

Remote Work, Job Quality and Work-life Balance: A Comparative Study of European Men and Women

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Abstract: The rapid growth of remote work, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has sparked increased interest in its effects on job quality and work-life balance. This study examines the role of job quality for work-life balance of European men and women when working remotely. While remote work offers benefits such as enhanced flexibility and autonomy, it also presents challenges including social isolation and stress management. Research indicates that these effects are not gender-neutral, with women often experiencing disproportionate challenges despite potential improvements in work-life balance. This study employs a quantitative approach, utilizing data from the 2021 European Working Conditions Survey, with a sample of over 70,000 European workers. Through multi-group analysis and Partial Least Square method, the research investigates gender differences in job quality and work-life balance in remote work settings. The study aims to contribute to the understanding of how remote work influences job quality and work-life balance, with a particular focus on gender disparities. Findings will provide insights for developing equitable remote work policies and practices.

Keywords: Remote Work; Job Quality; Gender; Work-life Balance; Europe

1. Introduction

During the pandemic lockdowns from 2020 to 2021, remote work made became a topic of debate in the European discussion on the quality of jobs and work-life balance, targeting men and women. While millions set themselves up in digital workspaces, this shift had transformed how employees interacted with their job environments, offering opportunities together with challenges. Remote working offers greater flexibility and autonomy, increasing satisfaction with job roles and greater work-life balance, but social isolation and mental stresses arise from significantly reduced social interaction and enhanced self-regulatory demand (Lorentzon et al., 2023; Garcia-Salirrosas & Rondon-Eusebio, 2023). There is also the important nuance of how these dynamics relate differently to men and women, prompting questions about the variation in experiences of remote work for men and women. Prior research has uncovered distinct challenges unique to female workers, namely, greater intensity in telework coupled with household responsibilities, informing evolving understandings of job quality and work-life interplay (Moreno-Colom et al., 2023; Joshi & Kumar, 2023). Though these dual impacts of remote work are discernible across gender, recent research points to the urgent need to explore the gender-specific impact of remote work, which often manifests in varying ways for men and women (Nowrouzi-Kia et al., 2024). Against this backdrop, this research focus on these dynamics across Europe to unveil insights about gendered implications of remote work and constraining factors, thus contributing to gender equality in modern work arrangements.

Remote work introduces distinct gender-specific challenges, particularly in how women experience higher levels of work intensity compared to their male counterparts. This disparity is often attributed to the dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities that women typically manage, which intensifies when working remotely. According to Moreno-Colom et al. (2023), the flexibility and autonomy offered by remote work can be a double-edged sword for women. While it allows them to better integrate their work and family duties, potentially enhancing their quality of life, it simultaneously blurs the boundaries between personal and professional life, leading to stress and decreased job satisfaction. Shen and Zamani (2024) further explore boundary management tactics and find that women often endure greater telework intensity, which, although linked to enhanced skill development and engagement, adversely affects working time quality and increases fatigue. This compounded stress arises because women are more likely to take on a disproportionate share of household tasks, resulting in an imbalanced work-life dynamic even in remote settings (Campos García et al., 2024). Such dynamics necessitate a deeper examination of how remote work impacts job quality and work-life balance, particularly for women who experience these compounded responsibilities and challenges.

This study employs a quantitative research design, utilizing data from the 2021 European Working Conditions Survey, which encompasses a considerable sample size of more than 70,000 European workers. Participants were selected from those who work remotely and, after that, the sample was divided into two sub-groups, categorized by gender, to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of the experiences of men and women. The primary variables under scrutiny - job quality and work-life balance - were measured using selected items from this extensive database. In examining these variables, the study deploys a Partial Least Square (PLS) analysis to rigorously test the hypotheses concerning the relation between job quality and work-life balance and gender differences in remote work experiences. This approach enables the investigation of intricate relationships within the dataset, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how job quality and work-life balance are experienced differently by men and women in remote work contexts. By focusing on these dimensions, the research is positioned to illuminate disparities and commonalities in how men and women experience remote work, based on the relation between job quality and work-life balance, thereby addressing a critical gap in existing literature on gender disparities in employment environments under the remote work paradigm (Nowrouzi-Kia et al., 2024).

The potential of this study to inform future work arrangements and gender policies is significant, particularly as the landscape of employment continues to evolve in the post-pandemic era. By elucidating the differences in job quality and work-life balance between male and female remote workers, this research provides useful insights that can drive policy and organizational change aimed at reducing gender disparities in the workplace. Existing literature underscores the multifaceted impact of remote work, revealing both opportunities for enhanced employee autonomy and risks of exacerbating existing gender inequalities (Van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2020; Joshi & Kumar, 2023). This study aims to bridge gaps left by prior research by focusing on the need to explore gender differences in job quality (Clark et al., 2021; Ficapal-Cusi et al., 2018). By using a large sample of European workers, this study offers a deeper understanding of how job quality influences overall work-life balance for different genders within the specificities of remote work. The findings from this research could be pivotal in crafting targeted interventions that support equitable work environments, where men and women can thrive equally in remote settings. As organizations consider the sustainability of remote work models, integrating gender-sensitive considerations will be crucial for fostering a fair and balanced future of work.

2. Literature Review

Investigating the gendered lens of remote work narratives has become a growing area of interest especially after the COVID-19 pandemic that hastened the ethos of working remotely. Such a domain of this way of work has been tackled by several studies, most of which provide peculiar interpretations of how men as opposed to women are affected by more or less the same remote work circumstances. As an illustration, the work done by Nowrouzi-Kia et al. (2024) has reported differential effects on worker wellbeing, level of presenteeism and level of absenteeism across the genders, suggesting that while remote work may offer increased flexibility in job roles, not everyone stands to gain the entire benefits with women being the worst affected. Likewise, Moreno-Colom et al. (2023) point out that during the lock down period, women in Catalonia had to deal with and were expected to perform different tasks from men thus suggesting there were huge gender differences that existed. Shen and Zamani (2024) demonstrate that men and women differ in boundary management strategies that are important for a number of factors in this case remote work, often leaving women more likely to experience role conflicts due to combining work and home roles. Furthermore Joshi & Kumar (2023) further elucidate gendered discriminatory practices embedded in the system of remote work, calling for measures to salvage the culprit.

Job quality, on the other hand, is a puzzling subject surrounded by scholarly debate regarding its influencing factors and criteria for its measurement. The central theme of this debate focuses on whether job quality may be defined utilizing objective indicators or, alternatively, assessed from a subjective perspective. The objective measures conventionally include hard, measurable characteristics of work, such as employment contracts, remuneration levels, hours worked, and working conditions (Muñoz de Bustillo, 2011; Stefana et al., 2021). However, subjective assessments take into account the perceptions and experiences of work from the worker's standpoint, such as satisfaction with their jobs, perceptions of job security, and the meaningfulness of their work (Cascales Mira, 2021; Kortmann et al., 2022). Although the supporters of objective assessments advocate their consistent cross-individual comparative approach providing an empirical basis for policy action, those in favor of subjective evaluation contend that job quality is in an essential sense experiential and must take into account the variety of values, expectations, and personal contexts of workers, thus capturing the multi-dimensional character of job quality in a more nuanced manner (Leschke & Watt, 2014).

In exploring the intrinsic dimensions of job quality, one must consider the salient indicators that encapsulate the essence of desirable work conditions from the worker's perspective. Autonomy in the workplace, cited

frequently in literature, refers to the degree of control and discretion an employee has over their tasks and methods of work (Knox et al., 2011). A closely related indicator, skill utilization, measures the extent to which workers can apply their knowledge and competencies in their current roles, which, as suggested by Simões et al. (2017), is intricately linked to job satisfaction and innovation within an organization. Job security emerges as another pivotal indicator of Intrinsic Job Quality (IJQ), reflecting the stability and predictability of employment deemed vital for an individual's well-being (Findlay et al., 2017). These indicators are increasingly quantified and analyzed through comprehensive indices such as the European IJQ Index (Cascales Mira, 2021), which offer nuanced insights into the multifaceted nature of job quality. By incorporating factors such as diverse working conditions, contractual stability, and the meaningfulness of work, these indices lay a critical empirical groundwork for examining the various shades of job quality across differing societal contexts within Europe, setting the analytical framework upon which this study is based.

A critical concern in the sphere of job quality pertains to the persistent disparities observed between genders. Seminal studies, such as those by Stier & Yaish (2014), and more recent analyses by Clark, D'Ambrosio & Zhu (2021), have drawn attention to the significance of occupational segregation and the resulting inequality in job quality. These works delineate the substantial role played by entrenched social roles and expectations in the perpetuation of gendered labour markets where men and women are differentially represented across occupational fields and hierarchies. The labour market is often seen through the lens of segmentation theory, with women disproportionately occupying positions in the secondary segment characterized by precariousness, lower pay, and lesser opportunities for advancement. Santero-Sanchez et al. (2015) and Ficapal-Cusi et al. (2018) provided empirical evidence of such segmentation in gender-dominated industries like hospitality and highlighted an often-observed disparity in job quality. Additionally, legal frameworks, which are effectively the formalization of social values, have a profound influence on job quality, as shown in studies by Antón et al. (2023) and Jones, Cook, and Connolly (2023). These studies offer substantial grounding for the argument that despite progress in gender equality, legally enshrined policies continue to have a differential impact on the job quality experienced by men and women, further underlining the complexity of the motherhood penalty and gender discrimination in the workplace. The literature, therefore, substantiates the existence of a complex interplay between gender, social roles, market segmentation, and legal imperatives that coalesce to systematically shape the job quality landscape in ways that often disadvantage women.

The work-life balance of men and women in remote work settings has revealed significant gender disparities, particularly exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women often experience a "double burden," managing both professional responsibilities and increased domestic tasks, leading to higher reported stress levels and workload compared to men (Wattenberg et al., 2023; Aiswarya & Perwez, 2023). Despite women reporting greater satisfaction in some aspects of remote work, they still face challenges in achieving a balanced distribution of time and energy between work and personal life (Ramos & García-de-Diego, 2022; Alfano et al., 2024). Men, while generally reporting higher life satisfaction, tend to prioritize their work, resulting in a more fragmented experience for women, who juggle caregiving and professional duties (Parry, 2024). This dynamic suggests that traditional gender roles persist, influencing the effectiveness of remote work arrangements and highlighting the need for organizational strategies to support equitable work-life balance for all employees (Wattenberg et al., 2023; Alfano et al., 2024).

Job quality appears to significantly influence the work-life balance of men and women in remote work settings, with gender and telework type being critical factors. Research indicates that home-based teleworkers, particularly women, often experience better working time quality compared to highly mobile teleworkers, who face greater challenges in job quality and work-life balance (Rodríguez-Modroño & López-Igual, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted these disparities, revealing that women, traditionally seen as caregivers, struggle more with balancing professional and familial responsibilities in a hybrid work environment (Katsabian, 2022). While men reported higher life satisfaction during this period, women continued to bear the brunt of household tasks, indicating a persistent gender imbalance (Gonzalez Ramos & García-de-Diego, 2022). Additionally, the interplay of flexibility and traditional roles suggests that while teleworking can enhance work-life balance, it may also reinforce existing gender norms (Sullivan & Lewis, 2001). Thus, addressing these inequalities requires systemic solutions that consider both job quality and the unique challenges faced by different genders in remote work contexts (Touzet, 2023).

3. Methods

Although the literature provide valuable insights on the gendered experiences of remote work, job quality and work-life balance, they often fall short of offering a comprehensive comparative analysis of job quality and work-

life balance across genders within the European context. Our study seeks to fill this gap by examining the interconnectedness of job quality and work-life balance for European men and women operating in remote settings, thereby contributing to the discourse on equitable work arrangements and highlighting areas for policy intervention.

As such, figure 1 presents the research model to be tested empirically. The hypothesis to be tested are as follows:

H1a: Autonomy, as a dimension of the European intrinsic job quality index, is positively related with work-life balance.

H1b: Interaction, as a dimension of the European intrinsic job quality index, is positively related with work-life balance.

H1c: Intensity, as a dimension of the European intrinsic job quality index, is positively related with work-life balance.

H1d: Meaningful, as a dimension of the European intrinsic job quality index, is positively related with work-life balance.

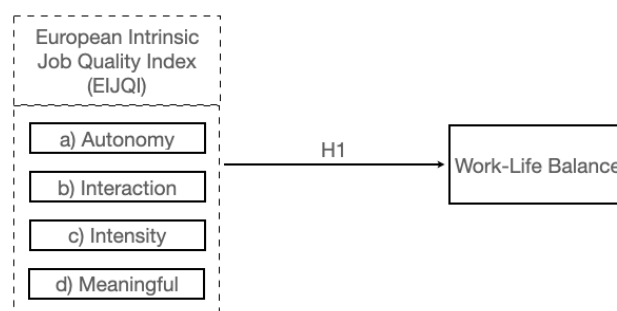


Figure 1: Research Model

Source: authors

Using secondary data from the 2021 European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) (Eurofound, 2022), this study employs a quantitative methodology. The EWCS, which is renowned for its extensive reach and the depth of its data, offers crucial insights into the job quality that employees encounter in diverse European contexts. There are 71758 people in the entire EWCS sample, spread across 37 nations. Only those who reported working remotely were taken into consideration for this study. Thus, 23,748 workers make up the study's sample.

Regarding the sociodemographic description of the sample participants, the most representative countries of participants are Belgium (6.8%), Germany and Norway (6.3% each), and France (5.4%). There is a balance in gender (48.6% are male and 51.1% are female). The average age of those interviewed is 42.89 years old, with the minimum age being 17 and the maximum age being 84. In educational terms, 77.4% have higher education and 22.2% have completed secondary education. Regarding seniority in the profession, these workers average 10.85 years. 88.5% of workers have just one job or business, 83.6% have a full-time job, and 71.8% have an unlimited contract. Regarding employers, 63.4% are workers in the private sector and 26.2% in the public sector.

Our operationalization of IQ is based on the European Intrinsic Job Quality Index (EIJQI), a multifaceted metric that encompasses the fundamentals of job quality, including decision-making autonomy, interpersonal interactions, work intensity, and work meaning (Cascales Mira, 2021). The EIJQI comprises four dimensions: autonomy (workers' ability to make decisions about their work), interaction (the social context in which workers interact), intensity (the psychological demands of their effort), and meaningful (social usefulness of their work). While the variables were measured using a likert scale with five points, the variables composing the "intensity" dimension were reversed in order to reflect the low-high orientation of job quality. One variable from the dimension "interaction" was not included due to the lack of data in 2021 EWCS database. Work-life balance is measured by three items (e.g. "Since you started your main paid job, how often have you kept worrying about work when you were not working?") and measured on 5-point likert scale, from 1 (never) to 5 (always). As such, higher scores mean less work-life balance.

A quantitative methodology was used. The first stage consisted of a statistical description of the items that measure the constructs using SPSS software (v25). Afterward, a factor analysis was carried out, and an exploratory factorial analysis (EFA) and a confirmatory factorial analysis (CFA) were carried out using SPSS

software (v25). The third stage consisted of testing the relationships established in the research model shown in Figure 1, using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) method in the Smart PLS (3.0) software (Latan et al., 2023). The PLS method has already been applied to other studies on similar themes (e.g., Amri et al., 2021; Abdullah et al., 2021). In the fourth stage, the model is evaluated after applying the PLS method regarding convergence, reliability, and discriminant validity, using the measures proposed by Latan et al. (2023): Cronbach's Alpha coefficient ($C\alpha > 0.70$), Composite Reliability ($CR > 0.70$) and Average Variance Extracted ($AVE > 0.50$). Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) of correlations ($HTMT < 0.85$). Finally, a bootstrap analysis was carried out to estimate the relationships between constructs in the research model.

4. Findings

4.1 Statistical Description of Construct Items

Table 1 contains the statistical description (mean and standard deviation) of the items that measure the constructs. Regarding the job quality indicators, the items that generated, on average, greater agreement among remote work professionals were those relating to Interaction, namely Good Cooperation between the worker and their colleagues ($M = 4.54$) and support colleagues ($M = 4.25$) and, then, Meaningful Work, namely Useful Work ($M = 4.34$). Regarding work-life balance, the items with the highest frequency on average are those related to concerns about work-life balance ($M = 2.91$).

Table 1: Intrinsic Job Quality dimensions and Work-life Balance (exploratory factor analysis)

Constructs	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
Autonomy	Consulted (CON)	3.85	1.214
	Decision Influence (DI)	3.86	1.032
	Improv-Workorg (IW)	3.74	1.153
Interaction	Support Colleagues (SC)	4.25	0.873
	Suport Manager (SM)	4.09	1.032
	WP GoodCoop (Coop)	4.54	0.756
Intensity	Hightspeed (HS)	2.58	1.069
	Tightdead (TD)	2.49	1.064
Meaningful Work	Work Welldone (WW)	4.20	0.794
	Usefull Work (UW)	4.34	0.800
Work-Life Balance	Work Life Balance Worry (WLB_W)	2.91	1.172
	Work Life Balance Tired (WLB_T)	2.70	1.062
	Work Life Balance Concentration (WLB_C)	2.21	0.988

Source: authors

4.2 Factor Analysis

Appendix A1 presents the results of the factor analysis. Regarding the implementation of EFA, the 13 initial items were divided into five factors corresponding to each of the constructs included in the research model. No items are being deleted. The accumulated variance of the factors is 63.6%, and none of the individual factors explains more than 50% of the variance. The CFA results confirm the reflective nature of the model and show that all items have high confirmatory factor loading (> 0.70).

4.3 Assessment of the Measurement Models

Table 2 contains the results of evaluating the research model after applying the PLS method. The results demonstrate that the model is reliable and convergent since results obtained for Cronbach's Alpha coefficient ($C\alpha > 0.70$), composite reliability ($CR > 0.70$), and Average Variance Extracted ($AVE > 0.50$) are superior to the reference values. Furthermore, according to the HTMT ratio of correlations (Henseler et al., 2015), there is discriminant validity since the HTMT ratio of correlation values is well below the reference value of 0.85,

Table 2: Reliability, consistency and discriminant validity

	HTMT Criterion							
	C α	CR	AVE	Autonomy	Intensity	Interaction	Meaningfull Work	WLB
Autonomy	0.737	0.791	0.561					
Intensity	0.750	0.851	0.740	0.053				
Interaction	0.731	0.744	0.596	0.514	0.085			
Meaningfull Work	0.720	0.830	0.712	0.521	0.076	0.468		
Work Life Balance (WLB)	0.776	0.776	0.540	0.155	0.313	0.254	0.233	

Source: authors

The model has a good fit: i) the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) (0.932; reference value > 0.90); ii) the Normative Fit Index (NFI) (0.956; reference value > 0.90) and iii) the Root Mean Square Approximation Error (SRMR) (0.064; reference value < 0.08). The research model was also evaluated in terms of collinearity with the variance inflation factor (VIF) and explanatory (R^2), and predictive power (Stone-Geisse's - Q^2) (Hair et al., 2019). The largest internal VIF of the items is 1.315, referring to the item "support colleagues", so collinearity is not critical. The dependent variable, Work Life Balance ($R^2 = 0.272$), present a "substantial effect", according to Cohen (1988). The model also has predictive capacity since Q^2 of the dependent variables is greater than zero (Work-Life Balance - $Q^2 = 0.238$).

4.4 Research Model Estimation

Table 3 presents the relationships established between the constructs of the research model comparing female and male remote workers.

Table 3: Reliability, consistency and discriminant validity

Direct Effects	Path (b)	t Value (Bootsrap)	p-value	Confidence Interval		Hypothesis Support
				2.5%	97.5%	
Male Workers						
Autonomy -> WLB	-0.018	1.640	0.102	-0.041	0.002	No
Intensity -> WLB	-0.176	17.836	0.000	-0.196	-0.157	Yes
Interaction -> WLB	-0.101	7.448	0.000	-0.129	-0.076	Yes
Meaningfull Work -> WLB	-0.093	9.391	0.000	-0.111	-0.074	Yes
Female Workers						
Autonomy -> WLB	-0.023	2.258	0.024	-0.044	-0.004	Yes
Intensity -> WLB	-0.197	21.568	0.000	-0.214	-0.180	Yes

Direct Effects	Path (b)	t Value (Bootstrap)	p-value	Confidence Interval		Hypothesis Support
				2.5%	97.5%	
Interaction -> WLB	-0.117	10.259	0.000	-0.140	-0.095	Yes
Meaningfull Work -> WLB	-0.104	10.282	0.000	-0.125	-0.087	Yes

Source: authors

The results reveal that the influence of job quality indicators on the work-life balance of European remote workers presents differences in terms of gender. Thus, in the case of male workers, the relationship between autonomy and WLB is not statistically significant. Intensity, interaction, and meaningful work negatively influence WLB (i.e. more job quality means more work-life balance), although with different intensities ($\beta = -0.176$; $\beta = -0.101$; $\beta = -0.093$, respectively). In the case of female workers, all job quality indicators (autonomy, intensity, interaction, and meaningful work) are statistically significant and negatively affect WLB ($\beta = -0.023$; $\beta = -0.197$; $\beta = -0.117$; $\beta = -0.104$, respectively; i.e. more job quality means more work-life balance). The influence of job quality indicators on WLB is greater in the case of female workers than it is in male workers.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the role of gender in the influence of job quality on the work-life balance of European workers who performed remote work between March and November 2021, using data from the 2021 European Working Conditions Survey. The results show that more job quality (autonomy, intensity, interaction, and meaningful work) is associated with more work-life balance levels, this result being more pronounced in women than in men. Furthermore, in the case of male workers, the results demonstrated that autonomy is not statistically significant in influencing their work-life balance.

Despite the study's many contributions, the study is not without limitations, and these limitations could lead to future lines of research. Firstly, the results of this study are for remote work workers and could be applied to other professionals. Secondly, the sample was collected between March and November 2021, that is, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and as such, workers ended up being forced to carry out remote work from their homes. Therefore, it would be interesting for future studies to use a more updated sample to compare the differences in job quality between the pandemic and post-pandemic periods. Third, the variables present in this research are limited to those available in the database used. Fourth, the study only considers meaningful work, autonomy, interaction, and intensity as conditions for job quality. Other indicators of job quality could be included in future studies, such as physical and environmental conditions, job security and stability, training and training opportunities, organizational climate, and work engagement. Fifth, this study does not consider cultural differences arising from the workers' countries of residence. Therefore, it would be interesting to carry out a cross-sectional study to allow a diagnosis of job quality in Europe. Furthermore, it is suggested that some variables be included in the research model as moderators, such as seniority, employment relationship, professional category, and the average number of weekly hours worked.

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Appendix

Table A1: Results of factor analysis (EFA and CFA)

Constructs	Items	Confirmatory Factor Loads	1	2	3	4	5	Communalities
Autonomy	Consulted (CON)	0.835	0.765					0.753
	Decision Influence (DI)	0.778	0.799					0.794
	Improv-Workorg (IW)	0.716						0.765
Interaction	Support Colleagues (SC)	0.720		0.716				0.783
	Support Manager (SM)	0.784		0.759				0.796
	WP GoodCoop (Coop)	0.793		0.816				0.786
Intensity	Highspeed (HS)	0.840			0.789			0.735
	Tightdead (TD)	0.880			0.786			0.827
Meaningful Work	Work Welldone (WW)	0.927				0.738		0.774
	Usefull Work (UW)	0.751				0.748		0.774
Work Life Balance	Work Life Balance Worry (WLB_W)	0.763					0.711	0.728
	Work Life Balance Tired (WLB_T)	0.817					0.719	0.736
	Work Life Balance Concentration (WLB_C)	0.708					0.754	0.825