

## Why do Spanish fathers still make little use of the family-friendly measures?

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## **Why do Spanish fathers still make little use of the family-friendly measures?**

### *Abstract*

This article examines why Spanish fathers still make little use of the family-friendly measures (FFM) they are entitled to. Amartya Sen's Capabilities approach is applied to the analysis of this agency gap in work-family balance (WFB). Males wishing to balance work and family face a series of barriers that inhibit their use of FFM, creating a gap between the theoretical right to use these measures and the real ability to do so. We illustrate this broader issue with qualitative information collected from a Spanish sample (59 semi-structured interviews with 43 fathers, 6 salaried mothers and 10 HR managers). Three types of factors (conversion factors) that enhance/limit the capabilities of fathers to use reconciliation measures were considered: individual factors, policy and societal factors, and factors related to workplace organizational culture.

### *Keywords:*

Father involvement; work-family balance; family-friendly measures; capability; entitlement

## Introduction

Working fathers use family-friendly measures (FFM) less than working mothers. For example, according to a study carried out in the Madrid region (Fernández-Cornejo & Escot, 2018), the average number of days of leave (paid leave, unpaid leave, public holidays) after the birth of a baby was 16.8 for wage-earning fathers and 162.7 for wage-earning mothers. Once they were back in their jobs, 4.0% of fathers and 37.7% of mothers asked to switch from full-time work to part-time work or reduce their working hours; 3.8% of fathers and 9.4% of mothers asked to move to a more flexible schedule; and 3.2% of fathers and 7.5% of mothers requested a change to a shift that was more compatible with caring for a child.

This gender inequality in the time dedicated to child care and in the use of FFM is one of the direct and indirect causes of the motherhood labor penalty (Correll *et al.*, 2007, Hodges & Budig, 2010). In the aforementioned study by Fernández-Cornejo & Escot (2018), the following question was asked: "Has being a parent impaired or slowed down your options for development or professional promotion?" 72.6% of salaried fathers answered "not at all/very little", while only 33.8% of salaried mothers answered the same.

In addition, this insufficient use by men of FFM arises in a context of rising expectations and norms for men to become carers (Aumann *et al.*, 2011; Adler & Lenz, 2017). Indeed, we can highlight the increased presence of the "new father" or "superdad" (Lamb, 2000; Kaufman, 2013; Abril *et al.*, 2015) and the fact that a growing number of fathers are experiencing a great deal of work-family conflict as a result of the difficulties they encounter in balancing their work and family life (Aumann *et al.*, 2011).

The fundamental research question in this article is why working fathers still make little use of the FFM they are entitled to. This research is intended to identify and understand the factors that limit or expand the agency capacity of fathers to use existing FFM. The analysis of this agency gap in work-family balance (WFB) can be addressed by applying Amartya Sen's Capabilities framework (Sen, 1993; Hobson & Fahlén, 2009). According to this approach, men

wishing to balance work and family face a series of barriers inhibiting their use of FFM, creating a gap between the theoretical right to use these measures and the real ability to do so.

To examine this issue (which occurs globally), we have used a sample of Spanish participants. We carried out a qualitative analysis based on 59 semi-structured interviews conducted with 43 salaried fathers, 6 salaried mothers and 10 HR managers. Through these interviews we tried to find out how the salaried fathers justified the very limited use they made of the FFM existing in their companies, but also wanted to understand the perspectives of their female colleagues and directors of human resources. A sample of salaried fathers was used (mostly working in large companies), which allowed us to assume that all these male employees were working in organizations where there was a series of WFB policies that they could use. In this way we were able to focus attention not so much on the FFM existing in their companies, but on the analysis of how these fathers explained the limited use they made of them.

### **Spanish context**

Spain is a Mediterranean Latin Country that until the 1970s was a very traditional society with a largely traditional division of household labor and strong family values. However, since the end of dictatorship (1975), values and social norms (including gender norms) have been developing quite quickly to reflect those existing in the most advanced societies (Valiente, 2013; Fernández Cornejo *et al.*, 2016). An important milestone in the development of gender equality policies was the approval in 2007 of the “Law for Effective Equality Between Women and Men”. In addition, the current discourse on gender equality and public equality policies place more emphasis on the need to advance in the domain of the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men in domestic and care work. This coincides with a recent change in fathers' attitudes towards a more involved fatherhood (Abril *et al.*, 2015).

Achieving a work-family balance (WFB) is very difficult for parents. Working hours in Spain do not facilitate WFB (lunch is usually eaten later than in the rest of the world and the working day is usually extended excessively in the afternoon). These problems, combined with a chronic

lack of childcare facilities (for children under three), often mean that working parents face problems taking care of their children during the week. As the participation of men in domestic and care work is still low, this situation particularly affects working mothers. Often the way work is made compatible with childcare is to turn to inter-generational support (help from grandparents, particularly grandmothers) (Pérez-Caramés, 2014). For example, according to Fernández-Cornejo & Escot (2018), in the region of Madrid, 50.5% of the dual income couples surveyed received help (for child care) from the grandparents; 16.9% used paid domestic help; and 8.6% used the help of "other people".

At the time of conducting our research (October 2016 - May 2017) there was a notable gender gap in the parental leave system: mothers had a maternity leave of 16 weeks (paid at 100% with a ceiling; the first six weeks were compulsory and the other ten could be transferred to the father), while fathers had a paternity leave (non-transferable, paid at 100% with a ceiling) of only 13 days. In April 2019, a process of progressive equalization of paternity leave with maternity leave was approved (8 weeks of paternity leave were introduced in April 2019 and it is planned to extend these to 12 weeks in January 2020 and 16 weeks in January 2021). Wage earner parents also have "nursing leave" (two half-hour paid breaks per day until the baby is 9 months old or two additional weeks of leave paid by the company). They also have the right to "unpaid leave", which can be used until the child is 3 years old. Parents can reduce their working hours to care for a child until its twelfth year. They are also entitled to leave to take care of a seriously ill child under 18 years old. The rate of use of these options by fathers is much lower than for mothers. The only exception is paternity leave (Meil *et al.*, 2017).

With regard to the FFM offered by companies, the most used are those related to flexible working arrangements. For example, almost all the companies visited for our field work had flexible start and finish times. Other forms of flexibility that can be found in some companies are a compressed working week, remote working, teleworking, and shift changes. Most of the businesses visited had some form of child care assistance and some had measures for extending

paid family leave. Spanish legislation requires companies with more than 250 (50 since April 2019) employees to have a “Gender Equality Plan”.

Finally, it is worth remembering that Spain has a complex labor market characterized by structurally high unemployment rates and high job insecurity. These problems were accentuated during the 2008-2013 economic crisis. During the conducting of our field work (2016-17) the macroeconomic situation was one of gradual economic recovery, but without having returned to the 2007 employment levels (OECD, 2017).

### **Gap between theoretical rights and choice: Sen's capability approach**

It was Barbara Hobson who first proposed the application of the Sen's capability approach to the analysis of the agency inequalities in WFB (Hobson & Morgan, 2002; Hobson & Olah, 2006; Hobson & Fahlén, 2009; Hobson, 2011, 2013).

Sen's capability approach (Sen, 1989, 1999) is a normative theory (in the field of the theories of economic and social justice) based on the assessment of individuals' capabilities (Sugden, 1993). For Sen, the core issue is not only what individuals choose, but the choices that they would make if they had the capabilities to achieve the kind of lives that they have reason to value (Robeyns, 2003).

Sen's capability approach contains three fundamental elements: capability, functionings and resources. Sen starts from the idea that living may be seen as consisting of a set of interrelated “functionings”, made up of “beings” and “doings” (being adequately nourished, avoiding premature mortality, being able to read and write, being happy, etc.). Capability refers to the set of valuable functionings to which a person has effective access. Thus, a person's capability represents the effective freedom (or agency) of an individual to choose between different functioning combinations. If this capability set is expanded, the well-being of the individual can be increased.

Resources (commodities, entitlements) are often essential requirements to access functionings. Resources include both the characteristics of individuals and their resource endowments. There

is a special type of resource: conversion factors. These are resources, or factors, that allow a given resource to contribute to achieving functioning.

We can clarify the relationship between capability, functionings, resources and conversion factors with an example. How much a bicycle (a resource) contributes to a woman's mobility (functioning) depends on that person's physical condition (a personal conversion factor), the social mores including whether women are socially allowed to ride a bicycle (a social conversion factor), and the availability of decent roads or bike paths (an environmental conversion factor). These three conversion factors emphasize that it is not sufficient to know the resources a person owns or can use (the bicycle) in order to be able to assess the well-being that she has achieved or could achieve (the mobility); rather, we need to know much more about the person and the circumstances in which she is living. Sen uses “capability” to refer to an opportunity made feasible, and constrained by conversion factors (Crocker, 2008).

According to Barbara Hobson, this approach can be a useful theoretical framework for analyzing agency inequalities in WFB (Hobson, 2011), since this is an area where there seems to be a marked gap between fathers' theoretical rights to use FFM and their effective ability to use them.

In this research, the functioning is “being effectively able to balance work and family” (that is, being able to use FFM in the desired way). The resource to achieve this functioning is the availability of FFM in companies. As mentioned above, this research has used a sample of salaried fathers, mostly in large companies, which allows us to assume that all these male employees worked in organizations offering a series of FFM that could theoretically be used.

It is essential to identify what conversion factors would allow this resource (the availability of FFM) to be transformed into the functioning (being able to reach WFB). Sen distinguished three types of conversion factor: personal, social and environmental. From this typology, Hobson & Fahlén (2009) propose an adaptation that is better suited to the field of WFB. We use (with minimal modifications) this typology of Hobson & Fahlén (2009).

As shown in figure 1, we identify three types of conversion factor. The first is formed by individual factors. The ability of a person to transform the availability of FFM into their effective use may depend on demographic variables (gender, age, ethnicity, etc.), the economic restrictions of their household (earnings, partner's earnings, family network, etc.), and their own attitudes.

The second group consists of policy and societal factors. These include aspects related to public policies, social norms and the existing discourse in the media, which can directly or indirectly contribute to the individual (the father) feeling entitled to request the use of FFM. For example, an increase in the length of paternity leave and a normalization of the use of this longer leave would allow many fathers to feel entitled to more time off work after having a child.

The third group of conversion factors includes those related to the workplace's organizational culture. Many fathers who would be potential users of existing FFM do not request them because they feel that these measures "are not for them". As Burnett *et al.* (2013) say, "fathers perceive that, while family-friendly policies might in theory be available to 'parents' these are in practice targeted at working mothers". In contrast, working in a family-supportive and father-supportive company can mean that the capabilities of fathers to use FFM (and reach a WFB) will be expanded.

These three types of conversion factor can interact with each other. For example, a father with a high level of education, advanced attitudes towards involvement in child care, and a high-income partner (individual factors) is more likely to work in a father-supportive company (workplace factor), and this fact puts him in a better position to use the existing social rights (policy factor). This interaction between factors would allow this father to have a high sense of entitlement to make use, for example, of a reduced workday to take care of his baby.

Another aspect that we will highlight in the following sections is that most of the time gender impregnates or affects these conversion factors. In this same sense, and following Hobson & Fahlen (2009), an important aspect of the "sense of entitlement" is what they call "the cognitive

level”, or “subjective states of efficacy”. The latter is used for challenging and confronting gendered norms and expectations in one’s workplace and among friends and family (for example, rights and social rights and new policies and discourses can create capabilities for challenging gender norms).

[Figure 1 here]

## **Data and Method**

Between October 2016 and May 2017 we conducted 59 semi-structured interviews in Madrid (Spain). Forty-three were conducted with fathers with at least one child under 14 years of age. These interviews were complemented by 6 interviews with mothers with at least one child under 14 and 10 interviews with HR managers. The profiles of the participants in each of these groups can be seen in tables 1-3. To preserve the anonymity of the participants fictitious names are used to refer to them. No reference is made to the names of the companies, only to the business sector in which they operate.

The procedure to carry out the fieldwork was as follows. On the one hand, four large companies were contacted, belonging to four different sectors (insurance, technology consulting, department stores and public financial institutions). Once the participation of each of these companies was agreed upon, in the first phase the HR director (or a member of their team) was interviewed; and, in the second phase, the collaboration of fathers/mothers in the company with small children was sought. Parents interested in collaborating contacted the researchers directly by email and the researchers selected the participants (the only selection criteria was to have at least one child under 14 years old). In this way, for these four companies it was possible to obtain the dual perspective of the human resources department and the employees. Through this procedure, 44 of the 59 interviews were obtained.

On the other hand, 15 other interviews were conducted with parents and managers from other organizations, but in this second group there was no longer a link between HR director and employees.

The interviews were conducted in person at the work centers, during working hours.

[Table 1 here]

[Table 2 here]

[Table 3 here]

All interviews were transcribed and coded using the Atlas.ti 7 program. The coding process included multi-person inter-rater reliability checks of coding and interpretation. The results were analyzed following an abductive reasoning such as that suggested by Timmermans and Tavory (2012). This means moving back and forth between data and theory iteratively, and a process of discussion of the results by the four co-authors. For this reason, in each of the sections in which the results achieved are presented, a series of theoretical references concerning the analyzed phenomenon are also incorporated.

On the other hand, this process of qualitative analysis is complemented by the use of a series of descriptive data from a survey conducted in the Madrid region to 1785 couples with children aged under 7 (Fernández-Cornejo & Escot, 2018), which was carried out within the same research project.

## **Gender and individual conversion factors**

### ***Economic constraints***

Some fathers interviewed used economic arguments to justify a low use of FFM (in terms of figure 1, economic constraints belong to the group of individual conversion factors). According to the comparative advantage approach (Becker, 1965), differences in the level of human capital, skills, etc., could lead to a justification of some gender division of work (one member of the couple relatively specializing in the paid job and the other in the housework). This same type of

argument serves to justify who uses FFM the most. The idea is that FFM should be used to a greater extent by those who have a lower opportunity cost of using them.

This is the kind of reasoning that Daniel uses. Daniel (50 years old; insurance; professional; 1 child, 4 years old) and his wife have jobs with a similar status (he is a computer specialist, she is a doctor). He acknowledges that his wife has taken action (working fewer shifts, changing work centers) to be able to balance work and family life during the early years of his son's life, while he has not. Daniel maintains that this difference is for economic reasons:

(...) I think this has more to do with the financial situation and the profession. As far as the financial situation goes, my position within my company is higher than hers. On top of this, there is more flexibility in the medical field [hers]. It's easier to change jobs in her field than in mine (...)

This type of economic justification to explain not using FFM was quite common in the interviews conducted.

According to the Fernández-Cornejo & Escot (2018) study, in the region of Madrid, in 59.8% of dual-income households the father had a higher income than the mother (in 14.4% of them the mother had a higher income, in 25.8% of them the income was similar). This data may point to the fact that there are more fathers than mothers who would face a higher opportunity cost from using FFM. Despite this, in our interviews we have detected a certain tendency, on the part of some fathers, to use economic arguments as an excuse to justify an unequal use of FFM due to other causes.

For example, Carlos (35 years old; insurance; professional; 1 child, 2 years old), has a wife with a higher level of academic qualifications than him, a job of similar status and a higher hourly wage. After returning to work, she reduced her hours to two days a week to balance work and family. When asked why he did not reduce his hours, he answered that:

It was a financial issue, as ever. My wife earns more than I do. So if I worked shorter hours the financial impact would be greater. (...) We talked about it and, yes, it was on

the table... And, above all, apart from her schedule being lighter..., there was a financial issue, which unfortunately today is what governs everything; that is, the decisions had to be taken in this way. It was one reason why we adopted that decision.

In this case, Carlos is trying to justify his decision not to use the FFM measure in financial terms, although in this case, according to the opportunity cost argument, he should have reduced his working hours, not his wife.

On the other hand, when some fathers refer to other fathers in their environment, they sometimes identify this and demonstrate that the financial justification is not always the one that determines who uses FFM. In this sense, Jesus (41 years old; insurance; professional; 7-year-old, fraternal twins) says:

I had a conversation with my friends last week... She makes twice as much as him. He makes less money than she does, but the person who has cut down [on working hours] is the woman. And I said: "Man, why don't you reduce your working day if you earn less!". But he doesn't want to... It's like "no, she doesn't want me to", "it impossible...", "not sure what the manager would say about that...". It's the typical conversation... Well, your boss doesn't have a say in this. You just go to human resources and say "Hey, I'm here to take the cut in hours", and that's it!

### *Normalization process of fathers as carers*

The fathers analyzed make, in general, less use of FFM than their female partners. However, it is observed that, in general, these fathers maintain the ideal of the father being involved in child care. That is to say, the interviews carried out reveal the growing social norm of being an involved father. This is what Kvande & Brandth (2017) call the "normalization process" of fathers as carers.

According to the Fernández-Cornejo & Escot (2018) survey, in the region of Madrid, 81.5% of fathers "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement that "A man can be as capable as a woman of taking care of their baby and connecting emotionally with the child".

In the interviews conducted, statements about the need to be present in all stages of their children's development have been quite frequent. For example, José Manuel (42 years old; technology consulting; professional; 1 child, 8 years old) reflects:

I discovered, out of necessity, that it is best to be with your child, so you get to see your baby growing up. You get to know them better. The child turns to me, looks into my eyes, and I know what's going on right away. And that cannot be said by just any father. It helps you to better understand the needs of your child in the future.

This more salient and psychologically central status of an involved father is one of the aspects analyzed in the literature on a father's identity, following the approach seen in Stryker's identity theory (Stryker, 1968, 1987; Olmstead *et al.*, 2009; Habib, 2012).

This greater prominence of the involved father has given rise to the figure of the "new father" or "superdad" (Fox *et al.*, 2009; O'Brien & Moss, 2010; Gregory & Milner, 2011; Kaufman, 2013; Romero-Balsas *et al.*, 2013). In the case of the United States, Kaufman (2013) differentiated between three types of father: "old dads" (traditional fathers), "new dads" (fathers who seek a better WFB), and "superdads" (fathers who significantly adjust their work in order to spend more time with their families). One of her conclusions was that "there has been a particularly strong shift in men's attitudes that has brought convergence (with mothers) in beliefs about work and family roles". In the case of Spain, Romero-Balsas *et al.* (2013), Abril *et al.* (2015), and Seiz *et al.* (2019) use similar categories of fathers.

In this research we classified the 43 fathers interviewed into committed (20.9%), intermediate (65.1%) and traditional (14%) fathers. Two criteria were used: the statements made in relation to attitudes towards fatherhood (and gender equality), and the participant's own behavior. Committed fathers are those who manifest a clear attitude and inclination to be fully involved

fathers, which is usually reflected in their behavior. Intermediate fathers also state that they attach importance to the social norm of being involved fathers, but not in such a high priority way as committed fathers. An improvement in the conversion factors is very likely to have an important impact on the use of FFM made by this group of fathers. Finally, traditional fathers maintain more traditional gender attitudes. In any case, the pressure of the social norm of being an involved father seems to act, to a greater or lesser extent, on all of them.

### ***Essentialism, attachment, gatekeeping***

In the previous section it was mentioned that 81.5% of the fathers "agreed/strongly agreed" with the statement that a man may be as capable as a woman of taking care of their baby. However, one aspect that we have seen in our interviews is the persistence of essentialist beliefs in this matter. On several occasions, reference is made to the fact that, by nature, women are better prepared than men to care for a baby. This belief could be a factor preventing some men from requesting the use of FFM (see "gender attitudes" in figure 1).

For instance, Aitor (41 years old; insurance; managerial; 2 children, 11 and 6 years old) argues that:

(...) Despite the measures, campaigns, etc., the weight of history, of thousands of years, still means that this is the case. The men went hunting and the women stayed in the cave, gathered. This is not something that we only have now, it is in our DNA, it has been the case for thousands and thousands of years and that's very difficult to reverse.

Charles and Bradley (2009) argue that the gender-essentialist ideology has proven to be extremely resilient even in the most liberal-egalitarian of contexts.

Where could these essentialist beliefs arise? According to Kimmel (2017), and also to the Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), it is not so much that the differences (essential, natural) between men/women explain the inequalities we see in results (in power, in gender roles, etc.), rather the opposite. The starting point is that there are inequalities that manifest themselves in the

performance of different roles and, in an attempt to explain why these roles exist, we make essentialist attributions ("because men and women are different ..."). Perceivers infer that there is correspondence between the types of action people engage in ("there are many women in caring activities") and their inner dispositions ("so women are better caretakers"). Thus, gender stereotypes follow from observations of people in typical social gender roles—especially men's occupancy of the breadwinner and higher status roles (with perceivers attributing agentic traits to them) and women's occupancy of homemaker and lower status roles (with perceivers attributing communal traits to them).

Julio (36 years old; department stores; operations; 1 child 2 years old) makes the following reflection:

It's true, and I have to admit that my wife does more at home than I do. Because that's the way it is. I believe that men are like that. It seems a bit sexist, but it is the reality, because as much as I try to help her, no matter how much I do, I look at the situation and say "it takes my wife a couple of hours to do what it would take me a whole day to do".

Julio observes that his partner does more activities at home related to the housework and care of their daughter. In an attempt to explain this inequality, he elaborates an essentialist explanation ("by nature women are different to men"). Going a little further, some discourses of this type may be reflecting a situation of cognitive dissonance. Indeed, the participant is confronted in the interview with an uncomfortable or dissonant thought ("I use FFM less than my partner, that's not right"); in response, the participant reacts by using essentialist reasoning ("but it is because they are better at care and domestic tasks"). In this way (by changing his attitude or way of thinking in this area) he manages to mitigate the dissonance or discomfort that his behavior generated in him.

These essentialist arguments seem to be somewhat less frequently used by the women in our sample than the men. For example, for Almudena (33 years old; insurance; professional; 1 child, 1 year old), it is not a question of natural differences but of who generates the attachment:

Without a doubt, honestly, my opinion previously, and now, is that kids love the person who takes care of them. Why did children use to love their mother more? Because she was the one who stayed with them.

Finally, there are also some fathers who refer to gatekeeping behaviors of their partners (Schoppe-Sullivan *et al.*, 2015) to justify why they are less involved than they would want to be in the care of their children (which, ultimately would encourage them to make less use of FFM). This is the point made by Adrián (38 years old; insurance; professional; 1 child, 3 years old):

She is more dedicated..., because I think she assumes greater responsibility. Things have to be done in the way that she believes they should be done and how she does them. That is why she assumes, not control but supervision, she is more on top of what is being done, so she spends more time with him.

Adrián feels some frustration because he perceives that his partner creates a series of barriers preventing him from participating actively in a series of basic decisions related to his son.

Some mothers also recognize that gatekeeping situations may occur to some degree. For example, Eulalia (38 years old; technology consulting; professional; 2 children, 8 and 4 years old) recognizes that there is an inertia (social norms) that makes her deal with the basic decisions concerning her children, and that perhaps she has not given her husband the option to deal with these issues:

I admit that I have that inertia in taking care of what the children have to take with them, if they have an event today, and these kinds of things. Sometimes I wonder whether if I didn't do it, my husband would do it. Maybe he doesn't do it because he takes it for granted that I will do it, but to be honest, I have never given him the opportunity to it.

One interesting aspect that we have detected in several interviews is that some fathers respond to gatekeeping (as well as other barriers) by adopting an attitude that we could call "self-indulgent" or "easy going". Adrián commented in this regard the following:

In other words, yes, (...) her decision has more weight more than mine, so sometimes I just let her do it.

Indeed, it seems that some fathers resign themselves to playing a secondary role in the care of their children (and in the use of FFM), on the grounds that "I have no choice".

### *Ideals of masculinity*

Another individual aspect which may be influencing the use of FFM by fathers is their type of masculinity. For example, having a masculine identity marked by the so-called "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 1995) may negatively affect the ability of some fathers to use FFM. The opposite could happen with those who have an "inclusive masculinity" (Anderson & McCormack, 2016).

The theory of precarious manhood (Vandello & Bosson, 2013) posits that manhood is seen as a precarious social status that is difficult to achieve, tenuously held, and something that must be earned and maintained through publicly verifiable actions. Because of this, men (especially heterosexual and cisgender men) experience anxiety over their gender status, particularly when that gender status is uncertain or challenged (this is related to the concept of homophobia from Anderson & McCormack, 2016). This can lead to a variety of negative behaviors, one of them affecting the domain of WFB. Indeed, some men could avoid using FFM in order to not look weak or effeminate.

We have collected some reflections from HR managers in this regard.

Rodrigo (HR manager; stores; medium):

As I said before, for many men, men working part time is not totally acceptable. It looks like you have a lack of ambition.

Katinka (HR management team; technology consulting; large):

What I think happens is something like: "Dude, how come you are working part time?

You're a henpecked husband! What does your wife do?" That's what's going to happen.

These two HR managers notice that, among some members of the male staff in their companies, there is sometimes a fear of being seen as "not much of a man" (not very ambitious, weak, etc.) due to using, for example, a reduction in working hours.

In contrast, Almudena observes in her environment (professionals with medium-high socio-economic status and high level of education) that the type of masculinity is changing, although she recognizes that this change may not be affecting all social groups with the same intensity.

Yes, I see that lack of shame in men; they are delighted with their children and there is no stigma of "ah, he is henpecked if he is playing with his children", or "if he changes diapers", "if he is the one who feeds the kids". And I think that is biased by the population in which I move. I don't think that's the case for all of Spain, unfortunately, but it's a seed and I think it's the trend.

### ***Social class***

Socio-economic level or social class is a factor determining the capability of many workers to balance work and family life (Williams *et al.*, 2013). Normally, this agency is lower at both ends of the labor hierarchy. On the one hand, managers are expected to arrange their lives to ensure unlimited availability to work unencumbered by family responsibilities (Williams *et al.*, 2013). On the other hand, unskilled or low-status workers, in a context of very low salaries, are often under pressure to work long hours and thus obtain sufficient income for their household, for example by moonlighting in the informal sector. In both cases, the use of FFM, such as the reduction of working hours or unpaid leave, are perceived as very costly (in terms of slowing down professional careers, for the former, and not receiving the basic income needed to survive, for the latter).

An example of this second case is Juan Manuel (44 years old; department stores; operations; 2 children, 1 and 16 years old). Juan Manuel works 40 hours in maintenance tasks in a department store, but he usually works between 50 and 60 hours a week, because he also does repairs in other homes. As he says, "many people working in the store have two jobs". He also notes that:

I mean, if they tell me that I can ask for a reduced working day, yes, of course I would like it. However my wages would be badly affected...

He does not intend to use a reduction in working hours to take care of his one-year-old son because he feels great pressure to obtain income for his family. His wife lost her job of a similar status to his and now works as a part-time domestic employee, with a lower salary than before. As access to daycare is expensive, Juan Manuel argues that his partner should not work long hours and, in exchange, he should work more:

Using a nursery, is money that..., although we have a hard time [financially], it is not worth her working so much. Imagine, you're going to work in a house for 400 or 500 euros, if I have to pay, maybe 400 euros for the daycare, then I think it's not worth the mother not being with the child for 100 euros; at least in this way the child will be with his mother.

Note that in this case there is an interaction between a traditional gender ideology (when there are financial restrictions that prevent access to daycare services, it is usually the mother and not the father who reduces her dedication to work in order to have more time for childcare), financial restrictions, and the limitations of family policies in the region of Madrid.

## **Gender and policy and societal factors**

### ***Rights and social rights***

Hobson (2011) and Browne *et al.* (2004) argue that rights that become social rights are more easily converted into capabilities (see figure 1). One of the ways in which this happens is through the normalization of the use of a certain right. Among all the FFM cited above, the only

ones normalized by our male participants (in the sense that they are used by most fathers and conceived as "normal" practices) are paternity leave (two weeks prior to 2017) and flexibility in start/finish times.

### *Low capability for using long childcare leave*

The take-up rate of paternity leave is high, but the problem is that the paternity leave is very short (15 days when the fathers interviewed were fathers, 8 weeks in 2019). Although fathers have other mechanisms to take the leave (sharing maternity leave, using unpaid leave, etc.), the only socially normalized mechanism is the use of paternity leave.

According to the Fernández-Cornejo & Escot (2018) survey, only 2.7% of salaried fathers were on leave (paid and unpaid leave, public holidays) for more than 30 days. So in Spain it was very uncommon for fathers to take long periods of leave. Therefore, one conclusion in this regard is that fathers in Spain had a low agency to decide to take more than 30 days' leave for child care (enjoying a long period of leave was not perceived as a social right).

This is what seems to be indicated in this statement from Juan Manuel (44 years old; department store; operations; 2 children, 1 and 16 years old), referring to the moment that his second son was born:

Yes, I took the thirteen days of paternity leave, plus the two days of the birth, plus my vacation days, to help the mother for a month. I worked with human resources programming it. I said: "Hey look, I want to do this with my vacations". They said: "ok". I didn't have any problems. I said what day I would take my vacations and then put the fifteen days after my vacation.

Juan Manuel considered it undeniable that he would use the paternity leave, which he extended with 15 days of vacation, being off for almost twice as long as the average father. However, it seems that the possibility of taking more time off was something that did not fit into his choice options.

The following question was asked in the Fernández-Cornejo & Escot (2018) survey: Would you be in favor of the duration of paternity leave being progressively equalized to that of maternity leave? 90.4% of the fathers surveyed were in favor of this proposal. The fathers who participated in our interviews were also very much in favor of the equalization of leave, although many of them did not previously have a clear idea of the content of this proposal. However, others were familiar with this proposal and, in addition, made use of egalitarian arguments to defend it. This was the case for José Antonio (36 years old; technology consulting; professional; 1 child, 5 years):

I think it should be mandatory for the time to be the same for both maternity and paternity leave. If not, the woman will still be the one who has to take care of the child and that kind of thing and the father who has to work. And then, when hiring, I hire the man because I know he will continue working, that even if he has children he will continue working. No, no, that is, it should be clear that the rules should be the same for everyone, and that if someone wants to have children, the effect should be the same for both men and women.

### ***Media and social sensitivity and support***

As mentioned when explaining the Spanish context, in Spain (and in many other countries) the discourse on gender equality and public equality policies currently place more emphasis on the need to advance in the domain of equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men in domestic and care work. However, in Spain the media/public debate could play a much greater role than it does today. There is certain media and social support for the equalization of parental leave and, in general, the inclusion of men in the use of FFM, but, in a difficult economic, social and political context, it seems that progress in this area is not seen as urgent. That is to say, the debate exists but has a rather low profile.

Some participants in our study do not perceive this social trend. In Lorenzo's opinion (HR management team; insurance; large):

That social movement [fathers as carers] is not perceived here. I do not see it in society, nor in the media, nor in education, which I believe is the fundamental driving force. I think it's more a personal matter. But I cannot see such a social movement, certainly not as being powerful.

For his part, Jordi (37 years; technology consulting; professional; 2 children, 6 and 4 years) believes that more awareness campaigns should be run on these issues:

(...) At the government level, it might be necessary to encourage people to believe that anyone has the right to stay at home with their children, not only the woman. Of course, they both have a right, but it seems that for the woman it is not a right but an obligation.

(...)

This low profile social and media support for "fathers as carers" does not help fathers to increase their subjective states of efficacy which would allow them to challenge and confront gender norms and expectations in their workplace and among friends and family.

## **Gender and workplace**

### ***Corporate culture and the ideal worker***

The culture of the company and its greater or lesser sensitivity towards the WFB needs of male workers can constitute an important conversion factor (see figure 1). In this sense, the influence of the ideal worker norm, or the work devotion schema (Blair-Loy, 2003), is a very significant aspect of that culture. According to this norm, the ideal worker is an individual totally committed to their company, unencumbered by family responsibilities.

In the Fernández-Cornejo & Escot (2018) survey, 45.6% of the salaried men surveyed agreed/strongly agreed with the idea that the statement "the view in my company is that work should take priority in a person's life" represents the philosophy or beliefs of their companies.

According to Williams *et al.* (2013) the work devotion schema is both coercive (many workers feel forced to comply) and seductive (workers may also believe that a strong work ethic helps

form their sense of self and self-worth). In this context the use of FFM could be interpreted by superiors, co-workers, and even the employees themselves as a signal that the employee is violating the work devotion schema and is therefore morally lacking. This can lead to the “flexibility stigma”, considering those using FFM as less productive and less committed to the company. This problem can particularly affect fathers who use FFM, since, in addition to that mentioned, these fathers can be seen as “atypical men” (Moss-Racussin *et al.*, 2010; Rudman & Mescher, 2013; Fernández-Cornejo *et al.*, 2019; Fernandez-Lozano *et al.*, 2019).

Juan Antonio (around 40; technology consulting; professional; 3 children, 3, 5, 7 years) presents seductive work devotion schema attitudes:

(...) In private companies, those who are promoted and earn more, etc., are the ones who devote all their time to the company, because to become a director of this company you have first had to show your total commitment (...). Of the new managers who are promoted through organic growth, 99% are men and women who have prioritized their professional life over their personal life, and anyone who says otherwise is lying.

Juan Antonio believes that he has shown an attitude of total dedication to his company, and that this is the attitude that must be shown if he wants to have a good career. However, his company has experienced the effects of the economic crisis and his salary has been reduced by 20%. Juan Antonio feels mistreated by his company, and that attitude of disappointment and frustration seems to be making him “discover” other areas of his personal life, such as spending more time with his three daughters and getting involved in caring for them. In any case, he tends to display a rather negative attitude towards the parents (and, in particular, towards the mothers in his working environment) who choose to reduce working hours or take unpaid leave:

The problem often arises when you have four women who take maternity leave, not because they are women, but because there are four more people who supposedly stop having time flexibility. In this case the rest of the members of the team become overloaded.

Jordi (37 years; technology consulting; professional; 2 children, 6 and 4 years) is a committed father who decided to take a reduction in working hours, which he has maintained for a year and a half. He asked for this because in his department they rejected his request to leave at an earlier time (not to do overtime). He has just moved to a new department and, although he has had to forego the reduction in working hours, he now has the flexibility he needs some days a week, depending on his wife's working shifts (she is a midwife in a hospital). The reaction of his manager is an example of "flexibility stigma":

(...) When my boss saw me for the first time, after having requested the reduction, he said "What a nerve!". I asked "Why?", the response being "Yeah right, now you will be in your little house". I said: "If I take this, it is not exactly to spend every afternoon in my house twiddling my thumbs".

His decision also surprised some people in his environment:

In my residential area, with my neighbors, many are businessmen, many were surprised (...). One told me: "Really! You don't want to keep getting promoted at work?" (...) I can see that they have all the same vision and were surprised (...). And yet, for example, one of them told me that his wife is using a reduction in working hours, as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

Something that most fathers say is that whether or not there is sensitivity to the needs of fathers for a WFB depends largely on the manager they have. Some also point out that in their companies, good intentions coming from the human resources department do not always reach the middle managers. For example, Jesus (41 years old; insurance; professional; 7-year-old twins) points out that:

It depends on who you're with. I've been here for three years. Now I'm with a person who facilitates the balance, but previously I was with another person who did not facilitate it. Then you see it from above, and all the dialogue is always from above. The statements that are made refer to "balance", "great place to work", "family-friendly

company"... We even have certifications, but as it goes down the hierarchy it doesn't take root. Then, a boss arrives who says, "I don't want this, I want to have people here" and human resources do not do much to enforce it.

Another drawback that seems to discourage several of the fathers interviewed from taking a reduction in working hours or longer leave is that this decision could harm their colleagues, who may experience an increase in their workload. These observations suggest that an adequate replacement policy is not carried out in their companies. A good corporate policy in this area can be an important factor in increasing the agency capacity of many fathers (and mothers) to use the FFM.

Finally, facing the problem of flexibility stigma, some fathers may manifest a certain degree of "self-indulgent" or "easy going" attitudes; that is, settling for not being the ones who use FFM (that will often be used by their partners), on the grounds that they have no other choice. This is what Elena (37 years; technology consulting; professional; 2 children, 4 and 0 years) seems to point out:

I don't know, of course, it's a very personal issue (...), but I get the feeling that men are very comfortable too: "I cannot do this".

### *Discourse of HR managers*

First, one aspect that has been perceived in most interviews with HR managers is a certain insistence that gender inequalities are issues that "are in society". This is what Lorenzo (HR management team; insurance; large) transmits:

That is a reflection of society, no more and no less. So, even if you say, "you can use it" [FFM by men], "there is no problem", in the end whether men use them or not will depend on the domestic organization they have...

Likewise, there is a certain degree of awareness among HR managers of the need to make progress in equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men in the use of FFM. This

awareness seems greater in large companies and in those where the percentage of female staff is higher. However, the very competitive environment (emerging from an economic crisis) in which the companies whose managers were interviewed were operating may be preventing this sensitivity from being expressed in ambitious policies on promoting equal sharing of responsibilities.

Most HR managers were personally in favor of the proposal to equate paternity and maternity leave, although as HR managers they sometimes showed more caution. For example, Jaime (director; supermarket; medium), pointed out "it's very good, but at what cost to the company?"

Of the ten companies whose managers were interviewed, seven were large companies (usually more likely to have policies to promote equal sharing of responsibilities for care). Of these seven companies, in three of them some kind of campaign to promote equal sharing of responsibilities had been run, or was in the process of being designed at that time. This type of good practice, insofar as it encourages men to use FFM, can contribute to generating role models among male workers. In this sense, Oscar (around 35 years old; public financial inst.; professional; 1 child, 2 years) reflects:

I think so. In fact, I took the reduced working hours because the person who I shared an office with in my previous job did it. And, you know, once you see it you believe that "yes you can". I think that without such a close example I would probably not have taken it, really. I don't think so.

## **Discussion**

The fundamental research question in this article was why Spanish fathers still make little use of the FFM they are entitled to. To answer this question we used a qualitative methodology and a sample of 43 Spanish working fathers, 6 working mothers and 10 HR managers. This analysis was complemented by the use of data from a survey conducted in the Madrid region to 1785 couples with children aged under 7. Summing up what the literature on

this issue maintains and the analysis carried out for our Spanish sample, we consider that this inequality is derived from the interaction of the following five factors:

- A context of rising expectations and norms for men to become carers (normalization process of fathers as carers).
- The persistence of essentialist beliefs that women are better prepared (by nature) than men to care for a baby, in a context in which, in general, the gender-essentialist ideology has proven to be extremely resilient.
- A "certain low profile" for social support for the involved father and for men using FFM, in the context of the recent economic crisis, high unemployment and economic insecurity, as well as other social problems and political conflicts. On the one hand, the media/public debate supporting fathers as carers exists, but it is not perceived as a priority issue (unlike in countries such as Sweden, Norway or Iceland). On the other hand, some fathers who would like to better balance their work and family lives, on encountering various barriers that hinder the fulfilment of that desire, end up adopting a "self-indulgent" or "easy going" attitude ("I have no choice...").
- Some government inaction on policies that facilitate WFB (for instance, chronic lack of childcare facilities for children under three, wrong time zone, etc.) and, above all, the maintenance of a parental leave system that offers a non-equalitarian role model.
- Employers (HR managers), on the one hand, are moderately aware of the need to advance equal sharing of responsibilities, but, on the other, have a perception that facilitating the use of FFM by fathers can lead to higher costs, in a context of intense business competition. All of this is framed in a gendered corporate culture where the norm of the ideal worker is still deeply rooted.

All this contributes to maintaining a marked gap between fathers' theoretical rights to use FFM and their effective ability to use them. Or, to put it another way, this set of factors tends to reproduce a non-egalitarian model in the distribution of the use of FFM, where it is still mothers

who assume most of the responsibilities for child care (and the use of FFM), thus encouraging the motherhood penalty and statistical discrimination (Fernández Cornejo *et al.* 2018).

Kaufman (2013) notes that “the problem lies in the fact that many dads see conflict between work and family as ‘personal troubles’ rather than structural and systemic constraints”. Indeed, the factors just discussed reveal these structural constraints. However, some of these can be removed, so we consider that it is very important to advance in terms of generating role models (visibility and normalization of fathers using FFM). In our view, three measures that could contribute to this progress are: first, to promote proactivity among companies in this field (visibility of the fathers who choose to balance work and family, awareness campaigns and good practices in this domain); second, the development of government awareness campaigns in this area; and, third, carrying out a reform of the parental leave system that equates paternity leave with maternity leave (equal and non-transferable parental leave for the father and the mother) (Castro & Pazos, 2016).

This could allow many fathers to feel more entitled to use FFM and to achieve a greater degree of WFB. That is, they would have some conversion factors that could allow them to be in a better position to challenge the rules (in the family, with friends, in the workplace, etc.) that still limit their ability to choose to balance work with family.

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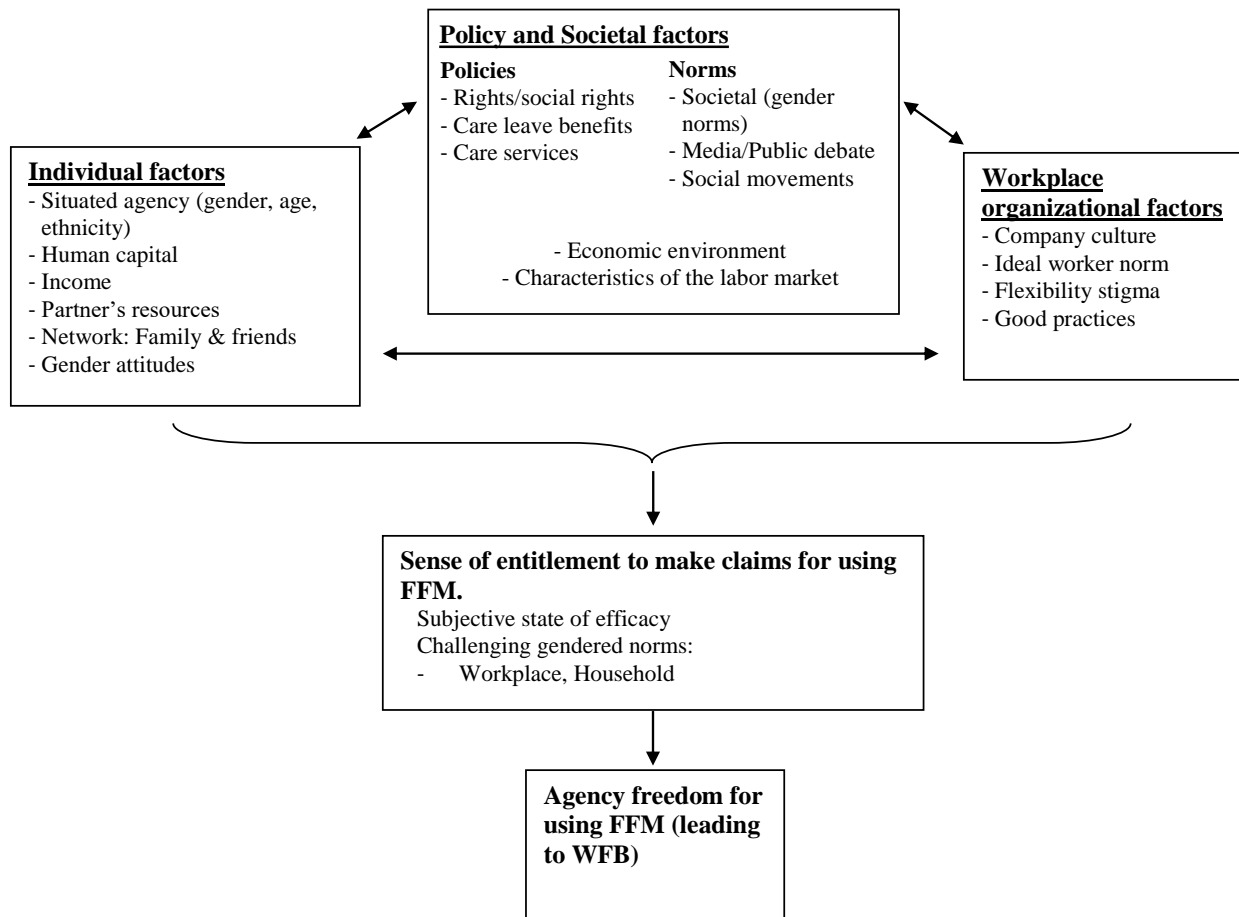
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**Figure 1.** Three types of conversion factor that explain the capability to balance work and family



**Table 1.** Profiles of the fathers interviewed

	Participants	Age	Company	Company size	Job level	Intact couple	Children	Couple	Father involvement
1	ADRIÁN	38	Insurance	Big	Professional	Yes	1 child (3) Waiting another	Working	Committed
2	AITOR	41	Insurance	Big	Managerial	Yes	2 children (11, 6)	Working	Intermediate
3	ALBERTO	35	Insurance	Big	Professional	Yes	2 children (4, 1)	Working	Committed
4	ALEJANDRO	44	Insurance	Big	Professional	Yes	2 children (13, 7)	Working	Intermediate
5	ÁLVARO	43	Insurance	Big	Professional	Yes	2 children (9, 6)	Not working	Intermediate
6	ANDRÉS	41	Insurance	Big	Professional	Yes	3 children (9, 6, 2)	Not working	Intermediate
7	ANTONIO	47	Insurance	Big	Professional	Yes	2 children (11, 7)	Working	Intermediate
8	CARLOS	35	Insurance	Big	Professional	Yes	1 child (2)	Working	Intermediate
9	DANIEL	50	Insurance	Big	Professional	Yes	1 child (4)	Working	Intermediate
10	DAVID	38	Insurance	Big	Professional	Yes	1 child (2)	Working	Intermediate
11	DIEGO	38	Insurance	Big	Professional	Yes	2 children (4, 0)	Working	Intermediate
12	ENRIQUE	40	Insurance	Big	Professional	Yes	1 child (4)	Working	Traditional
13	ERNEST	34	Insurance	Big	Professional	Yes	2 children (3, 2)	Working	Committed
14	FERNANDO	37	Insurance	Big	Professional	Yes	1 child (1)	Working	Intermediate
15	FRANCISCO	39	Insurance	Big	Managerial	No	1 child (4)	Working	Intermediate
16	IVÁN	36	Insurance	Big	Professional	Yes	2 children (4, 2)	Working	Intermediate
17	JAVIER	37	Insurance	Big	Professional	Yes	3 children (9, 6, 4)	Not working	Traditional
18	JESÚS	41	Insurance	Big	Professional	Yes	2 Children (7, 7)	Not working	Intermediate
19	JOAQUÍN		Technology consulting	Big	Professional	Yes	3 children (5, 2, 0)	Working	Committed
20	JORDI	37	Technology consulting	Big	Professional	Yes	2 children (6, 4)	Working	Committed
21	JOSÉ	42	Technology consulting	Big	Managerial	No	3 children (13, 10, 2)	Working	Intermediate
22	JOSÉ ANTONIO	36	Technology consulting	Big	Professional	Yes	1 child (5)	Not working	Traditional
23	JOSÉ LUIS	40	Technology consulting	Big	Professional	Yes	2 children (5, 2)	Not working	Intermediate
24	JOSÉ MANUEL	42	Technology consulting	Big	Professional	Yes	1 child (8)	Working	Committed
25	JUAN	39	Technology consulting	Big	Professional	Yes	1 child (0)	Not working	Traditional
26	JUAN ANTONIO		Technology consulting	Big	Professional	Yes	3 children (3, 5, 7)	Working	Intermediate
27	JUAN CARLOS		Big stores	Big	Operations	No	1 child (6)	Working	Intermediate
28	JUAN MANUEL	44	Big stores	Big	Operations	Yes	2 children (1, 16)	Not working	Intermediate
29	JULIO	36	Big stores	Big	Operations	Yes	1 child (2)	Working	Intermediate
30	LUIS	39	Big stores	Big	Operations	Yes	1 child (1) Waiting another	Not working	Traditional
31	MANUEL	45	Big stores	Big	Operations	Yes	2 children (7, 0)	Not working	Intermediate
32	MIKEL	47	Public Financial Inst.	Big	Professional	Yes	3 children (8, 6, 3)	Working	Intermediate
33	ÓSCAR		Public Financial Inst.	Big	Professional	No	1 child (2)	Working	Intermediate
34	PABLO	40	Public Financial Inst.	Big	Operations	Yes	2 children (4, 2)	Working	Intermediate
35	PEDRO	34	Public Financial Inst.	Big	Operations	Yes	2 children (4, 1)	Working	Committed
36	RAFAEL	35	Others (financial inst.)	Big	Managerial	Yes	1 child (0)	Working	Intermediate
37	RAMÓN		Others (public sector)	Medium	Operations	Yes	2 children (6, 3)	Working	Intermediate
38	RAÚL		Others (public sector)	Big	Operations	Yes	2 children (6, 1)	Working	Committed
39	RICARDO		Others (public sector)	Medium	Professional	Yes	1 child (2) Waiting another	Not working	Committed
40	RUBÉN	38	Others (police)	Medium	Professional	Yes	3 children (10, 8, 2)	Not working	Intermediate
41	SALVADOR	31	Others (education)	Medium	Professional		3 children (10, 8, 0)	Working	Intermediate
42	SERGIO	40	Others (logistics)	Small	Operations		2 children (10, 6)	Not working	Traditional
43	VICENTE		Others (infrastructure)	Big	Operations	Yes	1 child (14)	Working	Intermediate

Company size: big (>500 workers); medium (50-500 workers); small (<50 workers)

Table 2. Profiles of the mothers interviewed

	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>Company size</b>	<b>Job level</b>	<b>Intact couple</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Couple</b>
1	ALMUDENA	33	Insurance	Big	Professional	Yes	1 child (1)	Working
2	CARMEN	37	Insurance	Big	Professional	Yes	4 children (8, 6, 3, 1)	Working
3	ELENA	37	Technology consulting	Big	Professional	Yes	2 children (4, 0)	Working
4	EULALIA	38	Technology consulting	Big	Professional	Yes	2 children (8, 4)	Working
5	LAURA		Big stores	Big	Professional	Yes	1 child (1)	Working
6	SUSANA		Others (education)	Medium	Professional	No	3 children (10, 8, 0)	Working

Company size: big (>500 workers); medium (50-500 workers); small (<50 workers)

Table 3. Profiles of the HR directors interviewed

	<b>HR director</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>Company size</b>
1	Lorenzo & Esther	Insurance	Big
2	Katinka	Technology consulting	Big
3	Sara & José Ramón	Big stores	Big
4	Lucía	Public Financial Inst.	Big
5	Beatriz	Others (infrastructure)	Big
6	Anna	Others (energy)	Big
7	Santiago, Félix & Víctor	Others (industry)	Big
8	Rodrigo	Others (stores)	Medium
9	Jaime	Others (supermarket)	Medium
10	Miriam	Others (automotive)	Medium

Company size: big (>500 workers); medium (50-500 workers); small (<50 workers)