such specificities, the item provides a subjective view on whether the outcome of working from home is satisfactory in respect to one’s subjective standards and scale of preference.

The main independent variables are provided by our three hypotheses. First, we consider the moment of data collection, before COVID-19 or during lockdown, which allows testing H1. The second hypothesis requires controlling for the self-reported number of worked hours. Thirdly, marital status (single vs in cohabitation or married), number of children, and education level answer the questions in H3.

For testing, we run ordered logit models, with controls for various socio-demographic variables and work-related variables, depicted in *Table no. 2*. The first model includes the predictors of main interest for the testing of the three hypotheses, and the control variables. Models 2 and 3 add interaction effects between the wave of the survey and the predictors of interest, to grasp the differences that occurred during lockdown.

*Table no. 1*

#### Descriptive statistics

		WFH2018	WFH2020–April
		Mean (SD)/ Frequency	Mean (SD)/ Frequency
Unweighted count (all sample)		239	211
Unweighted count (dependent variable)		53	144
Monthly income in Euro (recalculated)		1 032 (578)	1 619 (1882)
Age		35 (9)	36 (8)
How many hours a week do you work (on average), regardless of where you do it?		45 (28)	37 (19)
How many hours a week do you work from home (on average)?		26 (26)	35 (20)
Education	post-secondary school or less	8%	2%
	university: BA	33%	33%
	university: MA	40%	50%
	university: PhD	19%	15%

The country where the respondents live	Living in Western Europe	5%	10%
	Living in Romania or Moldova	95%	90%
Gender	Woman	75%	72%
	man	25%	28%
Marital status	Never married/in partnership	24%	27%
	married	46%	46%
	In cohabitation	20%	22%
	Divorced/ separated/ widow	9%	6%
Number of children	None	54%	61%
	one child	30%	27%
	two or more children	15%	12%

Source: WFH2018 and WFH2020 databases.

Nevertheless, the data that we use is repeated cross-sectional, not a longitudinal panel, therefore we cannot tell for sure which were the changes suffered by those interviewed in the first wave of the survey, or how the ones interviewed in the second wave were behaving during the first wave. However, by using the mentioned control variables and interaction effects we manage to reduce the potential bias, and to provide insights into the hypotheses of interest.

## FINDINGS

### H1: Family quality time before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

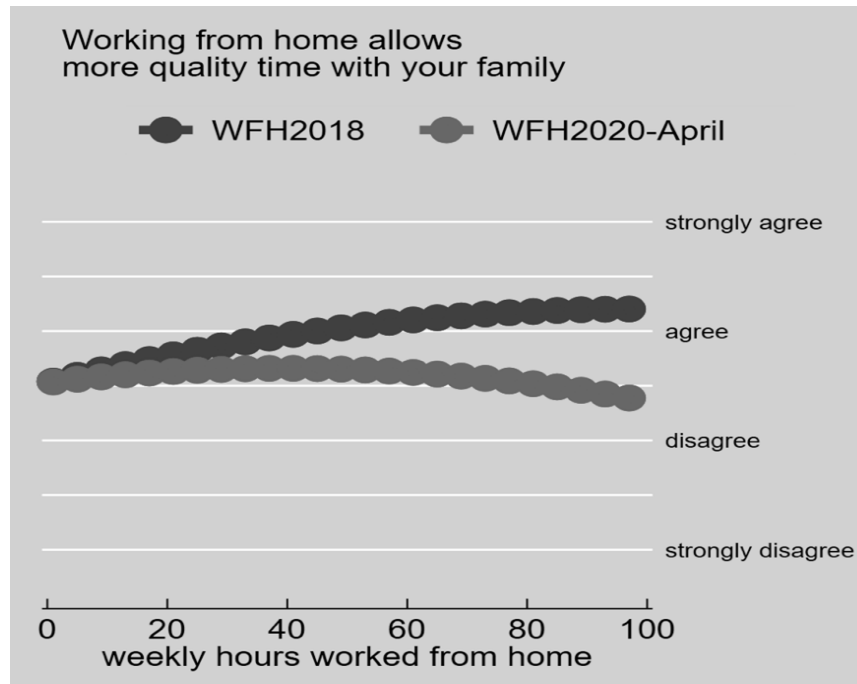
Data collected in 2020 during the pandemic show that the appreciation of WFH as facilitating quality time with family members is lower than data in 2018–2019 suggested. The result is valid after we eliminate differences induced by education, age, number of children, living in Romania or outside it, gender, number of members in the household. Hypothesis 1, which assumes that during the pandemic working from home may not enhance quality family time to the same extent as before the pandemic, was therefore confirmed.

### H2: Number of hours worked from home

In addition, the number of hours worked from home, compared to the previous wave of research, negatively affects the agreement with the statement “Working from home allows more quality time with the family”. In other words, the higher the number of hours worked weekly from home, the less respondents appreciate that they can spend quality time with their family, thus confirming our second hypothesis.

Figure 1

**Quality time with family by the number of hours worked from home  
(Comparison wave I – 2018–2019 and wave II–2020)**



Note: WFH2018 – 1<sup>st</sup> wave of research; data from February 2018 to September 2019; WFH2020 – 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of research; data collected in April 2020.

### **H3: Family composition and background matters: the children, marital status, education, and gender effect**

#### *Marital status effect*

For couples where both partners work from home, their simultaneous presence in the home space, often promoted as an advantage, can sometimes prove to rather be a difficulty, generating what Tietze and Musson (2005) have called a “paradox of presence – absence”: the partner working from home is physically in the space of their dwelling, without being mentally present, which includes an emotional effort to manage the situation, and maintain the boundaries between the two spheres. Our data show that the assessment of the influence of working from home on family relationship is distributed on a continuum, depending on the marital status of the respondents, as follows: a) for those separated/ divorced/ widowed, working at home negatively affects the quality time spent with the family (most likely the family of origin or choice being at distance, not in the same

household); b) for the single and married the effect is moderate; c) for those in partnerships, working at home leads to quality time with the family. Therefore, the component regarding the marital status of the H3 is confirmed when comparing married individuals with those in partnership, but not when comparing married and single people.

Table no. 2

## Regression models “Quality family time”

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	v202x	v202a	v202b
Working from home allows more quality family time			
Monthly income in Euro (recalculated)	1.00	1.00	1.00
Man	1.00	1.00	1.00
Woman	0.68	0.65	0.67
post-high school	1.00	1.00	1.00
BA	0.14 <sup>†</sup>	0.00 <sup>***</sup>	0.12 <sup>†</sup>
MA	0.13 <sup>†</sup>	0.00 <sup>***</sup>	0.11 <sup>*</sup>
PhD	0.07 <sup>*</sup>	0.00 <sup>***</sup>	0.06 <sup>*</sup>
Never married/in partnership	1.00	1.00	1.00
Married	0.95	0.90	0.91
In cohabitation	1.66	1.68	1.64
Divorced/ separated/ widow	0.53	0.49	0.52
None	1.00	1.00	1.00
One	1.93	2.11	1.42
2+	1.46	1.69	1.43
Age	0.98	0.99	0.98
Living in Western Europe	1.00	1.00	1.00
Living in Romania or Moldova	1.54	1.65	1.65
How many hours a week do you work (on average), regardless of where you do it?	0.98	0.99	0.98
WFH2018	1.00	1.00	1.00
WFH2020–April	0.91	0.00 <sup>***</sup>	0.52
How many hours a week do you work from home (on average)?	1.02	1.01	1.01
WFH2018 How many hours a week do you work from home (on average)?	1.00		
WFH2020–April How many hours a week do you work from home (on average)?	0.99		
WFH2018 # post-highschool		1.00	
WFH2018 # BA		1.00	
WFH2018 # MA		1.00	
WFH2018 # PhD		1.00	
WFH2020–April # post-highschool		1.00	
WFH2020–April # BA		81 469.44 <sup>***</sup>	
WFH2020–April # MA		2.2e+05 <sup>***</sup>	
WFH2020–April # PhD		2.2e+05 <sup>***</sup>	

How many hours a week do you work from home (on average)?		1.00	1.00
WFH2018 # none			1.00
WFH2018 # one			1.00
WFH2018 # 2+			1.00
WFH2020–April # none			1.00
WFH2020–April # one			1.63
WFH2020–April # 2+			1.21
How many persons, including you, live in your household?			
cut1	0.01 <sup>**</sup>	0.00 <sup>***</sup>	0.01 <sup>***</sup>
cut2	0.04 <sup>*</sup>	0.00 <sup>***</sup>	0.02 <sup>**</sup>
cut3	0.30	0.00 <sup>***</sup>	0.19
Observations	153	153	153
Pseudo $R^2$	0.039	0.043	0.038

Exponentiated coefficients; †  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

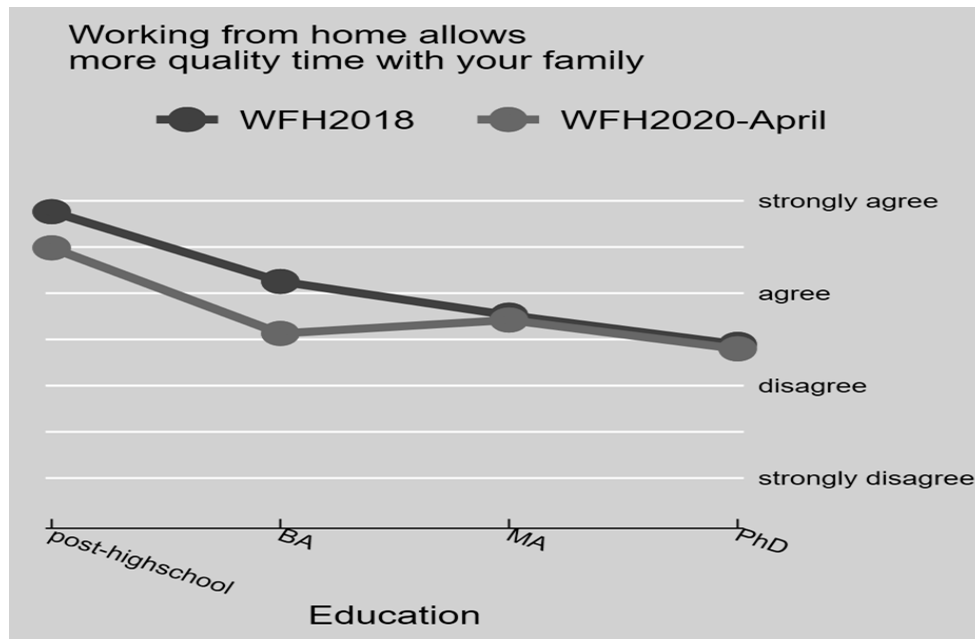
For all families, the pressure of condensing all activities into the same space is high: it involves adapting the living space to requirements of working at home, adapting the workspace and working time to the similar needs of other family members, it involves efforts to create and maintain boundaries between spheres of life to avoid confusion about the priority of roles and conflicts between them (Rosselin 1999; Ashforth *et al.* 2000; Dumas and Sanchez-Burks 2015). A suggestive metaphor, used to describe how time and space between family members with different programs are managed, is that of the “battle plan” they make to organize activities in the housing space (Tietze and Musson 2005).

### ***Educational level effect***

Respondents who have completed at least a master's degree appreciate to a lesser extent that working from home allows for quality time with their family. According to data collected in April 2020, 39% of respondents with doctoral studies, 43% of those with master's degrees, 54% of those with a bachelor's degree and 50% of those with post-secondary education or less agree that working from home allows them to spend more quality time with the family. Differences between categories are maintained even after we eliminate the effect of other characteristics such as marital status, gender, number of children, age, number of members in the household. Therefore, the hypothesis that individuals with higher levels of education may perceive working from home as enhancing quality family time to a greater extent is confirmed (H3).

Figure 2

Quality time with family by level of education  
(Comparison wave I– 2018 –2019 and wave II –2020)



Note: WFH2018 – wave I of research; data from February 2018 to September 2019; WFH2020 – wave II of research; data collected in April 2020.

There are two possible explanations. First, those with a high level of education could have jobs that are otherwise more suitable for working at home, which means that experiences of working from home may be different for them than they are for those who have completed lower levels of education. Second, it is possible that those with a lower level of formal education are more likely to work longer hours outside the household (working less from home), and could therefore be more time deprived. As the experience of time is included in the social class experience (Merz and Rathjen 2014), we expect that not everyone would be able to afford allocating time to their family in the same way when we look at education, age, or income.

At the same time, aspirations related to family quality time are also unevenly distributed. Those with lower education could financially afford less to save time by outsourcing services. Yet, according to our data, there are also those who say that working from home has allowed them quality time with the family. Ordering food or purchasing home equipment that saves time invested in domestic tasks are the practices of those with higher incomes. With a good proportion of the

population unable to cope with unforeseen expenses (44% of Romanian households, according to 2019 EU-SILC data), and the COVID-19 pandemic that has put economic pressure on many households (changes associated with the workplace, including financial, as well as the need to invest in food resources over a longer period to reduce physical exposure), spending quality time was very likely not to a priority. This means that quality family time is possible to have no attached standards, which in the end can have a positive effect on the overall appreciation.

***(Not) Having children as a marker of different quality time frameworks***

Working from home, the number of children and the number of hours worked interact to show us what our respondents think about how working from home does or doesn't allow for quality time with the family. Thus, before the pandemic begun, the results looked like this:

1. If they have children, for those who worked from home before the pandemic, the fact that they work more, or fewer hours does not change the representation of quality time with the family. This means that our respondents who have children (1–2) most likely have practices, routines and assessments that adapt in such a way as to increase the quality of family time, even if they work from home and work long hours.

2. On the other hand, if they do not have children, the more they work from home, the greater the extent to which they agree that “working from home allows more quality time with the family”.

Between the two categories of respondents (with children/ without children) there are most likely differences in the organisation of work from home, which influences how they relate to and judge family quality time. Respondents with children divide their time between their professional tasks and the children's daily schedule (school, tutoring, swimming classes, dance, piano, homework, etc.). On the other hand, respondents without children probably have greater flexibility in organising work from home (except in cases where the employer has very strict supervision procedures). It also matters whether individuals work exclusively from home or whether work from home takes place occasionally (one day a week, for certain employers, or only when needed).

During the pandemic, for respondents with children, it did not matter if they worked from home a lot or not, the representation of quality family time did not change, so between 2018–2019 and 2020 the number of children had the same impact on the assessment of quality family time.

### ***Gendered quality time and changes in home building for home-based teleworkers***

In terms of gender, for men, working from home did not change the representation of quality time with the family, in 2018–2019. By comparison, the higher the number of hours worked from home, the less respondents agree that working from home allows them to spend more quality time with their family. As the National Institute for Statistics (INSSE 2013), European Quality of Life Survey (Eurofound 2016), and Gender Barometer (Grünberg, Rusu and Samoilă 2019) data also show, the sharing of domestic activities makes women more likely to experience inequalities, by allocating an increased number of hours for these activities. According to the European Quality of Life Survey from 2016, 90% of women in Romania stated that they cook and/or do other household tasks at least a few times a week, as opposed to 57% of men. The likelihood of a woman allocating more time than her partner for household chores is higher in families with young children, probably because they are regarded as an additional activity of child rearing (Voicu, Voicu and Strapcova 2009). Therefore, most likely for women, working from home for several hours involves managing a place where domestic activities, childcare and professional tasks do not have clearly established boundaries, which can lead to confusion about the priority of roles (Clark 2000; Eddleston and Muki 2015). Distribution of household chores between partners is influenced both by the level of family income, and by the significance of income difference between partners. For example, the partner whose job is better paid allocates, in some cases, less time to household tasks. Also, higher levels of income allow family members to “buy” time, outsourcing cleaning services. In addition, gender values can reconfigure how total family income or income differences between partners are symbolized in relation to each other's time and implicitly with the load of domestic activities for each of the partners. Therefore, especially in families with children or in those with lower income levels, women have less time for activities with other family members that could be evaluated as quality time even if they work from home, which confirms the gender component of our 3<sup>rd</sup> hypothesis (H3).

## **DISCUSSION**

Our study compared assessments of quality family time before and during the pandemic, using a two-waves survey (in 2018–2019, and at the beginning of 2020). Overall results indicated that working from home contributed more to quality family time before the pandemic. When they evaluate the quality of their family time women are disfavoured by the sudden working from home conditions,. Number of children led to different results, with an indication that families with



children tend to have routinised their practices to secure a balance between family and work tasks, even before the pandemic.

When time is limited and working from home becomes even more of an option for working arrangements, the boundaries between quality time and other types of time (e.g., that invested in domestic work) are very likely to dilute. Being unable to allocate separate priority time for family, the best strategy to represent quality time seems to be “sneaking” it into home maintenance and family care activities (cooking with your partner, or other social activities with people outside the household, through online meetings). This context of re-signifying quality time may, however, hide gender inequalities embodied through the unbalanced distribution of activities in the household. To a larger extent, these resignifications can be sustained or deterred by organisational policy changes that promote remote work and more specifically working from home. These organisational policies, without mechanisms and regulations to support clear boundaries between work and other personal life spheres, could transfer work into private spaces and disturb work – life balance. Certainly, the impossibility of outsourcing domestic tasks brings transformations into the daily routines of family members. Whether or not children are present, living spaces are adapted to the new requirements of work at home.

As the data from the first wave shows (and consistent with wave II findings), if you are a man, the perception of quality time does not change when you work from home, which could be indicative of the effect discussed in literature, of women assuming more of the role of “protectors”/ “guardians” of their partner’s working time against interruptions (Sullivan and Lewis 2001). At the same time, for women who work from home, changes are greater in how they distribute their time, having less autonomy in how they spend it. However, there are several limits imposed by the lack of a probabilistic sample, so generalisations beyond some incipient trends that differentiate between women and men from our sample are not possible. Moreover, there are many ways quality time can be understood, and while the survey was concerned with finding the extent to which WFH contributes to quality family time, we could not account for different meanings associated with the concept.

Our contribution adds to the body of literature in three ways. First, work focusing on gender imbalances in domestic activities indicate women are most likely burdened by the blurring boundaries between work and family more than men (Clark 2000; Eddleston and Muki 2015). Although women can be more invested in family care by design (expectations, norms, working arrangements), our results clearly indicate that WFH with these responsibilities might not be what women enjoy, since their assessment of WFH as allowing family quality time declined during the pandemic.

Second, the meanings of quality time with family differ according to social position. At the same time, we know that the meaning of quality time is imagined

as time protected from the outside world (Hochschild 1997). Our results, however, could indicate completely different frameworks for quality time with family that individuals with blurred boundaries between work and family space might have, particularly those with children. It could signal a need to define family quality time as time protected from the inside world of the family (from chores and excessive imbalance of domestic responsibilities).

Third, our results show a hidden gender imbalance that comes into play when there is no evidence of tailored organisational policies to address this, in emergency contexts, such as that of the pandemic. The current study also reflects that even the way we define “quality time with family” undergoes transformations after the lockdown and COVID-19 pandemic, when leisure options have narrowed significantly, with the imposition of distancing measures, and when those who worked from home faced, at the same time, a quasi-institutionalization of time spent with the family during the time spent inside their home.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisation of work at home has undergone a series of changes supported not only by private arrangements, but also by the fact that this sudden structural event contributed to the increase of remote work options not only in working arrangements at organisational level, but also through various changes in national telework policies. Taking this into account, further studies could focus on how the post-pandemic arrangements of time for work and for families, as well as changed practices of WFH, affect the understanding and assessment of quality family time, thereby providing evidence for new organisational policies aimed at increasing employee satisfaction with work, and at a more gender-sensitive work – life balance.

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**D**atele colectate printr-un studiu desfășurat în două valuri, în 2018–2019 și în 2020, despre condițiile de muncă și echilibrul între viața profesională – și viața personală a celor care au lucrat de acasă arată cum contribuția muncii de acasă la aprecierea timpului de calitate petrecut în familie este diferită când se iau în considerare genul, numărul de copii și nivelul de educație. Primul val al cercetării a arătat că pentru cei care nu au copii, cu cât lucrează mai mult de acasă, cu atât sunt de acord în mai mare măsură că lucrul de acasă permite mai mult timp de calitate petrecut cu familia. Pentru bărbați, munca de acasă nu schimbă reprezentarea asupra timpului de calitate petrecut cu familia. Implicațiile indică spre o reprezentare inegală a timpului de calitate cu familia și experiențe distincte în funcție de gen, care ascund pattern-uri diferite ale utilizării timpului între membrii familiei, cu o împărțire și mai clară odată cu această schimbare culturală a muncii, generată de pandemie. Bărbații tind să fie mai protejați de sarcinile casnice și posibil au standarde diferite asupra a ceea ce înseamnă timpul de calitate, ceea ce ar explica rezultatele noastre. Mai mult, datele din anul 2020 sugerează ca fiind mai scăzută contribuția muncii de acasă la timpul de calitate cu familia decât pentru perioada 2018–2019, chiar dacă sunt ținute sub control variabilele educație, vârstă, număr de copii, dacă se locuiește în România sau în afara ei, genul și numărul de membri din gospodărie. Acest lucru extinde mai departe discuția despre diferențele conceptualizării ale timpului de calitate în familie și despre cum pandemia COVID-19, care a venit cu schimbări ale politicilor de telemuncă bruște și forțate, a contribuit la deteriorarea înțelegerii locuinței proprii ca un loc de refacere.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** munca de acasă; timp de calitate cu familia; echilibrul între viața profesională și viața personală; pandemia COVID-19.

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