

Gender differences in solo self-employment: Gendered flexibility and the effects of parenthood

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Abstract

With greater flexibility and control over the timing and conditions of work, solo self-employment (without employees) is seen as offering a potential solution to work-family conflict. This study examines whether this flexibility manifests itself in gendered trends among the self-employed as self-employed women undertake a larger share of unpaid domestic and caring work compared to their male and wage-and-salaried counterparts. The findings are based on data from the Irish national Labor Force Survey. We find that self-employed women are more likely to work reduced hours, to work from home and for reasons associated with caring or family responsibilities than both self-employed men and women in wage-and-salaried work. Flexibility factors are stronger determinants of self-employed status for women than men. While gender differences exist regardless of parental status, they are widest among self-employed parents of preschool children.

KEYWORDS

flexibility, freelance, gender, parenthood, self-employment

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Women continue to undertake a larger share of unpaid domestic and caring labor than men and are more likely to adapt their working lives to suit these demands (Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Bianchi et al., 2000; Bittman et al., 2003; Slaughter, 2015; O'Hagan, 2015; Howard, 2020). It is for this reason that “flexibility” and “work-life balance” in the context of the labor market remain highly gendered concerns (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020; Emslie & Hunt, 2009). Modes of employment outside the “standard” full-time norm that might offer greater flexibility over working time, location and conditions can enhance gender equality yet at the same time can impede it if women are forced into a situation of “juggling” and “multitasking” paid and unpaid labor while men are not (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020; Powell & Craig, 2015). A considerable body of research has investigated the impact of flexible employment arrangements, especially part-time work, on women including on their work-life conflict, status, careers and pay (Allen et al., 2013; Chung & van der Lippe, 2020; Coyle, 2005; Grönlund & Öun, 2017; Russell et al., 2008; Thornley, 2007). This study explores this issue in the context of the most flexible and autonomous form of labor market activity: solo self-employment or self-employment without employees. We expect that gendered flexibility, the take up of flexible working by women to balance paid and unpaid labor, will be particularly visible within solo self-employment. We use a sample of over 2000 solo self-employed individuals and employ a wide thematic scope including indicators of structural constraint or divisions of labor such as part-time work, home working, citing caring reasons, parental status, and child age to examine whether gendered trends emerge and how they compare to wage-and-salaried employment.

Solo self-employment, in having low barriers to entry, not requiring considerable capital investment or the management of workers is regarded as the most flexible form of labor market activity; having high levels of autonomy over work time, location and conditions (Cooke et al., 2018; Goldin & Katz, 2011; Nordenmark et al., 2012). There is a gendered work-life or work-family narrative here, as solo self-employment is said to “give women the ability to employ themselves for shorter hours and with greater flexibility” than might be found in wage-and-salaried employment in the corporate or private sector (Goldin & Katz, 2011: p. 2).

Encouraging women's self-employment and reducing the gender gap in participation have become policy priorities at EU level, presented as a way to improve both the labor market participation of women and gender equality more broadly (European Commission, 2015; European Investment Bank, 2020). While self-employment rates across Europe have remained relatively steady at around 15 percent of the labor force (Eurostat, 2018), there have been increases in the share of self-employment that is solo, part-time and among highly skilled or highly educated groups (Hormans & Marx, 2017; Spasova & Wilkens, 2018). Increasing numbers of women in part-time, solo self-employment have been said to contribute to these trends (Fondeville et al., 2015; Hatfield, 2015; Henley, 2015; Van Stel & van der Zwan, 2019). In Europe, self-employed women are more likely than men to work in professional occupations and have been found, on average, to have higher levels of education (European Commission, 2014, 2015). At the same time, despite this positioning within higher “human capital” groups, self-employed women in Europe are more likely than men to work part-time and overall, the dominant message is one of “work-life balance,” with self-employment providing an opportunity to work on a more flexible basis (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2014). Gendered narratives around self-employment and work-life balance also prevail in popular discourse and the media, with the flexibility to “balance” work and home centered around female self-employment but rarely, if ever, male (Lewis, 2014; Quinlan, 2014; O'Callaghan, 2014; Denning, 2020).

Past research offers some indication about the role of gendered divisions of labor in self-employment. The economic concept of compensating differentials, whereby flexible working is a utility factor in the self-employment decision, is applied frequently in international empirical research (Boden, 1999; Budig, 2006a, 2006b; Carr, 1994; Connelly, 1992; Wellington, 2006). The role of personal preference and choice feature prominently, with data connecting household factors to financial or labor-related outcomes for women seen as indicative of their preference for work-life balance (Richmond & Slow, 2017; Simon & Way, 2015). Longitudinal studies into labor market transitions have found self-employment for women can be a substitute for part-time work or inactivity

(Georgellis & Wall, 2005; Lawter et al., 2016; Patrick et al., 2016). Research has found self-employed women to be more inclined than men to cite flexibility or work-life balance as motivating factors in surveys or interviews (Drew & Humbert, 2012; Hughes, 2003; Johansson Sevä & Öun, 2015), while time-use and work-life balance studies have shown self-employed women spend more time in domestic and caring work than their male counterparts (Gurley-Calvez et al., 2009; Hagqvist et al., 2015; Hildebrand & Williams, 2003). Working from home in particular leads to more time spent in domestic work in household divisions of labor that are already gendered (Bianchi et al., 2000; Gurley-Calvez et al., 2009). High marriage rates among self-employed women, their tendency, and hence ability to work part-time and their likelihood of having an employed or self-employed spouse has positioned them as secondary earners within nuclear families, prioritizing work-life balance and having the financial and possibly cultural capital of the household at their disposal (Bruce, 1999; Budig, 2006a; Georgellis & Wall, 2005; Hundley, 2001; Wellington, 2006).

Yet exploring gender differences is important not just in terms of understanding self-employment as a labor market option but in observing how flexibility itself might be gendered, how the availability of flexible working can have different outcomes for men and women. We therefore look within the data on solo self-employment to investigate gender differences in the characteristics and determinants of self-employment. The contribution of this research is that it is multidisciplinary, using microeconomic data to investigate social concepts and adding to the body of knowledge on self-employment from a gender angle. Furthermore, rather than apply the default rational-choice or utility-based reasoning, we instead view the data through the theoretical lens of gendered divisions of labor and structural constraint. In addition, we provide evidence from a particular context, Ireland, which has unique features in terms of its gender regime and labor market. We expect not only that there will be gendered trends in flexible working arrangements among the self-employed but that these will be more pronounced than among wage-and-salaried workers, as greater levels of control translate to self-employed women “juggling” paid and unpaid work.

The importance of jurisdictional context when investigating issues of gender, flexibility and labor market options is well known (Ahl & Nelson, 2014; Aidis & Wetzels, 2007; Besamusca, 2020; Crompton & Lyonette, 2006; Jaumotte, 2003; Plantenga & Remery, 2009). Variations in the level of support provided by national governments to dual-earning families, the availability and cost of childcare and particular cultural and gender-role attitudes impact how work and family life are managed and the range of options available for working parents (Crompton & Lyonette, 2006; Rubery & Grimshaw, 2003). Levels of gender-equity have been found to be, somewhat counterintuitively, connected to lower levels of self-employment for women as women have less reason to transition from more supportive or flexible wage-and-salaried work (Hatfield, 2015; Klyver, Nielson and Evald, 2010). Ireland serves as a useful case study through which to examine these issues. It has been described as “no country for working mothers” where, as a consequence of traditional, male-breadwinner normative household structures and neoliberal economic ideology, women have to strategize ways to balance competing roles and expectations (O’Hagan, 2015: p. 1). As such, Ireland has been noted as having a high level of work-family conflict or difficulty in reconciling the often-competing demands of the work and domestic sphere (OECD, 2016; Lin, 2018).

In addition, the Irish government and state bodies have strongly promoted self-employment (Duggan, 1998; European Commission, 2012, 2015, 2017; Enterprise Ireland, 2015), particularly for women where it is viewed as “a necessary step for addressing income inequality and social exclusion” (Department Business, Enterprise, and Innovation, 2017: p. 1). While there is a wide gender gap in self-employment participation, with men more likely to be self-employed than women, there have been recent significant increases in both the numbers and proportions of women in non-agricultural solo self-employment in Ireland (Bari, 2021). Between 2003 and 2019, self-employment rates rose from 2.9 percent to 4.6 percent, or an additional 27,000 female self-employed, with women with children under 15 making up a substantial proportion (43%) of this increase (Bari, 2021). In an ideological and cultural sense, Ireland views self-employment, entrepreneurship and business enterprise in a highly positive light, with the benefits for both individuals and society (Duggan, 1998; Fitzsimmons & O’Gorman, 2017). This combination of factors: a market-oriented economy and care system, traditional meets neoliberal culture, work-family conflict and the

vention of self-employment and entrepreneurship make Ireland an interesting case through which to examine gendered trends in this form of work.

The article is structured as follows. First, the literature is presented to theoretically frame the research hypotheses. Themes of gendered flexibility, work-life balance, and the way in which self-employment and entrepreneurship themselves can be gendered are discussed. The Irish context is explored in more detail before methodology and findings are presented.

2 | LITERATURE AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT: SELF-EMPLOYMENT AS A FLEXIBLE WORK OPTION

Much of the empirical work on gender and self-employment has employed what Vosko and Zukewich refer to as a “precarious by choice” framework (Vosko & Zukewich, 2006: p. 69). Compensating differentials or utility approaches view gender differences in self-employment as indicative of individual preferences toward particular allocations of time between paid and unpaid work, the flexibility of self-employment being a weighting factor in a freely chosen and rational decision making process (Boden, 1999; Caputo & Dolinsky, 1998; Carr, 1994; Georgellis & Wall, 2005; Simon & Way, 2015). Research that uncovers gender differences in self-employment motivations or determinants, such as women's tendency to cite “flexibility” as a “pull factor” in survey or qualitative data generates a profile of the self-employed “mother entrepreneur” (Budig, 2006a: p. 25) who desires less demanding, more autonomous work to manage work and home schedules. The reasoning is often resonant of Hakim's (2000) “preference theory” whereby “adaptive” women opt for flexible, but perhaps less lucrative forms of work in order to prioritize time with family. That men's reasons for self-employment are fairly consistently found to have “little association with their parental status” tends to be similarly viewed in simple utility terms (Boden, 1999: p. 1).

The conceptual underpinnings for this article, however, draws more upon the social constraint theory of labor market behavior. This theory has at its core not task allocation, expected utility and role efficiency but the gendered divisions of household and caring labor and the way in which women are face structural barriers and disadvantages when it comes to their career-based or financial position (Calkin, 2018; England, 1982; Fraser, 2013). Social constraint theory therefore serves as alternative viewpoint to the rational-choice or utility frameworks that frequently characterize the labor economics literature (Goldin & Katz, 2011; Hundley, 2001; Leoni & Falk, 2010; Wellington, 2006). This approach acknowledges that decisions are made at individual and household level with regard to time-use but also recognizes the crucial role of gender-roles, policy context, institutions, culture and environment in shaping those choices (Ahl & Marlow, 2021; Fudge, 2006; Hughes, 2003; Klyver et al., 2010; Vosko & Zukewich, 2006). While there have been dramatic shifts in the take-up by women of formal employment in the last half century, household tasks, childcare, cleaning, spending and dealing with all the minutiae of family life, that is, “the mental load” remain the unpaid and largely unrecognized labor carried out predominantly by women (Crompton, 2002; England, 2010; Howard, 2020). This fundamental barrier to labor market equity leaves women in a position of having to strategize ways to combine paid and unpaid labor (Bianchi et al., 2000; Bianchi et al., 2012).

One concept, therefore, to arise from a social constraints viewpoint is that of gendered flexibility: how flexible working, remote working, part-time or flexible hours, can potentially maintain traditional gendered roles, as women use the flexibility to take on more unpaid labor than men (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020; Sullivan & Lewis, 2001). The work-life balance discourse would be viewed critically through a social or structural constraint lens. The ability to use flexible working arrangements to “balance” work and life imposes an individualized obligation to “get the balance right” (Lewis et al., 2017: p. 361). Work-life balance implies satisfaction with personal responses to competing demands of work and home while its counter-situation “work-family conflict” refers to when there is difficulty reconciling these demands (Munkejord, 2017; Roehling et al., 2001). The gendered nature of the flexible working discourse is well-researched (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020; Lott & Chung, 2016; Sullivan, 2000).

Many of these issues intersect in solo self-employment. After all, if freelance or solo self-employment is flexible and flexibility is gendered then might it, rather than offer a solution to gender inequity in fact reproduce socio-economic norms? (Marlow & McAdam, 2013). There is both a neoliberal and a gendered aspect to the entrepreneurship narrative, with the “role model” self-employed woman portrayed as someone who succeeds personally and professionally, who finds balance between “work” and “life” through individual hard work and determination (Byrne et al., 2019; Lewis, 2014). In this way, self-employment is seen as meritocratic, accessible, benign; a way to free oneself from the burdens and restrictions of waged employment (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Ahl & Nelson, 2014). Self-employment can, in effect, be a strategy that allows women to meet both “good worker” and “good mother” norms: available for caring roles while earning a living and fulfilling the labor market expectations of a neoliberal society (Ahl & Marlow, 2021; Besamusca, 2020). Thus, it is here that concepts of gendered entrepreneurship or self-employment and gendered flexibility meet. The “freedom” offered by self-employment, particularly solo self-employment, is presented as inherently positive for women so they can, in effect, balance their paid and unpaid labor, rather than question any of structural barriers to gender-related labor market inequality that might exist (Ahl & Marlow, 2021). From a practical perspective, we might expect flexibility to be gendered within self-employment and perhaps to a larger extent than in waged work.

3 | THE IRISH CONTEXT: “NO COUNTRY FOR WORKING MOTHERS”

As O’Hagan points out, “the role of mothers is far from settled in Irish society” (2015: p. 16). There have been huge changes, including significant increases in women’s employment and the acceptance of both male caring roles and women’s economic independence, yet at the same time the distribution of tasks at household level is still heavily influenced by traditional gender roles (Fine-Davis, 2011, 2013; Loftus, 2009; McGinnity & Russell, 2008). Time-use statistics show men in Ireland spend 75 fewer minutes per day on unpaid work and 43 min more per day on paid work (OECD, 2019). Parenthood is the factor which signals the reallocation of tasks along gender lines (Breen & Cooke, 2005; McGinnity & Russell, 2008). Gender gaps in part-time work are wider among those with children, and while rates of lone-parent (predominantly female-headed) households are increasing, the male primary breadwinner, female secondary or part-time earner household structure is normative following the birth of children (Barry, 2009; Callaghan et al., 2018; CSO, 2016; McGinnity & Russell, 2008). After maternity leave, 1 in 10 women do not return to work in the year, and the likelihood of returning to paid employment falls with every additional child born (CSO, 2019). While there have been recent legislative moves toward extended parental leave and flexible working, expanding the length of unpaid leave and increasing the circumstances under which a parent can request reduced, flexible, or remote work, the take-up of unpaid leave by fathers is likely to be low (Ni Longaigh, 2019).

Ireland has been described as having an “unsupported” or “modified” breadwinner model in which, while policy does not “openly promote separate gender roles for men and women, the scarceness of affordable childcare tends to perpetuate gender traditionalism owing to the dominance of cultural norms that place primary responsibility for childcare with mothers” (Ciccia & Bleijenbergh, 2014: p. 25). At the same time, success or upward mobility in many sectors is still reserved for those “for whom temporal barriers so not exist,” disadvantaging women in many professions (Turner & McMahan, 2011: p. 5). Part-time or flexible work tends to be in sectors that are low-paid and often precarious, contributing to the gender pay gap in waged work (Barry, 2009; Fagan et al., 2014; McKinley, 2016). Work-family conflict is experienced, with many mothers feeling “torn between children and work” (O’Hagan, 2015: p. 18). A 2020 survey found that half of working mothers in Ireland considered giving up work due to the cost of childcare, with 90 percent feeling overwhelmed (Network Ireland, 2019) and for many women they “simply cannot afford to go to work” (O’Reilly, 2018: p. 1).

It is within this context that self-employment and entrepreneurship for women is promoted at policy level (see OECD, 2017: p. 24 for a list of current policy supports and programmes) and in popular work-life balance discourse

(Quinlan, 2014; O'Callaghan, 2014; Denning, 2020). For busy working mothers, "working full time, commuting, doing the creche run, and juggling when kids are sick... can all become too much... setting up a business from home can seem the ideal way to take the pressure off" (Mara, 2018). Websites and social media talk about self-employment being "the life change needed to find the balance between motherhood and pursuing personal dreams" (Kolbuc, 2019: p. 1). While the emphasis of government policy is usually on self-employment that is "entrepreneurial," this is a vague term, referring to "women who start and/or run their own business, including the self-employed" (OECD, 2017). What is clear is that solo self-employment among women is increasing in Ireland (Bari, 2021). It is also clear that there is a layer of highly educated, skilled and experienced women who are experiencing work-family conflict as a result of a combination of lack of flexibility in wage-and-salaried work, high childcare costs, and a cultural preference for female primary caregiving (O'Hagan, 2015; Russell et al., 2018). Past research has found that women are more likely than men to cite flexibility or family factors as motivations for self-employment participation, to have their work schedules interrupted or shaped by caring for children and spend more time in unpaid labor than their male counterparts (Dawson et al., 2009; Drew & Humbert, 2012; Hagqvist et al., 2015). This article looks within self-employment at how gender and household factors shape flexible working arrangements and the extent to which gendered trends are reflective of those in wage-and-salaried work. Specifically, this research expects that:

- (1) Flexible working arrangements will be more prevalent among self-employed women compared to men.
- (2) Flexible working arrangements will be more prevalent among self-employed women compared to women in wage-and-salaried work.
- (3) Gender gaps in flexible working will be wider among self-employed than wage and salaried workers.
- (4) That the presence of children and flexible working factors will be more positively associated with self-employed status for women compared to men
- (5) That the presence of children will be more strongly associated with flexible working for self-employed women compared to self-employed men
- (6) That the presence of children will be more strongly associated with flexible working for self-employed compared to wage-and-salaried women

4 | DATA, SAMPLE, AND METHODS

The Labor Force Survey (LFS) is a large-scale, nationwide survey of households in Ireland designed to produce quarterly employment and demographic estimates (CSO, 2020). The LFS provides a wide variety of information relating to labor and household characteristics, working time, arrangements, occupation, and industrial sector. The primary dependent variable is solo self-employed status or self-employed without employees (1 = self-employed (solo), 0 = employed/waged). As pointed out, measurable distinctions between self-employment that may be "entrepreneurial" and any other form of solo self-employment are almost impossible to make (Freedman, 2001). Therefore, the definition of solo self-employment used here could include any non-agricultural freelancing, consultancy, subcontracting, independent professional practice, small business ownership, entrepreneurship as well as dependent, or "bogus" self-employment. Independent variables include gender (male/female), household status (currently married/not currently married), parental status (children under 15/not), and presence of children at different ages ("preschool" 0-6, "school-age" 6-15, and "none" children aged 15+ or no children). Flexible working arrangements and/or constraints to labor market activity arising from household factors are captured by three variables: full-time/part-time work, working from home at least sometimes, and citing caring responsibilities as a reason for reduced working time. We include dummy variables for age in five categories in multivariate models, to account for the effects of age on employment and household trends.

In order to obtain a large and more robust sample size, two cross sections of LFS data are pooled. Due to overlap between quarters in the survey sampling design, a gap between years is required to prevent repetition. Therefore, the years 2017 and 2019 are chosen, giving a sample of 602 women and 1703 men in non-agricultural “solo” self-employment or freelance work (no employees). A sample of 13,830 women and 13,142 men in wage-and-salaried work is utilized for comparison or reference in statistical analysis. LFS standard individual-level weighting (“GF”) is applied throughout which adjusts for non-response and to agree with population estimates (CSO, 2019). The strategy of weighting prior to analysis is not without its issues, as “inflated” sample sizes can generate statistical significance where no meaningful relationship might exist. To account for this possibility, the focus is on regression coefficients or Cramer's V effect sizes rather than *p*-values, unweighted sample sizes are checked to ensure adequacy. Where sample sizes are small (<30) in cross tabulations (namely, within the variable “caring reasons” by “preschool-children” and “school-age children” in the male sample, Table 5), confidence intervals and Cramers V results are examined.

This study uses cross-sectional data to empirically investigate the research questions, that is, data collected at one point in time and can provide a snapshot of the distribution of factors at that point. Cross-sectional analysis allows for the use of large datasets particularly through the pooling of a number of surveys as the numbers of self-employed women in the sample are relatively small and pooling enables samples to be further stratified by marital status, age, occupation, and so on (Wellington, 2006). Cross-sectional data such as that applied here is designed to be representative of the population and therefore can be generalized from the sample to the wider context. In this way, it is useful in monitoring conditions in a population such as differences in outcomes or factors, which are the focus of this research. This approach to the data does have important limitations such as temporality bias and unobserved heterogeneity and cannot observe transitions in the same way as longitudinal datasets can. Nevertheless, cross-sectional analysis is sufficient and appropriate to address the hypotheses presented here.

The analytic strategy includes observation of descriptive statistics, non-parametric hypothesis testing (Chi Square and Cramers V) and binary logistic regression models. To isolate the impact of household and flexibility factors on self-employment status, logit models of self-employment selection are estimated for men and women separately, a strategy used by Carr (1994), Boden (1999), and Curl et al. (2014). Comparing coefficients across models is, again, not without its limitations (chiefly, the effects of unobserved heterogeneity), the emphasis in the multivariate models here is on identifying patterns as backed up by literature, theory, and descriptive data. Thus, the hypotheses are tested through the following methods:

- Hypotheses 1–3: Observation of frequency data plus Chi Square test for a statistically significant association between the variables and Cramers V to estimate the size of this effect.
- Hypothesis 4: multivariate binary logistic regression models.
- Hypotheses 5 and 6: observations of frequency data, Chi-Square, and Cramers V tests

5 | FINDINGS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics (percentages) of the main independent variables used in the analysis, with Chi Square and Cramers V tests on cross tabulations of “gender” with the variables of interest to our hypotheses. To address the first and second hypotheses, that flexible working arrangements will be more prevalent among self-employed women compared to self-employed men and compared to women in wage-and-salaried work, we can see these can be supported from the data. Compared to their male and wage-and-salaried counterparts, 68 percent of self-employed women work part-time (less than 30 h), 37 percent and 60 percent of whom work part-time, respectively. Working from home rates are also noticeably and significantly higher among self-employed women compared to the other groups at 57 percent. Self-employed women are the labor market group most likely to cite caring responsibilities as a reason for reduced working time, at 30 percent, 24 percentage points

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics (%) of independent variables, including Chi Square & Cramers V tests for flexibility factors: Solo self-employed and wage-and-salaried workers

	Self-employed			Wage-and-Salaried			Chi Square/Cramers V W&S Women/W&S Men		
	Women n = 602	Men n = 1703	% point difference	Chi Square/Cramers V (SE women/SE Men)	Women n = 13,830	Men n = 13,142		% point difference	Chi Square/Cramers V (SE women/W&S women)
Flexibility factors									
Part-time (<30 h)	68	37	+31	$\chi^2 21080$ $p < 0.01$ $\phi c.267$	60	15	+45	$\chi^2 110$ $p < 0.01$ $\phi c.088$	$\chi^2 280125$ $p < 0.01$ $\phi c.278$
Work from home	57	40	+17	$\chi^2 6638$ $p < 0.01$ $\phi c.149$	9	8	+1	$\chi^2 133696$ $p < 0.01$ $\phi c.264$	n/a
Caring reasons for part-time (% of those in p/t work)	30	6	+24	$\chi^2 23542$ $p < 0.01$ $\phi c.280$	24	4	+20	$\chi^2 123978$ $p < 0.01$ $\phi c.184$	$\chi^2 123978$ $p < 0.01$ $\phi c.184$
Household characteristics									
Currently married	60	69	-9		50	53	-3		
Preschool children 0-6	13	14	-1		16	15	+1		
School age 6-15	10	10	-4		11	10	+1		
Older children	8	10	-2		9	8	+1		
No children	69	66	+3		64	67	-3		
Labor characteristics									
Professional	73	43	+40		39	40	-1		
Skilled/craft	9	34	-25		20	23	-3		
Service/manual	14	20	-6		29	24	+5		
Other	3	3	0		11	13	= 2		

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Self-employed				Wage-and-Salaried				
	Women n = 602	Men n = 1703	% point difference	Chi Square/ Cramers V (SE women/SE Men)	Women n = 13,830	Men n = 13,142	% point difference	Chi Square/ Cramers V (SE women/ women)	Chi Square/ Cramers V W&S Women/ W&S Men
Manufacturing	7	34	-27		9	29	-20		
Service sector	19	32	-13		31	33	-2		
Professional/science/ tech/finance	27	24	+3		15	19	-4		
Health/education/Social	30	5	+25		42	16	+26		
Other sectors	16	5	+11		3	2	+1		

Source: Labor Force Survey pooled cross sections 2017 and 2019.

Standard Individual-Level LFS Sample Weights Applied.

"Skilled craft" = skilled trades, administrative & secretarial; "Service manual" = sales, customer service, process, plant & machinery operatives, caring and leisure services;

"Professional" = professional, managerial, semi-professional or technical occupations.

Abbreviations: LFS, Labor Force Survey; SE, Self-employed; W&S, wage-and-salaried.

TABLE 2 Gender differences self-employment determinants. DV self-employment/wage-and-salaried work

	Model I		Model II	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Married	1.424* (0.015)	1.302* (0.011)	1.444* (0.015)	1.282* (0.011)
Widowed/Divorced	1.706* (0.022)	1.322* (0.006)	1.962* (0.023)	1.371 (0.018)
Children	0.917* (0.012)	1.180* (0.008)	1.076* (0.013)	1.256* (0.008)
Part time	1.524* (0.013)	1.834* (0.008)	2.047* (0.014)	2.367* (0.008)
Caring reasons	2.454* (0.023)	0.001 (0.009)	3.014* (0.024)	0.215 (0.112)
Home working	10.086* (0.012)	6.004* (0.008)	6.290* (0.013)	6.846* (0.009)
Professional/manager			4.612* (0.018)	1.105* (0.011)
Skilled/trade			0.714 (0.024)	1.659* (0.011)
Elementary occupation/other			0.703* (0.029)	0.429* (0.016)
Profs, sci, tech, finance			0.176* (0.023)	0.611* (0.021)
Health, edu, social			0.063* (0.021)	0.112 (0.024)
Industry, construct			0.128 (0.022)	0.739* (0.021)
Constant	-4.795*	-3.185*	-3.729*	-3.556
Observations	7020	14,726	7020	14,726
Pseudo R ² *	0.201	0.168	0.293	0.311

Source: Labor Force Survey pooled cross sections 2017 and 2019.

Standard Individual-Level LFS Sample Weights Applied.

*significant at 99% confidence.

Odds ratio (Exp(B)) Reported. Standard errors in parentheses.

Reference category for industrial groupings is "service sectors."

Abbreviation: LFS, Labor Force Survey.

higher than men and 6 percentage points higher than women in wage-and-salaried work. Results for all flexibility factors were statistically significant at 99% confidence, with low-moderate effect sizes. A summary of results is shown in Chart A.

Turning to the third hypothesis, that gender gaps in flexible working will be wider than among wage-and-salaried workers, we can see support for this, albeit to a relatively small extent. Gender differences in working from home rates and citing caring reasons are higher among self-employed than wage-and-salaried workers, measured through observed percentage point difference and applying hypothesis tests to gender differences between the groups. Gender gaps in part-time working between men and women are wider among wage-and-salaried workers, owing to a higher proportion of self-employed men in part-time work compared to their waged counterparts. Therefore, from the data observed, cautious support can be found for the third hypothesis as it relates to caring reasons and home working only.

Moving to multivariate models to test hypothesis four, Table 2 presents logistic regression coefficients for the effect of household factors and flexible working arrangements on the probability of being self-employed as opposed to in wage-and-salaried employment. Model 1 includes household and flexibility factors only, model 2 includes controls for professional status and four industry dummies. Both models control for five age dummies. Separate regressions are run for male and female groups with the sample being all labor-active individuals. Being either currently or previously married has a small but positive effect on the likelihood of self-employment for women and men in both models, but for women slightly more so. The presence of children under 15 does not appear to have

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics (%) & Chi Square and Cramers V: Part-time work rates by child age. Self-employed and Wage-and-salaried workers

	Self-employed				Wage-and-salaried			
	Part-time work <i>n</i> = 1071				Part-time work <i>n</i> = 7633			
	Women	Men	Difference	Test	Women	Men	Difference	Test
Preschool	74	26	+48	$\chi^2_{2723} p < 0.01$ $\phi c.258$	40	16	+24	$\chi^2_{41138} p < 0.01$ $\phi c.268$
School age	63	39	+24	$\chi^2_{1324} p < 0.01$ $\phi c.208$	41	17	+24	$\chi^2_{25542} p < 0.01$ $\phi c.261$
No young children	66	35	+31	$\chi^2_{15180} p < 0.01$ $\phi c.277$	40	14	+26	$\chi^2_{193313} p < 0.01$ $\phi c.286$

Source: Labor Force Survey pooled cross sections 2017 and 2019.

Standard Individual-Level LFS Sample Weights Applied.

Abbreviation: LFS, Labor Force Survey.

any noticeable effect on self-employment choice over waged employment for men or women, although there is a small positive effect when controlling for labor-related factors. Part-time work is positively and significantly associated with self-employed status for men and women, particularly when professional and industry factors are controlled for. The coefficients on caring reasons for reduced working time and home working are highly positively associated with self-employed status for women. Citing caring reasons means women are two and a half times more likely to be self-employed as in waged work, all other factors held constant. Interestingly, the effect is increased when controlling for industry and occupation, suggesting that the importance of caring responsibilities on self-employed status is higher for women in professional occupations or in non-service sectors. Working from home very strongly increases the likelihood of self-employed status for men and women, by a factor of between 6 and 10. While such large-value coefficients should be interpreted with some caution this instance with working from home rates far higher among self-employed generally, as might be expected owing to the nature of the work, the results reflect the descriptive statistics in Table 1. The coefficients on the variables in these multivariate models provide partial support for the fourth hypothesis. Flexibility factors, caring reasons, and home working are stronger predictors of self-employed status for women compared to men. Part-time work is broadly similar for men and women. Household factors show no significant gender difference. These results reflect the situation that self-employed men have higher part-time work rates than their male wage-and-salaried counterparts.

Next, non-parametric hypothesis tests are applied to test the fifth and sixth hypotheses which are that the presence of children will be more strongly associated with flexible working arrangements for self-employed women compared to self-employed men and women in wage-and-salaried work. First, looking at percentage values and both Chi Square and Cramers V tests, we can see a wide gap in part-time work rates among self-employed parents of preschool children, with 74 percent of women working part-time compared to 26 percent of men (Table 3, Chart B). This gap narrows substantially among self-employed parents of only older children or no children. By comparison, gaps between men and women in part-time work rates according to the presence of children at different ages are almost identical across the categories, with gender differences in part-time work rates between 24 and 26 percentage points regardless parental status. Looking at the other two flexibility factors, home working and citing caring reasons, somewhat unexpected results are shown. As expected, proportions citing caring reasons (Table 4, Chart C) and home working (Table 5, Chart D) are higher among self-employed women with preschool children than their male or wage-and-salaried peers. However, self-employed women with no children or older children (15+) show a higher proportion citing caring reasons for full-time work. The differences are small, just five percentage points, but would run somewhat counter to the general premise that it is women with young children who are

TABLE 4 Descriptive statistics (%) & Chi Square and Cramers V: Caring reasons for reduced working time by child age. Self-employed and Wage-and-salaried workers

	Self-employed				Wage-and-Salaried			
	Caring reasons <i>n</i> = 514				Caring reasons <i>n</i> = 1102			
	Women	Men	Difference	Test	Women	Men	Difference	Test
Preschool	28	3	+25	$\chi^2_{1031} p < 0.01$ $\phi c.336$	25	4	+21	$\chi^2_{5388} p < 0.01$ $\phi c.216$
School age	21	4	+17	$\chi^2_{380} p < 0.01$ $\phi c.249$	25	5	+20	$\chi^2_{4113} p < 0.01$ $\phi c.223$
No young children	33	7	+26	$\chi^2_{3937} p < 0.01$ $\phi c.306$	25	3	+22	$\chi^2_{28250} p < 0.01$ $\phi c.241$

Source: Labor Force Survey pooled cross sections 2017 and 2019.

Standard Individual-Level LFS Sample Weights Applied.

Abbreviation: LFS, Labor Force Survey.

TABLE 5 Descriptive statistics (%) & Chi Square and Cramers V: Home Working by child age. Self-employed and Wage-and-salaried workers

	Self-employed				Wage-and-Salaried			
	Home working <i>n</i> = 1027				Home working <i>n</i> = 2271			
	Women	Men	Difference	Test	Women	Men	Difference	Test
Preschool	38	32	+7	$\chi^2_{128} p < 0.01$ $\phi c.056$	25	16	+9	$\chi^2_{857} p < 0.01$ $\phi c.122$
School age	48	41	+7	$\chi^2_{101} p < 0.01$ $\phi c.057$	17	21	-3	$\chi^2_{277} p < 0.01$ $\phi c.083$
No young children	61	43	+18	$\chi^2_{5826} p < 0.01$ $\phi c.171$	25	25	-	-

Source: Labor Force Survey pooled cross sections 2017 and 2019.

Standard Individual-Level LFS Sample Weights Applied.

Abbreviation: LFS, Labor Force Survey.

turning to self-employment as a flexible work strategy. A similar picture emerges with working from home. While self-employed women are more likely than men overall to work from home, age of children appears to have no apparent connection. On the contrary, women with no children or older children are more likely to work from home than any other group.

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The data in this study have revealed some important gender differences in the working arrangements of the solo self-employed, differences which are in many cases wider than those in wage-and-salaried work. The proportions of self-employed women in part-time work, working from home, and citing caring reasons for reduced working time are significantly larger than those of both self-employed men and women in wage-and-salaried work. Gender gaps in terms of the difference in proportions between men and women in the take up of flexible work are wider among the self-employed with regard to home working and caring reasons, although narrower for part time work. This

reflects the fact that part-time work rates, that is, the proportion working less than 30 h per week, among solo self-employed men larger than among their male employed counterparts, at 37 percent. Overall, the results show some support for the overarching hypothesis of the research: that gendered flexibility will be visible within self-employment. Greater levels of control and autonomy over the timing and conditions of work that is offered by solo self-employment creates divisions of labor along gender lines, as women undertake a greater share of unpaid domestic or caring tasks.

Multivariate models show that citing caring reasons and working from home are positively associated with self-employed status for women more so than men, something which is backed up in the descriptive data. Research has shown that working from home can lead to women taking up more domestic and caring labor as gendered divisions of labor already in place at a household level are facilitated by the presence in the home (Gurley-Calvez et al., 2009; Powell & Craig, 2015). Part-time work is associated with self-employment as opposed to waged work for women, something which has been found in previous research (Aidis & Wetzels, 2007; Carr, 1994; Devine, 1994). This is also the case for the male group, reflective of higher rates of part-time work among self-employed compared to wage-and-salaried men. Household factors, being currently or previously married and the presence of children under 15 are all positively associated with self-employed status, although the effect of children is only marginal and larger among self-employed men. Being married, widowed or divorced are slightly stronger determinants of self-employed status for women compared to men and particularly when labor-related variables are controlled for. The coefficients on these variables are reflective of higher marriage rates among self-employed and also mirror findings of previous research (Bruce, 1999; Carr, 1994; Caputo & Dolinsky, 1998; Georgellis & Wall, 2005). The association between the presence of children and self-employment status found in past research (Boden, 1999; Hundley, 2001; Wellington, 2006) is not apparent in the data here, reflective of the fact that the self-employed in Ireland are less likely than their wage-and-salaried counterparts to have children under 15 and more likely to have older (adult) or no children.

Examining the data along parental lines, the results are more unexpected. Rates of part-time and home working and the proportions citing caring reasons are higher among self-employed women than self-employed men and wage-and-salaried women at all child-age ranges. Yet parental status has less of an effect on self-employed working arrangements than was predicted, with women with no young children still taking up a large share of these flexible working factors and 33 percent citing caring reasons for part-time work. This might point to a situation where self-employed women's caring roles continue throughout the lifespan, with elder care or the demands of older children, something that is well-researched in the wider labor market (Ehrlich et al., 2020; Johnson & Sasso, 2006). Nevertheless, the data here show that self-employed women with preschool children are the most likely group to work part-time, showing support for the contention found in past research that working mothers of young children are opting for solo self-employment as an alternative to part-time work (Hatfield, 2015; Lawter et al., 2015).

Something that has been highlighted from the data on the characteristics of self-employed women and the multivariate models controlling for labor-related variables, is the effect of professional status on gendered trends. Descriptive information shows that nearly three-quarters of self-employed women are operating at professional, semi-professional or technical occupational levels. At the same time, three-quarters of self-employed women work part-time, so we can see trends that appear to run counter to the economic idea of opportunity cost, whereby the greater the level of human capital the higher the cost, or the less likely the preference for time out of paid work (Becker, 1965, 1985; Hakim, 2000; Polachek, 2004). The gendered effects of citing caring responsibilities are furthermore not eliminated by the addition of professional status and activity in non-service sectors in multivariate models. On the contrary, these effects are exacerbated. The impact of part-time work on self-employed status is strengthened when labor factors are controlled for. This points to a situation reflective of previous studies finding that there is a layer of highly educated, professional or managerial level women who struggle with work-family conflict and seek flexible working arrangements that may not be available in wage-and-salaried employment (Barnett & Hall, 2001; Lawter et al., 2016; Network Ireland, 2019). This connection between professional occupation, industrial sector and human capital more broadly with gendered trends in solo self-employment would be a useful area for further investigation and research.

These findings of this article do not just provide us with increased information on gendered trends within solo self-employment, they offer an insight into the nature of flexible working in the labor market more broadly. If autonomy and control over working arrangements offered by self-employment exacerbates gender differences, would enhanced flexibility in the waged sector also result in gendered trends? This is an issue with particular relevance in the contemporary moment as COVID-19 has accelerated already existing moves toward flexible working arrangements in many sectors of wage-and-salaried employment (Phillips, 2020). Remote working and more employee-friendly flexible schedules are now more widely available and may continue to be so in the medium to long term (Oxford Analytica, 2020). There has already been some research and discussion into gendered effects of COVID-19 and remote working. While men have increased their shares of domestic and caring work during lockdown restrictions, women are shouldering the bulk of the additional burden of home-schooling, more likely to be interrupted by the demands of children, more likely to have reduced their working time as a response to school closure, and other pressures and are still struggling with the “balancing act” or labor market and domestic pressures in this new environment (Milliken et al., 2020; Nash & Churchill, 2020). This is gendered flexibility, and the data on solo self-employment can potentially offer important clues on how divisions of labor play out in gendered ways when greater autonomy and flexibility over working arrangements is available.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The Labor Force Survey (Q2 2017 and Q2 2019) data used in this study were generated at the Central Statistics Office in Ireland. The Labor Force Survey data are distributed by the University College Dublin. Data Archive is available on request from <https://www.ucd.ie/issda/>.

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ENDNOTE

¹ The sample is limited to non-agricultural self-employment. This limitation is to prevent the skewing effect that large numbers of male farmers might have on demographic trends and to best reflect the type of professional, creative and technical “freelance” work that is the focus of this study.

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