

## European Population Conference 2022

### Extended Abstract

#### **Parenthood, Housework, Class, and Gender: How Do Different Families Cope With Domestic Responsibilities at Times of Crisis? A Case Study of Spain in The Covid-19 Context**

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This paper explores a “social class paradox” in work-life balance in Spain and its consequences within the Covid-19 pandemic context. The noted paradox stems from the fact that most resources designed to facilitate work-family reconciliation in Spain are used by middle-class families and employees with stable working conditions (Ferragina 2019, Fernández Kranz 2018, Lapuerta et al. 2011). Nevertheless, and despite the increasingly extended use of family policies, research has not proven that these families have achieved more egalitarian divisions of labour than working-class families. The latter often show equally or more egalitarian distributions of work than professionals from upper social classes. Even if we may expect middle-class families and the “educational elite” to be the front-runners of gender equality and equitable work-life balance, this is far from reality (Fernández-Lozano 2019, Abril et al. 2015, Deutsch 1999).

In the Spanish context, the “social class paradox” could have much to do with top professionals’ long working hours and the difficulties they face to reconcile high job demands with domestic responsibilities. These professionals would quickly learn that long hours are expected at their position and therefore also internalize such beliefs (Blair-Loy 2003). Earlier studies show that working-class families, and specially fathers, tend to express greater support for specialized gender roles, than their middle-class counterparts – they even resort to more essentialist ideas about the natural superiority of women for managing home and children (Deutsch 1999, Mason and Lu 1988, Usdansky 2011). They frequently have no choice, however, but to share parenting and domestic chores with their partner, since outsourcing care and domestic work are out-of-reach options for many due to economic reasons or lack of nearby informal support structures. Accordingly, even if these families, on average, do not adhere to egalitarian attitudes to the same extent as families from higher socioeconomic strata, their practises are often more egalitarian due to social structures in the sphere of work and family that act as potent counterforces (Usdansky 2011).

Available studies on the effects of the pandemic on gender and social inequalities in Spain show that some couples approached relatively egalitarian division of work during the lockdown, but that overall gender and social class inequalities increased (Seiz 2020, Farré et al. 2020). The abovementioned social class paradox in work-life balance could deepen in post-pandemic societies, because of increasing social

polarisation and generalised dependence on welfare states' social policies responses. There is namely a social class bias in the use of family policies, entailing that public investments often benefit relatively privileged workers. Middle-class couples seem to take greatest advantage of most work-family reconciliation measures targeted at both women and men, but this does not necessarily translate into gender balanced arrangements. Public discourses and policies often neglect the needs of working-class couples, many of which nonetheless attain egalitarian divisions of labour driven by need, even when they hold traditional beliefs about women's and men's distinctive abilities (Deutsch 1999, Pyke 1996). This paradox has been first described for the liberal welfare regimes (US and UK), but we do not know whether it also applies to other regimes like Spain. The purpose of our analysis is to examine whether it is also present in the Spanish case. We place focus on the Covid-19 pandemic context, which has exacerbated socioeconomic inequalities, work-family related dilemmas, and the need for policies that address the needs of those hardest hit by the economic downturn derived from the Covid-19 crisis. As in other Western countries, family policies could be very unevenly used across social classes, not necessarily fostering gender balance and social equality more generally. There is, for instance, evidence that first-cycle early childhood education and care services in Spain are often designed for full-time employees with regulated, stable, and standard schedules, leaving the needs of families in more vulnerable situations unmet (Save the Children 2019). The potentially unexpected effects of family policies that may reach, attract, and benefit families in different socioeconomic groups to very different degrees thus lie at the core of our research. We attempt to address a gap in scientific knowledge regarding Spanish society in this respect. By comparing mothers and fathers from different occupational and socioeconomic strata during the pandemic, we address the following objectives: To gain insights on how men and women in different class positions organised care and domestic work before and during the pandemic, we address the following objectives:

1. To understand how family policies have interacted with different social class positions to favour or discourage women's and men's work attachment and gender equality in everyday life
2. To understand how the experience of parenthood and work-life balance dilemmas intersect with migrant background, class, and gender.

### **Main contribution**

**Our paper contributes to existing knowledge on social stratification and family sociology by challenging the common notion that current family policies in Spain are gender neutral and targeted to those who need them most.** The research is both theoretically and methodologically innovative in several ways. First, we place our focus on **social class**, which is seldom taken into consideration in empirical analyses on work-life balance. Second, we go beyond class and adopt an **intersectional approach** (considering migrant background, class, and gender) to understand how multiple sources of discrimination and inequality generate different forms of vulnerability and interact with work-family policies. Third, we use

**couples as a unit of analysis** to understand women's and men's decision-making about the division of labour and use of work-family balance measures across socioeconomic groups. Fourth, we explore **gender-equality attitudes, beliefs, and practices and how these vary by socioeconomic status and access to work-family reconciliation measures**. Fifth, we make use of **nationally representative data specifically collected during the Covid-19 pandemic** to consider a context that is likely to have amplified socioeconomic differentials. Our goal ultimately is to identify what encourages or prevents egalitarian arrangements across families in different socioeconomic groups in contemporary Spanish society.

## Data

The study is based on commissioned data collected through private funding obtained during the pandemic (RecerCaixa). The research team, based in several Spanish universities, was in charge of the design of the questionnaire, which included both retrospective questions and items specifically designed to capture families' reality at the time of the survey. We conducted a **nationally representative survey** of 1,700 individuals and their partners in Spain during the month of July 2020 (coinciding with school holidays in Spain and the period following the strictest Covid-19 lockdown). This paper is based on a sub-sample of 1,451 individuals living with a partner.

## Hypotheses

To shed light on variations in the gender division of labour across socioeconomic groups and their interaction with the pandemic context and the family policy framework, we explore the following hypotheses:

1. We expect that the gender division of labour in families before and during the Covid-19 pandemic will have varied substantially by social class. Such variation will not only be contingent on attitudinal diversity, but perhaps more crucially, on differential positions in the labour market and regarding work-family reconciliation facilities.
2. We expect that middle-class men with gender egalitarian values will generally not have achieved egalitarian practices, due to employment constraints and the organizational patriarchal cultures typical of most professional occupations in Spain. Such trends could have been exacerbated by the pandemic context, as middle-class men maintaining their jobs could have faced increased pressure to uphold an intense dedication to paid work.
3. Working class men whose partners had atypical, unpredictable, and long working hours will likely have stepped into housework and/or childcare – especially when facing an increased domestic workload due to the pandemic –; provided that their working conditions allowed it and that support from other women of the extended family/close network was unavailable. Nevertheless, working-class couples where the male partner had long schedules and no access to flexibility measures may also have experienced hard backlashes in terms of gender equality. In such cases, the increased work-life balance

difficulties derived from the pandemic could have forced the female partner to leave paid work and devote her time entirely to unpaid labour, especially in the absence of supporting policies.

4. Regarding couples where no member was unemployed or forced to abandon the labour market during the pandemic, we expect women partnered with middle-class men to have been more prone to downshift their paid work hours and increase their domestic effort than those partnered to working class men. In middle class families, economic incentives to maintain two full-time jobs should namely have been lesser, while middle class men are likely to have encountered particularly large constraints to abandon very long working days.
5. The Spanish parental leave reform of 2019 represents a substantial institutional change towards stronger paternal involvement during children's first year of life. Among couples with children, we expect that working-class fathers employed in the formal economy and with relatively stable working conditions to have been more likely than middle-class fathers to make full use of paternity leave. This would be due to potentially lower opportunity costs and lesser orientation towards career advancement. Working-class fathers with temporary or very precarious types of work contract, however, should have been the least likely to take up full leave (or to use it at all).

### **Research design**

We conduct descriptive and logistic regression analyses to assess how social class, in interaction with work-life reconciliation policies, have affected partnered women's and men's propensity to maintain equal distributions of domestic work and care in the pandemic context. Our dependent variables are relative levels of housework and care involvement in couples, as well as related changes with respect to the pre-pandemic period. To measure change, we draw on information collected in the questionnaire regarding both the time of the survey (July 2020) and that before the onset of the pandemic. Our main independent variables are socioeconomic position during the pandemic (based on labour market and occupational status), working conditions, and work-family reconciliation measures available to workers. As control variables, we incorporate age; education; family structure; relative resources; changes in occupational status; gender values; outsourcing of domestic and/or care tasks; help from grandparents (or other relatives); children's attendance to care/educational services (e.g., toy library, day-care centre, city camp); difficulties to reconcile all daily obligations; current net monthly income; remote work; worries about the household not being able to make ends meet.

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