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Revisiting Flexibility Stigma: How Framing Remote Working Shapes Bias Against Remote Workers

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ABSTRACT

Despite the steep rise in working from home practices across the world, stigmatized views against remote workers still exist and are slowly coming back as evidenced by managers' requests for workers to return to the office. Drawing on a national sample of managers in Singapore, this study uses a factorial vignette experiment to examine how the framing of remote working may change managers' bias against remote workers and for whom such framing matters more. The results show that remote working is associated with significantly worse managerial perceptions in commitment, productivity, team spirit, and promotion opportunities for all gender-parenthood groups (i.e., mothers, fathers, and childless men and women). The scarring effects are more pronounced for fathers and childless workers compared to mothers because managers hold negative views against mothers regardless of their remote working status. When remote working is framed as a policy for all workers, the scarring effects are significantly mitigated for all groups. By contrast, in the context where remote working was framed as a policy only for mothers, or only for parents, the scarring effects remain significant for all groups and are even intensified for mothers. These findings highlight the importance of “de-coupling” remote working as specifically being for mothers or parents, to remove biases that may hinder good practices.

1 | Introduction

Remote working, defined as a work arrangement allowing employees to control their work location (e.g., working from home) whilst using digital technologies (e.g., mobile apps and video conferencing) to complete their job tasks, has gained increasing preference during the COVID-19 pandemic (Eurofound 2022). During the peak of the pandemic, around half of the workforce in many developed countries across the world worked remotely, and even after lockdown measures ended in 2021, around one-third of employees in Europe and the United States were still doing some of their work remotely (Dalton and Groen 2022; Eurofound 2022; Ng 2021). In the post-COVID-19 period, there has been increasing public clamor to make remote working the default in some occupations due to its potential to improve employee wellbeing and productivity, and to help companies

save costs related to office space and facilities (CIPD 2021; Li and Wang 2022).

However, a major setback to this is the flexibility stigma. Flexibility stigma refers to a belief that workers who use flexible working arrangements (FWAs), including remote workers, are generally less productive, motivated, or committed than their counterparts who work in the office (Williams et al. 2013). Such beliefs largely stem from the proximity bias (Cristea and Leonardi 2019), namely the tendency for managers evaluate workers they can see working more positively. It is compounded by the ideal worker norm that expects workers to prioritize work above all else in life and to work long hours in the office as evidence of their motivation, commitment, and professionalism at work (Acker 1990). Taking up flexible working arrangements, especially when assumed to be used (only to) meet family

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demands, may signal to managers that workers do not or cannot prioritize work (Leslie et al. 2012; Spence 1973). The prevalence of the flexibility stigma not only prevents workers from taking up such arrangements due to fears of negative career penalties (Thébaud and Pedulla 2022), but also causes the “flexibility paradox” where flexible workers work harder, longer, and feel a need to be always connected to the workplace to over-compensate (Chung 2022; Mazmanian et al. 2013). This, in turn, may result in negative outcomes for both workers and companies in the long run due to declines in productivity and burnout (Kelly et al. 2014). Thus, if we are to reap the multitude of benefits and address the challenges of remote working, it is important to better understand why biased views against remote workers exist, and under what conditions they can be exacerbated or reduced.

In our study, we focus on managers' perceptions as they occupy a pivotal gatekeeping role in contemporary workplaces, holding substantial influence over critical organizational processes that directly shape employees' career trajectories and work–life outcomes (Leslie et al. 2012; Williams et al. 2013). Managers decide whether flexible or remote-work requests are granted, evaluate performance, allocate high-visibility assignments, and make promotion recommendations. Managers' subjective perceptions and potential biases become especially consequential in remote settings, where productivity signals may be less visible (Kelly et al. 2014; Moen et al. 2016). If managers associate remote work with lower commitment or productivity, especially for certain groups (e.g., mothers but not fathers, or women but not men), these beliefs can translate into systematic differences in opportunities, evaluations, and rewards, even in the absence of objective performance differences between groups of workers. Examining managers' perceptions therefore provides unique insight into the mechanisms through which remote-work arrangements may either reduce or inadvertently reinforce gender- and parental-status inequalities, making their viewpoints a critical lens for understanding persistent disparities in modern labor markets.

The main goal of this paper is to better understand how the framing of remote working, through changing organizational or national contexts, influences managerial bias against remote workers (see also, Munsch et al. 2014; Thébaud and Pedulla 2022). Based on status construction theory (Correll and Ridgeway 2006) we argue that remote working is more likely to be viewed by managers with suspicion when it is associated with groups who are assumed to have lower competence and worth. In other words, when remote working is framed as a policy specifically used by or geared towards parents or mothers, we expect that managerial biases against remote working will increase. This is because remote working will be viewed as a policy largely (or exclusively) to meet family demands, sacrificing productivity as a result (Leslie et al. 2012; Williams et al. 2013), which stems from the negative biases associated with women and mother's work capacities and their assumed priorities within the family (Correll et al. 2007). Contrarily, when remote working is framed as a universal policy, namely a policy for all workers or that most workers take it up, it can help reduce stigma. This is because it is no longer associated with a group status characteristic, and signals to managers that remote working is a tool that can enable both the productivity demands

of the company and the work–life demands of workers to be met (Kelly et al. 2014; Moen et al. 2016).

Similarly, workers' gender and parenthood status can also shape managers' assumptions about how workers use remote working practices—that is, their flexible working attributions. Some studies expect stronger flexibility stigma for men and fathers as they deviate from their assumed roles—namely the masculine breadwinning norms and the ideal worker norm (Rudman and Mescher 2013). However, we might expect that mothers—or women more generally—face stronger stigma when working remotely, as their remote working is more likely to be associated with reduced productivity. This is because their commitment to work may already be questioned due to traditional gender norms (Correll et al. 2007), and remote working, especially when done for family purposes, can exacerbate this assumption (Brescoll et al. 2013; Chung 2020). This study aims to contribute to this debate by exploring this dynamic in the post-lockdown labor market, where we have seen an expansion of remote working across the population, especially among women (Abendroth et al. 2022; Chung 2024), which may have shifted the perceptions of managers. This study further examines how different contexts shape whose remote working is stigmatized more and whose is protected.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature by exploring how the framing of FWAs at both organizational and national contexts shape flexibility stigma, and for whom these associations are the strongest. To achieve both objectives, this study conducts a factorial vignette experiment based on a national sample of managers in Singapore collected in 2022 to explore managers' perceptions of remote workers. The experimental design not only facilitates causal inferences about managerial attitudes but also allows us to explore scenarios that rarely occur but can be introduced in the future to address the challenges of remote working. In doing this, this study makes important contributions to the discussions of remote working in the future of work to show what types of changes are needed to ensure that remote working can meet the needs of both workers and companies.

2 | Background and Hypotheses

2.1 | Research Context

In recent years, Singapore has witnessed a significant increase in the adoption of various FWAs, such as flexible workplace, flexible work hours, and remote working (Ng 2021). This trend has been further accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the proportion of firms offering at least one formal FWA rose to 78% in 2020, a substantial increase from 53% in 2019, and 59% of companies offered multiple formal FWAs in 2020, reflecting the recognition of diverse employee needs and demands (Ng 2021). Similarly, before the pandemic, remote work was relatively uncommon in Singapore. The situation changed dramatically in 2020, with 49% of employed residents working remotely due to pandemic-related measures (Ministry of Manpower 2021). This was among the highest proportions globally at the time. Although there has been a noted decline in remote work prevalence as restrictions eased, the rate of remote

work has stabilized at around 20% in Singapore, which is higher than the rate in the pre-pandemic period (Monetary Authority of Singapore 2023) and higher than many other countries globally (Aksoy et al. 2025).

After the COVID-19, the Singapore government requires all managers to consider employees' requests for flexible work arrangements including remote working and published the Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangement Requests (TG-FWAR) to specify how employees should request for FWAs and use them and how managers should handle FWA requests (Ministry of Manpower 2024). The TG-FWAR came into effect on December 1, 2024, which is after our data was collected. These guidelines establish a formal process for employees to request flexible work arrangements (FWAs), including remote work. Managers are required to consider such requests fairly and respond within 2 months. However, the guidelines do not mandate managers to approve all requests. Managers retain the discretion to approve or reject FWA requests based on reasonable business grounds (Ministry of Manpower 2024). This legal context is crucial for understanding the environment in which managers assess remote work requests. Although employees have the right to request flexible work arrangements, managers are not obligated to approve them, allowing for managerial discretion based on organizational needs. This is aimed at making it easier for workers, especially caregivers and seniors, to remain in or return to the workforce.

Furthermore, Singapore's social fabric is influenced by traditional gender norms rooted in Confucian principles where women are expected to be responsible for domestic labor whilst also being economically active (Boehnke 2011). For example, in Singapore women's labor force participation remains consistently lower than men's, particularly among married women and mothers. Family responsibilities, including childcare and eldercare, are a major reason for women's lower and more discontinuous employment (Yeoh and Huang 2018). Women are overrepresented in part-time and informal employment, which often offers lower pay and limited benefits (Yeung et al. 2018). Second, the division of unpaid labor within households remains highly gendered. Even as dual-income families become more common, women continue to perform the majority of domestic work and caregiving tasks (Jiang et al. 2024). This persistent imbalance reinforces broader inequalities in time availability and career advancement opportunities between men and women. Taken together, these patterns reflect the intersection of labor market structures, cultural norms, and state policies, which collectively reproduce gendered divisions of labor and caregiving in Singapore.

The persistent gender inequalities may be intensified by the strong overwork norm in Singapore, where approximately 23% of the population work more than 48 h per week. This overwork norm can be attributed to the prevalent "kiasu" (fear to lose) culture and strong work ethic, where employees are expected to dedicate long hours and prioritize work over nonwork obligations (Yeung and Hu 2018). Although remote working may be perceived as a viable option for women to fulfill family and caregiving responsibilities, people who utilize remote working may face challenges due to potential violations of the ideal worker norm and masculine workplace expectations.

2.2 | Defining Flexibility Stigma

Williams et al. (2013) defines flexibility stigma as the discrimination workers face when using flexible working arrangements for family responsibilities. According to stigma scholars, rather than being based on factual truths, stigma against groups of populations is generally socially constructed heavily based on social norms and institutions (Hatzenbuehler 2016). In the case of flexibility stigma, rather than coming from actual lack of commitment or productivity of remote workers, it stems from the idea that remote workers deviate away from societal assumption around what a committed worker would do (Williams et al. 2013). Remote working, especially when it is assumed to be done for care purposes, makes workers deviate away from the socially constructed image of work devotion, where workers should always be available for work, without any other obligations outside of work, working long hours in the office (Kasperska et al. 2024; Munsch et al. 2014).

Nevertheless, extensive evidence shows that flexible workers are generally as, if not more, productive than those who do not work flexibly (Awada et al. 2021; Bloom et al. 2015; Boltz et al. 2023; Farooq and Sultana 2022). Flexible workers are also generally more loyal, committed to their jobs, and happier with their working conditions, leading to fewer problems with regards to sickness, absenteeism, and worker retention (Beauregard and Henry 2009; Boltz et al. 2023; Farooq and Sultana 2022; Kelliher et al. 2019; Kerkhofs et al. 2008; Masuda et al. 2012; Ruppanner et al. 2018). Regardless, especially in the Singaporean context where long hours working work devotion norms are prevalent (Yeung and Hu 2018), remote workers are expected to be generally stigmatized with regards to their productivity, commitment, and their ability to be a team player, and less likely to be supported for promotion.

Hypothesis 1. *Remote working is associated with significantly worse manager perceptions in commitment, productivity, team spirit and promotion opportunities.*

2.3 | Flexibility Stigma and Gender-Parenthood Status

Based on the signaling theory (Spence 1973), flexible working attribution (Afota et al. 2023; Leslie et al. 2012), namely what people perceive as the reason behind workers working remotely, is important when we consider whose remote working will be stigmatized more across gender and parental lines. Flexible working can be used to meet family demands and to increase productivity through smarter work designs (Appelbaum et al. 2000; Bloom et al. 2015). When flexible working is seen to be used for personal reasons, it is likely to lead to career penalties, whereas, when it is seen to be used for performance enhancing purposes, it leads to career bonuses (Leslie et al. 2012). However, even when workers use flexible working to meet work-family demands and to improve their well-being, this does not necessarily hinder productivity, and in many ways it is precisely by enhancing workers' well-being and motivation that flexible working can result in productivity enhancement (Li and Wang 2022; Wood and de Menezes 2010).

In many industrialized countries, including Singapore, women are still considered to be responsible for childcare and housework (Yeung et al. 2018), and therefore are assumed to use and often (have to) use remote working for care and family purposes more often than men and fathers (Chung and van der Lippe 2020; C. Sullivan and Lewis 2001). As men are still considered breadwinners, men are generally less likely to be pressured to carry out housework and childcare when working remotely. In addition, they are more likely to (be able to) use the flexible boundaries between work and family life to devote more time and energy to work (Glass and Noonan 2016; Kim 2020; Parry 2024). In other words, because of the gendered assumptions around work identity and devotion, managers may expect women's remote working to be disrupted more by domestic responsibilities, hindering their productivity. Men on the other hand, are expected to keep stricter boundaries when working from home without impacting their productivity, even when it is done to meet family demands. This may be more apparent during parenthood. As the motherhood penalty and fatherhood bonus have shown regarding pay trajectories (Hodges and Budig 2010), it is especially towards parents that gender biases are most pronounced, reinforcing unequal expectations and outcomes for mothers and fathers. Several studies provide evidence supporting this claim using longitudinal panel data examining the career trajectories of flexible workers (Glass and Noonan 2016; Lott and Chung 2016; Pablonia and Vernon 2022). They show how men and fathers' flexible working resulted in bonuses, whilst women, especially mothers', flexible working resulted in career penalties. Similarly, experimental data in the United States provide evidence that any negative views against flexible workers were more evident when mothers worked flexibly compared to when fathers do so (Brescoll et al. 2013; Munsch 2016).

It is unclear whether women without children will face similar consequences as mothers, or whether they will experience similar outcomes as men without children. On the one hand, women without children are still assumed to take on other domestic and family care responsibilities, entailing that the stigma they experience will be similar to that of mothers (Dahlberg et al. 2007; O. Sullivan 2011). On the other hand, studies have shown that when all other conditions are equal, women without children are deemed more competent than men without children and parents (Cuddy et al. 2004), and are seen to be able to adhere to the ideal worker norm as much as men. In Singapore, given the gender norms of society with regards to women's caring roles, we expect the former to be stronger.

Hypothesis 2a. *Remote working is associated with significantly worse manager perceptions in commitment, productivity, team spirit and promotion opportunities for women and mothers compared to men and fathers.*

Countering this argument, some scholars argue that men may face stronger prejudice when remote working due to “femininity stigma” (Rudman and Mescher 2013). They argue that when men work flexibly especially for family reasons, this makes them deviate away from both the ideal worker and the masculine breadwinner image (Kelland et al. 2022; Vandello et al. 2013). This can be especially true because society expects

men to be more work devoted compared to women because they are expected to be the breadwinners of the family, especially when they become fathers (Berdahl et al. 2018; Hodges and Budig 2010). When men are seen to work remotely for personal reasons, they may experience a stronger bias. This is because women's, especially mothers', work capacities may already be viewed with suspicion, regardless of their remote working status (Correll et al. 2007). Remote working, even for care purposes, may only validate the reviewer's perception of mothers' work capacity and commitment. In this case, the negative impact of flexibility stigma can be rather muted rather than amplified (see for similar discussions around unemployment scarring and race, Pedulla 2018). Some studies provide evidence of this (Kasperska et al. 2024). Although mothers' work competencies and commitment were generally viewed lower than that of fathers' or that of workers without children, remote working did not increase this bias further. On the other hand, for fathers, remote working was met with greater penalties as their starting positions, namely in in-office scenarios, were significantly higher than that of any other groups.

Therefore, for mothers, remote working may not result in additional bias against their work commitment, capacities, and career, as mothers already face bias due to social assumptions around motherhood limiting their capacity to work. Remote working even for family purposes would be in line with managerial assumptions around mothers' priorities (Williams et al. 2013). In contrast, men and fathers generally gain bonuses with regard to their perceived work commitment and capacities when working in the office. Fathers' and men's remote working, especially for care purposes or personal reasons, may be seen as a stronger deviation away from the assumed roles, and therefore met with stronger bias (Rudman and Mescher 2013).

Hypothesis 2b. *Remote working is associated with significantly worse manager perceptions in commitment, productivity, team spirit and promotion opportunities for men and fathers compared to women and mothers.*

2.4 | Flexibility Stigma and (De-)Gendered Framing of Remote Working

Policy designs with regards to targeting versus universal policies shape how those who take up policies are stigmatized (Titmuss 2006), by increasing the cultural distance and distrust between those who take up the policy versus those who do not or cannot (Larsen and Dejgaard 2013). We argue that at the organizational level, targeting remote working policies to certain groups of workers can also increase distrust between groups. This is especially more likely when remote working is framed as a policy targeted only towards parents or mothers. Based on the flexible working attribution theory (Afota et al. 2023; Leslie et al. 2012) when remote working policies are targeted only to, or used mostly by, parents or mothers, managers are more likely to perceive remote working as a work–life balance or equality and diversity enhancing tool rather than a performance enhancing tool. This is because parents, especially mothers, are often perceived as having the most pressing need for balancing work and family responsibilities (Pedulla and Thébaud 2015),

and policies geared towards these populations are assumed to fulfill that purpose, and potentially that purpose alone. In such cases, remote working will deviate further from the traditional ideal worker image, and as a result, will face more penalties (Leslie et al. 2012; Williams et al. 2013).

Based on the status construction theory (Correll and Ridgeway 2006), we also expect that when remote working is widely perceived as a “mothers’ arrangement,” this can activate stereotypes associated with mothers’ work capacities for all remote workers, exacerbating biases against them. The status construction theory argues that there still exist biases against mothers’ work abilities as a result of their assumed family commitments or the undervaluation of women’s contributions to paid employment—arguing that motherhood becomes a “status” (Correll et al. 2007). In fact, revisiting the discussion on the femininity stigma (Rudman and Mescher 2013), it becomes evident that the stigma men face when taking up part-time work or leaves, stems less from the concerns around productivity, but more from the associations these arrangements have with women, especially mothers, and the stereotypes surrounding their assumed level of work commitment. For example, studies show that part-time workers are more productive per hour compared to their full-time counterparts (Künn-Nelen et al. 2013). However, as part-time work is largely perceived to be an arrangement used by mothers to combine work with family demands (Chung 2024), it is met with biases and results in the downgrading of occupations (Connolly and Gregory 2009). To put it another way, if managers primarily perceive remote working as a solution for mothers, this perception can trigger biases against all workers who work remotely, as they may be viewed through the same lens, namely as less committed or of lower labor market status as “mothers,” simply by association. Although reframing it as a solution for parents may reduce some of these biases, the language used will still likely connect it with balancing work and family responsibilities, parents being considered synonymous with mothers rather than being perceived as both fathers and mothers, thereby leading managers to believe that performance enhancement is not achievable.

Hypothesis 3a. *Remote working is associated with significantly worse manager perceptions in commitment, productivity, team spirit, and promotion opportunities when it is generally mothers and parents who use remote working, and when remote working policies are specifically only for mothers and parents.*

Drawing on the cultural distance theory (Larsen and Dejgaard 2013; Titmuss 2006) when remote working policies are designed as universal entitlements, organizational trust is more likely to be fostered, reducing stigma, and gaining broader support from all, as all workers including managers may see themselves as legitimate and potential beneficiaries. Previous studies have indicated that when such universal framing was used, remote working was less likely to be stigmatized (Kelly et al. 2014; Moen et al. 2016). When there are policies to provide all workers with remote working opportunities, remote working may no longer be perceived as a gift that needs to be reciprocated, but as a right (see for similar discussions around family policies in organizations, Been et al. 2017). Framing remote working as a policy for all workers may also signal to managers

that remote working policies are performance enhancing, and/or are used based on manager-led motives, such as the reduction of rental costs, rather than based on workers’ initiatives alone (Anderson and Kelliher 2020). This assumes that if this were not to be the case, the company/country would not have introduced such policies and/or would not have allowed workers to work from home on a large-scale basis regardless of work–private-life demands.

Hypothesis 3b. *Remote working is associated with significantly better manager perceptions in commitment, productivity, team spirit, and promotion opportunities when all workers (not a specific gender-parenthood status) take up remote working, and when there are remote working policies for all workers.*

Finally, the question arises as to who is more likely to be impacted by the different framing of policy and practice. At this stage, we will not set forward any clear hypotheses on this element given the uncertainty of whose remote working is stigmatized more. What we can expect is that this will largely depend on who is more likely to be penalized for remote working. When remote working is framed as a policy for mothers/parents, we might expect some protective mechanism from stigmatization, as they would not deviate away from their expected roles. However, we expect that even in cases where remote working is primarily taken up by mothers or parents, or where policies specifically target mothers or parents, we do not expect that mothers or parents/fathers to be safe from stigmatization. This is because when remote working becomes closely associated with mothers/parents, it can trigger status-based bias linked to assumptions of lower productivity and weaker commitment, rooted in the socially constructed maternal roles. Consequently, all forms of remote working, including that undertaken by mothers or parents, may be subject to negative evaluation. We further believe that this negative dynamic of flexible working attribution is likely to outweigh any potential protective effects of framing remote working as primarily intended for mothers and parents.

3 | Method

3.1 | Research Design

This study used a factorial survey experiment (FSE), including an online survey and a vignette experiment, which was carried out in Singapore. Combining the advantages of survey and experiments, FSE has been increasingly used to better understand the multi-dimensionality of individuals’ decision-making processes (Auspurg et al. 2017). In this study, there are at least three key advantages to using a factorial survey experiment (FSE) to examine managers’ evaluations of remote working. First, FSE respondents can evaluate a large number of vignettes that vary along multiple dimensions. This enables the testing of various combinations, including some that are rare in current practice but may become more common in the future (Auspurg and Hinz 2015). For example, the scenario in which policies universally support remote working for all eligible employees has not yet materialized and can only be examined through forward-looking designs such as the vignette experiment. Second, the

randomization inherent in the experimental design eliminates confounding effects related to respondent characteristics, allowing the effects of employees' remote working status on managers' ratings to be interpreted as causal. This complete control over respondent features ensures a higher level of internal validity compared to traditional survey methods. Third, the multidimensionality of the FSE design reduces the likelihood of socially desirable responding, as the simultaneous variation of vignette dimensions makes it difficult for respondents to discern the study's true focus. Nevertheless, FSEs are not without limitations. A major limitation is that they capture intentions and attitudes rather than real-world behavior, a point that will be discussed in more detail in the conclusion.

3.2 | Survey and Sample

The survey part of the FSE involves a population-based online study, which was conducted in August 2022 in Singapore by Kantar, an internationally leading survey company. Ethical approval was obtained before data collection. Kantar maintains a national online panel of around 700,000 respondents in Singapore and employs various recruitment methods, such as e-newsletter campaigns, opt-in email, co-registration, and social media, to ensure the coverage of a diverse population. For the purpose of this research study, a stratified quota sample was drawn from the online panel to select manager respondents who are aged 18–65 years old and supervise at least one employee in Singapore based on the distributions of gender (men and women), age (below 35, 35–44, 45–54, and 55 or above), marital status (married and unmarried) and education (tertiary and nontertiary) in the 2020 census in Singapore. Compared with previous studies on ordinary respondents, our focus on managers can significantly enhance the ecological validity of our findings by targeting individuals who play real-world roles in management and recruitment. This approach ensures that our results are grounded in the practical experiences and decisions of those directly responsible for overseeing and hiring staff.

Supporting Information S1: Table A1 shows that the manager sample is drawn from a highly diverse portfolio of eight major economic sectors, with no single industry providing a majority of respondents, thus enhancing the generalizability of the findings. The sample is most heavily represented by the wholesale, transportation, and accommodation sector (18.40%), closely followed by finance, insurance, and real estate (15.36%), and education, culture and health (15.22%), indicating a slight focus on service and knowledge-based industries. The remaining sectors—including manufacturing, information, and professional activities—are also well-represented, each contributing between 11.77% and 13.74% of the total sample.

Kantar sent emails to invite selected respondents to complete an online survey to evaluate hypothetical candidates with different remote working statuses. A pilot study was conducted and a series of quality checks (e.g., duplication of IP addresses, survey speedsters, and honesty detector) were conducted to ensure the data quality. The final analytic sample contains 2838 observations (473 respondents $\times$ 6 vignettes). Like other experiments,

FSE does not necessarily require a representative sample to yield internally valid results (Mutz 2011). Nevertheless, we constructed weights using information on individuals from professional and managerial occupational class¹ in the census and applied the weights in the analyses. After weighting, our sample is very close to the distribution of the census population in terms of age, gender, marital status, and education,² suggesting that our analytic sample is close to the distribution of the corresponding population segments in Singapore. For more details about the sample distribution and its comparison with the census distribution, see Supporting Information S1: Tables A1 and A2.

3.3 | Experimental Design and Implementation

Within the online survey, we conducted a factorial vignette experiment (for more details, see the questionnaire in Supporting Information S1). The experimental process is as follows. First, the manager respondents were first introduced to the experiment with a brief overview of its objectives, namely, to assess their evaluations of job candidates' use of remote work arrangements under varying organizational and policy contexts. Next, they were informed that they would be reviewing a job vacancy description and evaluating multiple candidate profiles based on their suitability for the position. Specifically, they were asked to assume the role of a human resources manager responsible for selecting a team leader who would lead a team of around 10 people to maintain good relationships with customers and develop new markets, and to rate the six candidates accordingly.

Respondents were randomly assigned to evaluate six candidate vignettes, with each vignette being constructed by randomly combining the following five characteristics: gender (2 levels), parenthood (2 levels), remote working status (2 levels), remote working use in organizations (4 levels), and government remote working policy (4 levels). For the specific presentation of the vignette, please refer to the questionnaire. The main experimental variable is remote working status, which distinguishes between “standard full-time work schedule in the company office” and “2–3 days remote working per week.”³ The latter is the most common arrangement in current or previous experiments of work–family programs in most developed countries including Singapore (Ng 2021). Gender has two categories (“men” and “women”), and parenthood distinguishes between “no children” and “two children” because most Singaporean parents have two children (Yeung and Hu 2018). Moreover, building on prior experimental research on flexible working that has manipulated context variables to explore changes in individual intended behavior across different settings (Munsch et al. 2014; Thébaud and Pedulla 2022), this study specifically alters the use of remote working within organizations and the application and support of government remote working policies. Additionally, it differentiates between four gender-parenthood groups to provide a nuanced understanding of how these factors interact to shape the effects of remote working use. The four gender-parenthood specific scenarios are well aligned with the variations in existing and possible future work–family policies across developed countries regarding who is allowed use the

policies. More detailed descriptions for each level of the experimental variables can be found in Table 1.

After reviewing each candidate profile, the respondents were then asked to assess each candidate on four outcomes. For each candidate, we reference prior literature (Fernandez-Lozano et al. 2020; Leslie et al. 2012; Munsch 2016; Munsch et al. 2014) to identify four key outcome variables—work commitment, productivity, team spirit, and promotion opportunity—that are particularly pertinent to remote working. These outcome variables were measured on a scale that ranged from 0 (very poor) to 10 (very good).

This study used a full factorial design where the total number of combinations (vignette universe) crossing all vignette levels of the five factors is 128 ($2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 4 \times 4$). The D-efficiency is equal to 100, above the commonly accepted value of 90, suggesting that all factors are orthogonal to each other and that there is sufficient statistical power to obtain precise estimates (Auspurg and Hinz 2015). Among the 128 unique vignettes, 22 decks (i.e., questionnaire versions) were randomly constructed with each containing 6 random vignettes. The total number of vignette-respondent observations is 2838 (473×6). On average each vignette was rated 22.17 times, which exceeds the common suggestion of five in the literature and thus ensures the robustness of the results (Auspurg and Hinz 2015).

To test the randomization of our experimental design in the vignette universe, we first conducted correlation analyses and found that the correlation coefficients between different experimental variables are almost zero, indicating that the different vignette dimensions are completely orthogonal (see Supporting Information S1: Table A3). This suggests that different experimental variables are completely orthogonal and exogenous to

each other. Similarly, there are also no correlations between experimental variables and respondents' sociodemographic characteristics, indicating that respondents were randomly assigned to, rather than self-selected into, different vignettes (see Supporting Information S1: Table A4).

3.4 | Analytic Strategy

As the data are hierarchically structured (vignettes are embedded within the respondents) and dependent variables are treated as continuous, random intercept multilevel linear regression models were applied to yield correct standard errors (Garson 2013). Due to the successful randomization in the experimental design, the assumption of exogeneity is satisfied and therefore a multilevel model rather than fixed-effects model is used to maximize statistical efficiency. The multilevel model can be expressed in the following equation. Rating_{ij} is the dependent variable measuring the extent to which a manager rates the specific candidate's commitment, productivity, team spirit, or promotion opportunities (vignette i for respondent j). $\text{Remote working status}_{ij}$ is the explanatory variable measuring different remote working statuses of the vignette i for respondent j . In addition, there are a number of moderator variables, including gender-parenthood status, organizational remote working use, and government remote working policies. Finally, α_{ij} is the random intercept; c_j is the respondent-level error term; and μ_{ij} is the vignette-level error term.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Rating}_{ij} = & \alpha_{ij} + \beta_1 \text{Teleworking status}_{ij} \\ & + \beta_2 \text{Gender_parenthood status}_{ij} \\ & + \beta_3 \text{Organizational teleworking use}_{ij} \\ & + \beta_4 \text{Government teleworking policy}_{ij} + c_j + \mu_{ij} \end{aligned}$$

TABLE 1 | Levels of experimental variables.

Experimental variables (levels)	Descriptions
Gender (2)	1. Random male names 2. Random female names
Parenthood (2)	1. Has no child 2. Father/mother of two children
Remote working status (2)	1. Worked a standard full-time schedule at the company office during the post-COVID period 2. Worked a remote working arrangement for 2–3 days per week during the post-COVID period to better meet family obligations (e.g., housework or caregiving)
Remote working use in organizations (4)	1. Used by very few workers (< 10%) 2. Used by most mothers (> 80%) but very few other workers (< 10%) 3. Used by most parents (> 80%) but very few other workers (< 10%) 4. Used by most workers (> 80%)
Government remote working policy (4)	1. No government policy 2. Policy only supports mothers' remote working 3. Policy only supports parents' remote working 4. Policy supports all workers' remote working

Specifically, we first estimated the main model by investigating the effects of remote working status on manager ratings. Next, we fitted interaction terms between remote working status and gender–parenthood status to explore whether and how the effect of remote working varies across demographic groups. Finally, we fitted interaction terms between remote working status and context variables (including organizational remote working use and government remote working policy) within each gender–parenthood group to examine whether and how the effects of remote working depend on organizational and national policy contexts.

4 | Results

4.1 | Effects of Remote Working Across Gender–Parenthood Statuses

Table 2 reports several random intercept multilevel models examining the effects of remote working status on manager evaluations of work commitment, productivity, team spirit and promotion opportunities, and how the effects vary across gender–parenthood status. In Panel A of Table 2, the models show that compared with employees who worked a standard

full-time schedule at the company office, employees who worked a remote working arrangement for 2–3 days per week have significantly lower manager ratings for commitment, productivity, team spirit, and promotion opportunities ($\beta = -0.69$ to -0.85 , all p -values < 0.001). The negative effects of remote working on all manager-perceived outcomes are generally comparable, but slightly larger for commitment and productivity. These results strongly support Hypothesis 1.

The models in Panel B further examine whether the effects of remote working on the four manager-perceived outcomes vary across gender–parenthood groups. First, consistent with the results in Panel A, Models 1, 3, 5, 7 in Panel B of Table 2 show significant negative effects of remote working on manager ratings of the four outcomes for all gender–parenthood groups (all p -values < 0.001). Second, Models 2, 4, 6, 8 compare the negative effects of remote working between gender–parenthood groups with mothers being the reference group. We find that the sizes of flexibility stigma are significantly larger for fathers than mothers in all four outcomes (all p -values < 0.05). For childless men and women, their flexibility stigma is significantly larger than that of mothers in terms of commitment and productivity (all p -values < 0.05), but not in team spirit and promotion.

TABLE 2 | Random intercept multilevel models examining managers' attitudes toward telework.

	Commitment		Productivity		Team spirit		Promotion	
Panel A. Main effects of remote working status								
Remote working status (ref. = no remote working)								
2–3 days remote working	−0.85***		−0.84***		−0.69***		−0.77***	
	(0.05)		(0.05)		(0.05)		(0.05)	
Constant	7.34***		7.31***		7.19***		7.31***	
	(0.09)		(0.09)		(0.09)		(0.09)	
Akaike information criterion	9646		9610		9624		9794	
Bayesian information criterion	9723		9687		9701		9871	
Panel B. Remote working status × gender-parenthood status	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
2–3 days remote working × childless men	−0.92***	−0.27*	−0.93***	−0.29*	−0.77***	−0.24 ⁺	−0.84***	−0.23 ⁺
	(0.09)	(0.13)	(0.09)	(0.13)	(0.09)	(0.13)	(0.09)	(0.13)
2–3 days remote working × fathers	−0.92***	−0.27*	−0.91***	−0.27*	−0.82***	−0.29*	−0.88***	−0.27*
	(0.09)	(0.13)	(0.09)	(0.13)	(0.09)	(0.13)	(0.10)	(0.13)
2–3 days remote working × childless women	−0.92***	−0.26*	−0.90***	−0.26*	−0.68***	−0.15	−0.77***	−0.16
	(0.09)	(0.13)	(0.09)	(0.13)	(0.09)	(0.13)	(0.09)	(0.13)
2–3 days remote working × mothers	−0.65***	Ref.	−0.64***	Ref.	−0.53***	Ref.	−0.61***	Ref.
	(0.09)		(0.09)		(0.09)		(0.09)	
Constant	7.26***	7.26***	7.22***	7.22***	7.12***	7.12***	7.25***	7.25***
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Akaike information criterion	9647	9647	9610	9610	9625	9625	9769	9769
Bayesian information criterion	9742	9742	9705	9705	9720	9720	9891	9891
Number of managers	473	473	473	473	473	473	473	473
Number of manager-vignette observations	2838	2838	2838	2838	2838	2838	2838	2838

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

⁺ $p < 0.10$.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

Based on the results of Table 2 (interaction models in Panel B), Figure 1 plots the predicted scores of the four manager-perceived outcomes by remote working status and gender-parenthood groups. It indicates that remote working has negative effects on manager-perceived outcomes for all groups, but the effects tend to be larger for non-mothers who have steeper slopes. This largely owes to the fact that among office-workers, fathers have the highest scores in all manager-perceived outcomes, closely followed by nonparent workers, compared to mothers. Among remote workers, workers tend to have lower yet similar manager ratings regardless of their gender-parenthood. This suggests that remote working status penalizes mothers to a smaller extent, lending partial support to Hypothesis 2b.

4.2 | Moderating Roles of Contexts of Remote Working Use and Policy

Next, we investigate whether and how the contexts of remote working use and policy moderate the effects of remote working on manager-perceptions for each of the four gender and parenthood groups (Figures 2–5). For each figure, Panel A plots the effects of remote working status by remote working use in organizations and Panel B plots the effect of government remote working policy for each worker group (for more detailed results, see Supporting Information S1: Tables A5–A8).

Figure 2 plots the context effects for mothers (for more detailed results, see Supporting Information S1: Table A5). As Panel A in Figure 2 shows, negative effects of mothers' remote working 2–3 days are found for most outcomes (relatively steeper slopes) when remote working is used by very few workers, only by mothers, or only by parents. In contrast, when remote working is used by most workers, the negative effects become smaller with

flatter slopes. Further analyses in Supporting Information S1: Table A5 show that there are significant and negative effects of remote working on all outcomes when remote working is used by few workers, or only used by mothers, or parents (except the effect on team spirit when only few workers use remote working). The negative effect is the largest in the context when it is mostly mothers that are using remote working, confirming our expectations. However, when remote working is used by most workers regardless of gender and parenthood status, the negative effects of remote working become much smaller in size (especially compared with the situation where remote working is only used by mothers) and nonsignificant except for being suggested for promotion. Similarly, Panel B in Figure 2 shows negative effects of mothers' remote working on most outcomes when government remote working policies only support mothers and parents, followed by no remote working policy, whereas the negative effects become much smaller when remote working policies support all workers. Further analyses in Supporting Information S1: Table A5 confirm the significance of strong negative effects of remote working when policies only support mothers or parents. In contrast, when there are no policies, the negative effects are smaller and only significant for commitment. When government policies support all workers, remote working is no longer a negative signal for any of the outcomes. Overall, the results are consistent with Hypothesis 3a and 3b.

Figure 3 plots the context effects for fathers (for more detailed results, see Supporting Information S1: Table A6). The results in Panel A indicate that the negative effects of fathers' remote working are most pronounced (and statistically significant, see Supporting Information S1: Table A6), displaying steeper slopes, when it is utilized by a small proportion of workers or primarily by mothers. Subsequently, when remote working is primarily used by parents, the negative effects remain substantial and significant although slightly diminished in comparison. In

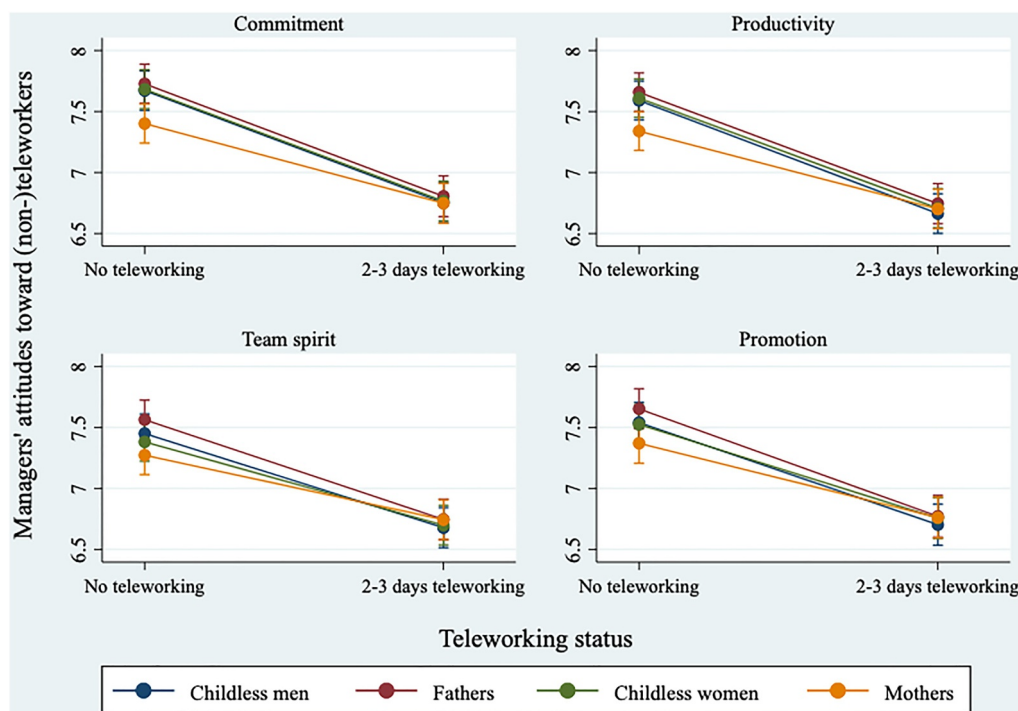


FIGURE 1 | Managers' attitudes toward (non-)remote workers by gender-parenthood groups. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gwa.70115)]

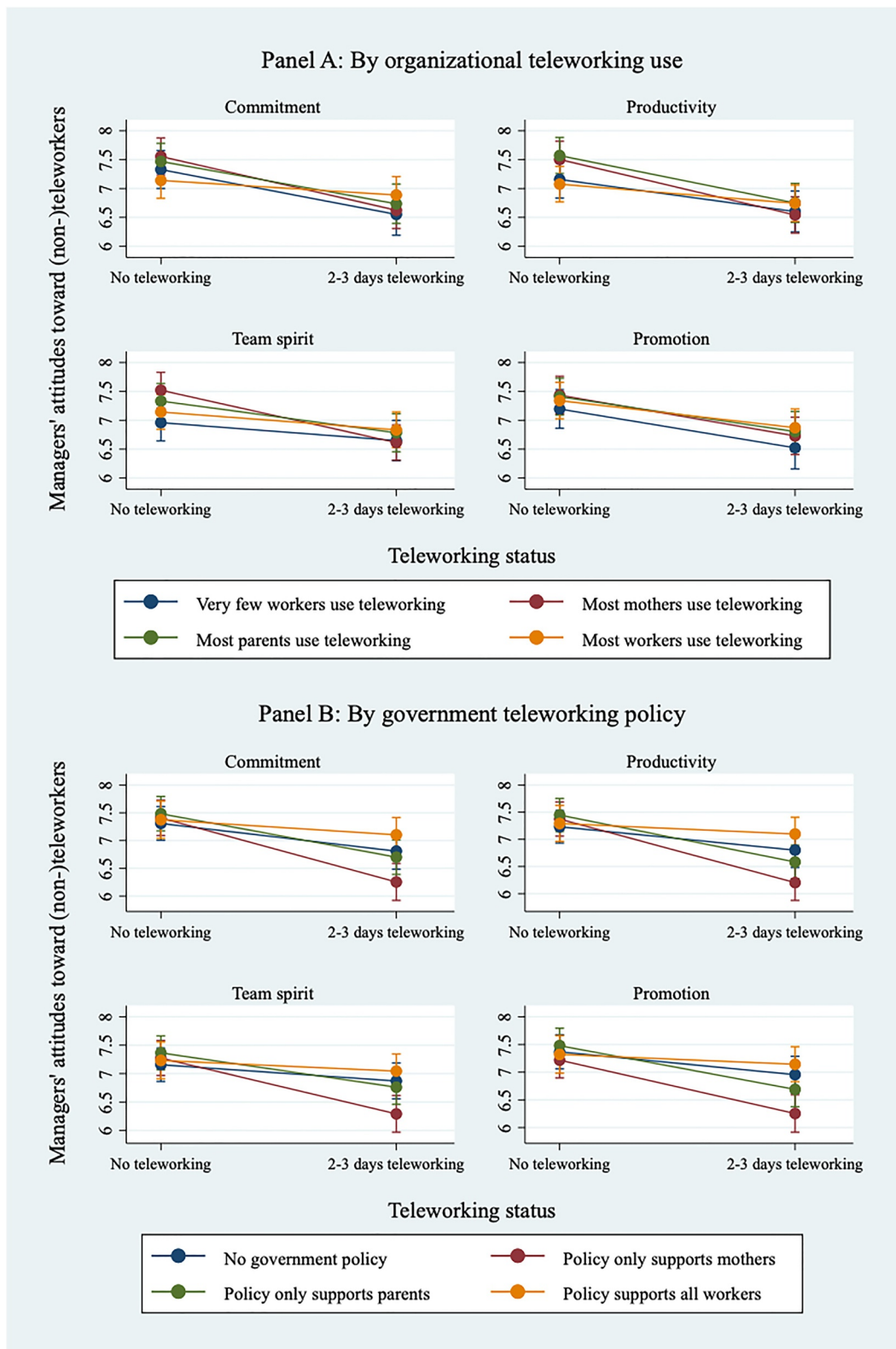


FIGURE 2 | Effects of remote working status on managers' attitudes toward commitment, productivity, team spirit and promotion by organizational remote working use and government remote working policy for mothers. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gwa.12111)]

contrast, the adverse effects are minimized and become nonsignificant (except for promotion), showing the flattest slopes, when remote working is adopted by most workers. Similarly, Panel B (national contexts) reveals that the negative effects of fathers'

remote working are the largest and significant (see Supporting Information S1: Table A6) when there are no policies, or even more so when policies only target mothers. The effects become smaller in size but remain significant when policies only support

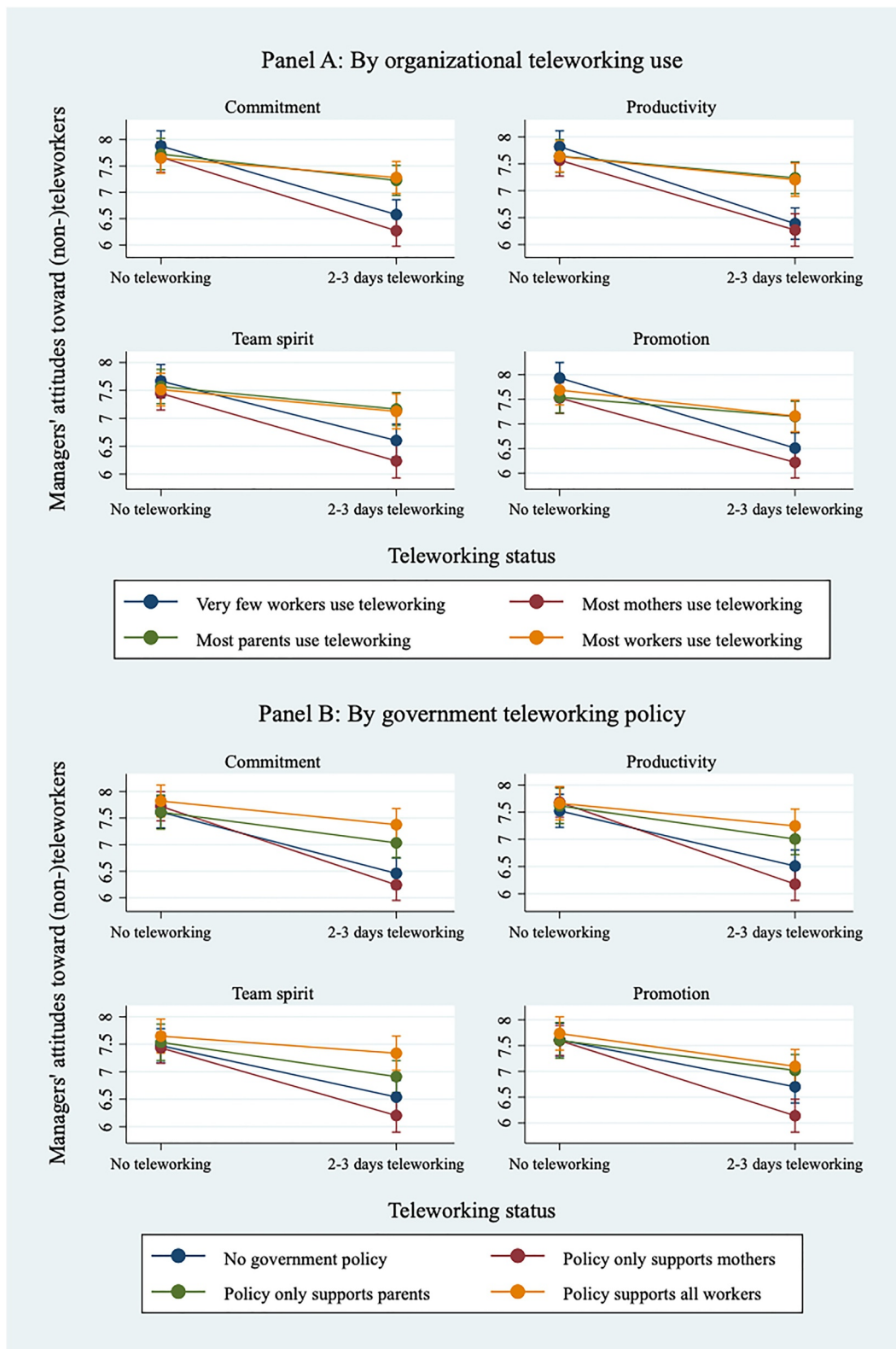


FIGURE 3 | Effects of remote working status on managers' attitudes toward commitment, productivity, team spirit and promotion by organizational remote working use and government remote working policy for fathers. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gwa.12115)]

parents but are nonsignificant (except for promotion) when the policies support all workers. Overall, these results generally support Hypothesis 3a and 3b.

Figure 4 plots the context effects for childless men (for more detailed results, see Supporting Information S1: Table A7). Panel A reveals that the adverse effects of remote working are most

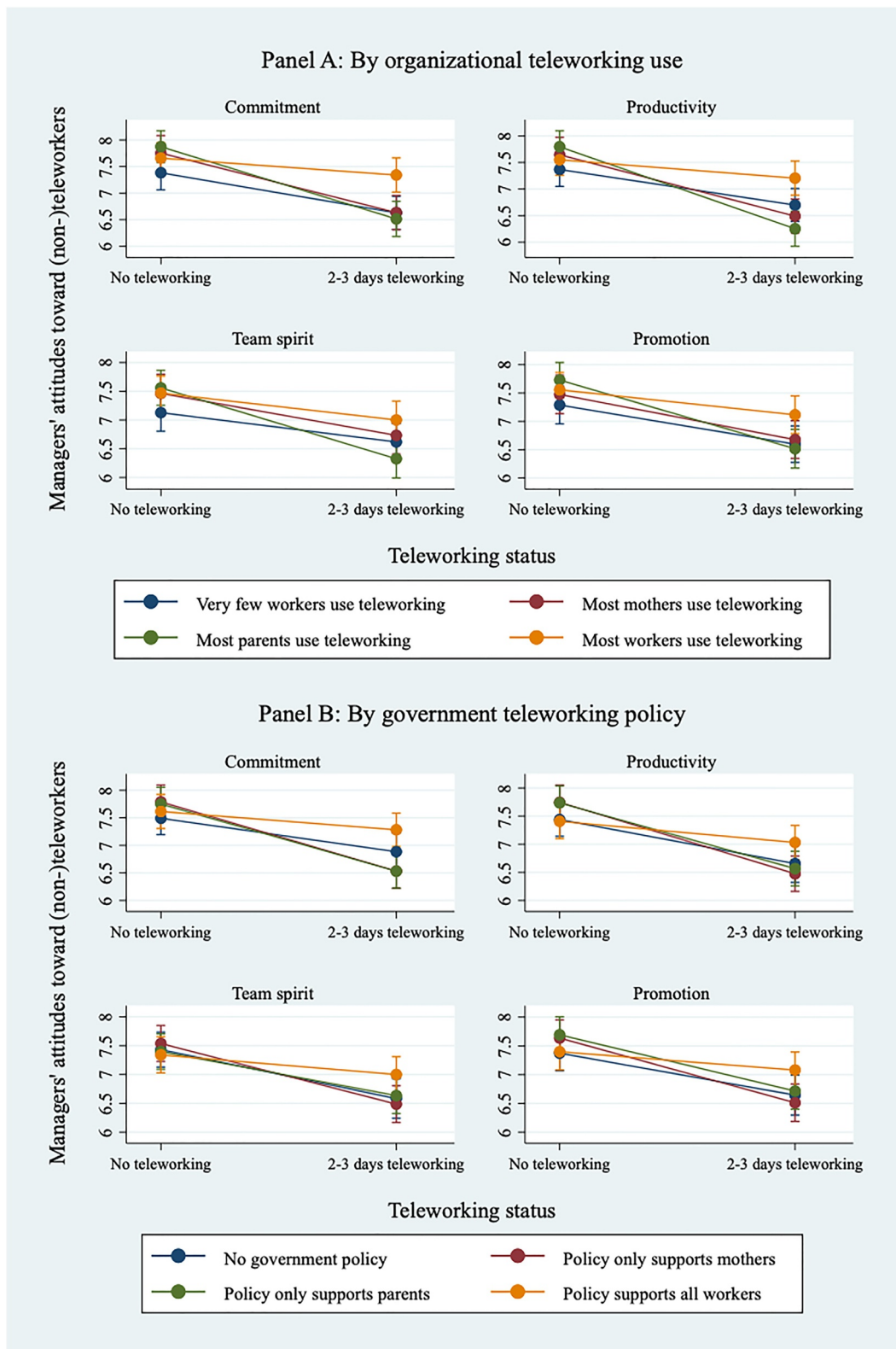


FIGURE 4 | Effects of remote working status on managers' attitudes toward commitment, productivity, team spirit and promotion by organizational remote working use and government remote working policy for childless men. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gwa.70115)]

pronounced, as indicated by the steepest slopes, when it is predominantly utilized by mothers, and interestingly, this time even more so when it is used mostly by parents. These effects are substantial and statistically significant, as demonstrated in Supporting Information S1: Table A7. When remote working is used

by few workers, the negative effects diminish in magnitude but remain significant. However, when remote working is adopted by most workers, the detrimental effects are further alleviated, evidenced by the flattest slopes, and becomes nonsignificant for most factors (except for team spirit and promotion). Panel B

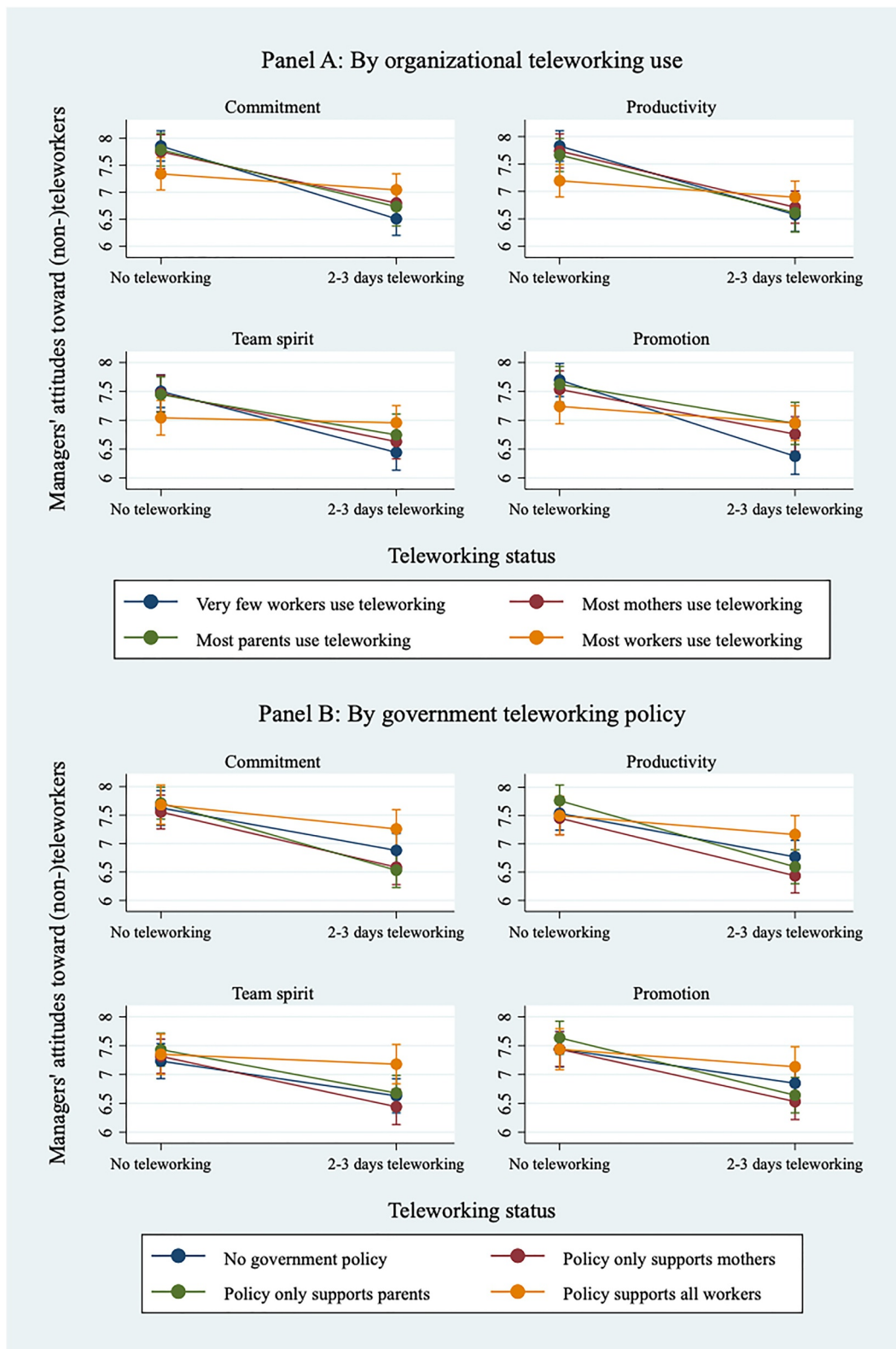


FIGURE 5 | Effects of remote working status on managers' attitudes toward commitment, productivity, team spirit and promotion by organizational remote working use and government remote working policy for childless women. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gwa.12115)]

demonstrates a consistent trend, highlighting that the negative impact of remote working is most pronounced when government policies exclusively focus on mothers or parents. The subsequent scenario, where no policies are in place, presents smaller yet

significant negative effects. Conversely, when policies extend their support to all workers, the negative effects further diminish, albeit still significant (with the exception of team spirit). These results generally support Hypothesis 3a and 3b.

Figure 5 plots the context effects for childless women (for more detailed results, see Supporting Information S1: Table A8). The patterns in Panel A show that the negative effects of remote working are most pronounced and significant (see Supporting Information S1: Table A8), as evidenced by the steepest slopes, when it is used by mostly mothers or parents. However, compared with childless men, the negative effect of remote working is even stronger when very few workers use it. In contrast, when remote working is used by most workers, negative effects become mitigated in magnitude and non-significant for all four outcomes. In addition, Panel B shows that the negative effects are most pronounced and significant (see Supporting Information S1: Table A8) when policies only support mothers and parents, closely followed by when there are no government policies. In contrast, the negative effects become much smaller in size and nonsignificant (see Supporting Information S1: Table A8), as indicated by the flatter slopes, when policies support all workers. These results partially support Hypothesis 3a and 3b.

5 | Discussion and Conclusions

Drawing on a national sample of managers in Singapore, this study uses a factorial vignette experiment to examine how managers perceive remote workers and whether their perceptions vary with remote workers' gender–parenthood status and in different remote working contexts. There are three important findings.

First, this study provides clear evidence that remote working has significant adverse impacts on manager perceptions of employees in terms of their commitment, productivity, team spirit, and promotion, holding all else constant, confirming the previous literature on flexibility stigma (Williams et al. 2013; Chung 2020; Chung and Seo 2024; Munsch 2016; Kasperska et al. 2024). Second, we find that the negative effects of remote working are more pronounced for non-mother groups, especially fathers, compared with mothers. This aligns with the femininity stigma perspective (Rudman and Mescher 2013), which suggests that fathers may be penalized more when deviating away from the expected roles as breadwinners. However, our study findings show that this result is largely because the stereotype of motherhood is strongly ingrained, such that the bias specifically associated with remote working diminishes in its overall impact and becomes muted (Correll and Ridgeway 2006; Pedulla 2018). As managers already hold biases against mothers' work capacity and motivation, remote working does not necessarily add additional bias that managers have against mothers' work capacities. On the contrary, as nonmother workers, especially fathers, are generally perceived more positively with regard to their commitment to work, their remote working—especially when linked with work–life balance connotations—is considered more of a violation against managers' assumptions about the worker (Rudman and Mescher 2013).

Most importantly, drawing from the cultural distance theory, status construction theory, and flexible working attribution theories, this study was able to provide contributions to better understanding around the importance of universal framing of flexible in shaping flexibility stigma. Our study shows that when

remote working was targeted to mothers, or parents, flexibility stigma was intensified for all workers, including mothers. Targeting remote working as a policy largely for mothers or parents amplifies its attribution as a tool primarily used to meet work–family demands, signaling to managers that it is antithetical to the goals of productivity (Leslie et al. 2012; Chung 2022). By associating remote working with mothers, it triggers managers' biases towards remote workers, based on the assumption that these workers have similar status and characteristics as mothers, a work group whose work commitment and capacities are generally questioned (Correll et al. 2007). In other words, when workers use a “mothers' policy,” managers assume that they will act like mothers, and will be unable to commit to their jobs.

When the policies apply to parents, without specifically singling out mothers, there are generally lower levels of flexibility stigma for both mothers and fathers because the focus is broadened to encompass both genders, which weakens the association of remote working with the images of motherhood. However, the flexibility stigma persists especially for mothers, most likely because the burden of childcare often falls disproportionately on mothers while fathers are expected to be able to engage in work-related tasks when remote working (Chung and Booker 2023; Kim 2020). Thus, targeting remote working only for mothers or parents is even worse, even for mothers, compared to when remote working was used by very few workers, and no policy was made available at the national level. For nonmothers, targeted policies only for mothers or parents were equally bad as having no policy available at all.

Conversely, universal policies that apply to all workers, and when most workers take up these policies, can minimize flexibility stigma for all workers, regardless of their gender or parenthood status. This pattern is consistent with the previous literature that shows that universal policies reduce stigmatization of policy users and can enhance trust and cohesion across populations/workers (Kelly et al. 2014; Larsen and Deigaard 2013; Titmuss 2006). The widespread use of remote working across all gender and parental status can help reduce the disadvantages of certain gender–parenthood groups, especially mothers who are already discriminated in the labor market and are more likely to use FWAs (Correll et al. 2007; Chung 2024).

In addition, there are also some differences between the influence of contexts at organizational and national levels. In particular, we note that the pronounced scarring effects observed for working mothers appear to be more sensitive to government policies directly targeting mothers. This pattern suggests that, at least in the Singapore context, national-level policies may exert a stronger influence on managerial perceptions and gender/parental biases than organizational policies alone.

Overall, these findings highlight the importance of “decoupling” remote working policy from specific gender–parenthood characteristics to address potential flexibility stigma in the future of work. Unfortunately, many governments have introduced the right to request flexible working specifically aimed at and only covering parents and carers (e.g., the European Work Life Balance directive). What this study shows is that

such policies may further exacerbate gender inequality patterns (Chung 2024), especially in the current context where more men are returning to the office in the fear of potential negative career outcomes while women remain working remotely (Sasso 2023; Chung and Yuan 2025).

The present study has several important limitations that warrant discussion. First, the manager sample was recruited through a reputable online panel provider rather than from a probability-based sampling frame of the Singaporean managerial population. Although the sample is diverse in terms of industry, gender, and organizational characteristics, its nonprobability nature means it may not be fully representative, potentially introducing selection bias, which could affect the generalizability of the findings. Second, the vignette design, although effective for establishing causality, necessarily simplifies real-world decisions. Respondents evaluated hypothetical employees in isolation rather than within ongoing supervisory relationships where personal knowledge, past performance, and relational dynamics would also matter. Future research could extend the current findings by incorporating longitudinal or multi-source designs or by examining how managers' own remote-working experience or parental status moderates their evaluations—variables unfortunately not collected here. Finally, the study captures perceptions at a single point in time (2023–2024), shortly after the large-scale shift to hybrid and remote work prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Attitudes may still be evolving as new working norms solidify. Replicating the experiment in different national contexts, over time, or with matched employee–manager dyads would help establish the boundary conditions of the observed gender- and parental-status biases and further clarify when and why flexibility stigma persists or diminishes in post-pandemic workplaces.

Taken together, this study makes important contributions to the discussions of flexibility stigma, the importance of framing policies, and how it can help shape flexible working attribution and the perceived status of remote workers. The results of the paper help to support a better understanding of potential ways to tackle bias against remote working through policy interventions. The expansion of remote working can help eliminate labor market inequalities by enabling more workers to take a more active part in the labor market. However, due to the prevailing norms around work and gender, it also has the potential to exacerbate inequality patterns if remote working is not rolled out in an appropriate manner. To improve labor market access and performance with remote working, without sacrificing the enhancement of diversity and inclusion, we need to ensure that remote working is provided to and encouraged for use by all workers, not just mothers or parents—both through policy and practice.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

¹ As there is no information about the nationally representative sample managers in Singapore as in many other countries, we used the information of people from the professional and managerial occupational class in census to construct weights.

² In the census, only information of the four variables is available.

³ This study focused on remote work for family purposes because prior research (e.g., Leslie et al. 2012) suggests that the career consequences of flexible work practices (FWPs) are not uniform but highly dependent on the attributed purpose of their use. Remote work for work purposes can be interpreted as a signal of productivity and organizational commitment in some cases (leading to career premiums), or as a signal of prioritizing personal life over work (leading to career penalties). Without distinguishing the intended purpose, respondents may project their own assumptions onto the scenario, introducing noise and bias into the results. By clearly specifying the family-related purpose, we ensure greater consistency in respondent interpretations, thus enhancing internal validity.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Supporting Information S1: gwao70115-sup-0001-suppl-data.docx.