

Dual-career Spanish couples in Europe: Work-family balance in childcare

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Abstract

The article explores the childcare arrangements made by Spanish migrants in Belgium, Germany and the United Kingdom. The research is based on semi-structured interviews conducted after an exploratory survey. The respondents, mostly women with university degrees, had engaged in intra-European mobility between the economic recession of 2008 and the health crisis of 2020. In the narratives, women in dual-career couples with young children reflect on how approaching work-family balance depends on receiving social, institutional and family support. In addition, gender expectations affect negotiations around the sharing of roles and responsibilities in different-sex couples. Interviewees underline that the gender divide persists or is even reinforced in relation to employment and technological change. Non-standard and -flexible jobs, little access to services or incompatible teleworking with children at home reveal the fragility of care and welfare regimes and, consequently, the limited ability of couples to find satisfaction in the search for a work–family balance.

INTRODUCTION

The consolidation of the European Union and Schengen area has been a driving force in facilitating the flow of capital, products and services across internal borders, as well as the mobility of its citizens between countries for family,

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study, work or leisure purposes. Since the late 1980s, the presence of Spaniards in different European cities has taken on a new dimension compared with the emigration of the guest worker period (1950s–1970s), which was essentially destined for manual and low-skilled jobs (Bermúdez & Oso, 2020).

In four decades, many young people have had the opportunity to study or work temporarily in countries such as France, the United Kingdom or Germany, as part of an exchange of experiences, with the idea that upon returning to their country of origin, the skills learned abroad would be rewarded through a promising and suitable job.

These aspirations, however, were frustrated from 2008 onwards, when southern European states such as Spain experienced a deterioration in employment conditions and prospects (González-Ferrer & Moreno-Fuentes, 2017). This new economic recession triggered a northward exodus that has been characterized as the individual migration of educated young people with an increasing participation of women (Bartolini et al., 2017; Pratsinakis et al., 2020). Their concern has been mainly associated with issues of matching job aspirations with the reality in different destination locations (Cuberos et al., 2022).

In addition to students and trainees, the new intra-European migration has included a wider range of profiles, such as professionals and jobseekers, with or without work experience, who are in the process of starting their own family or already have one. This group has received less attention in the academic literature compared with individual and childless migrants. However, an emerging area of research discusses how migration affects the position of women with respect to work and childcare issues, in contrast to the position of fathers, in heterosexual couples (Röder et al., 2018; Santero & Naldini, 2020; Shinozaki, 2014).

The economic crises of 2008 had effects not only on job losses and income cuts, but also on family life, including reduced welfare provision for the elderly and childcare (Lafleur & Stanek, 2017). In these conditions of acute economic crisis and social risk, Spanish emigration would have activated intergenerational and marriage/couple pacts as a way of enacting informal social protection strategies in the family (Oso & Martínez-Buján, 2022).

Consequently, on the one hand, couples with young children living abroad may find themselves between different demands regarding care arrangements in the family of origin as well as in the family of procreation in the country where they are building a new life. On the other hand, in the search for work–family reconciliation, the challenges that couples with children in their early years of life may face, due to the complexity of balancing the professional ambitions of both partners with 24-h childcare, are heightened (Del Boca et al., 2020). In cities where migrant parents have settled, far from their relatives, there are few possibilities for them to lend a hand, while public or private services may be insufficient or inaccessible (Nijhoff & Gordano, 2017). While this situation is challenging for both partners, it remains to be seen how women cope with these tensions, as they tend to bear most of the *care burden*, real and imagined, following the ideals of intensive motherhood (Sevón, 2012; Herrero-Arias et al., 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic that has imposed home confinement for varying periods of time across Europe has added strain to partner involvement in childcare (Czymara et al., 2020; Minello et al., 2021), as we could observe during an empirical investigation in Belgium, Germany and the UK conducted in the years 2019–2021. These countries have been the main destinations for the migration of Spanish professionals since 2008 (INE, 2021a).

NATIONAL CONTEXTS AND GENDER NORMS

Spanish couples in Central and Northern European countries face not only barriers but also new opportunities for work–family reconciliation. The choices of childcare are embedded in different institutional contexts according to different welfare regimes. Belgium, Germany and the UK welfare states have provided with regulations and resources that reach families more widely than in Southern states like Spain (Daly & Ferragina, 2018).

The Spanish welfare system is a family-centred model, characteristic of Southern European Mediterranean countries (Bettio & Plantenga, 2004; Kougioumoutzaki, 2020). Basic services are universal but do not sufficiently cover equality and care policies. Moreover, according to Díaz-Gandasegui et al. (2017), the Spanish case shows a peculiar difficulty in achieving satisfactory work–life balance due to low labour flexibility, because of long working hours and

lack of synchronization with formal care schedules. The combination of these factors places a heavy responsibility for childcare on families, ultimately mothers and grandmothers, with little support from the private sector or the state (Esping-Andersen, 2009). In contrast, Belgium allocates more money to social spending as a share of GDP than Spain, and family support policies are better funded, although dual wage-earner policies are still considered weak and socially unequally distributed, which reinforces women's care role (Vinck & Brekke, 2020).

In the same vein, Barglowski and Pustulka (2018) argue that both Anglo-Saxon (British) and Bismarckian (German) welfare systems have different historical and cultural roots, attached to different images of families and gender roles. German governance strongly supports a socially desirable family model, in which the division between women's caring and men's breadwinning/providing roles is still quite evident. As a result, generous social benefits have tended to support women's exit or non-entry into labour markets. In contrast, the Anglo-Saxon regime tends to place less emphasis on framing a particular family model and on a transfer of unearned income. The British model is based on economic liberalism and is often characterized as a work reinforcement mechanism (Deeming, 2019). Thus, we can observe a greater investment in early childhood education programmes in the UK, while Germany demonstrates its commitment to subsidiarity and mixed approaches that encourage the continuity of traditional care models. In particular, this has led to the working mother and two-career household model being recently recognized in the latter, which effectively explains why the expansion of provision in Germany is proceeding at a slower pace (Nitsche & Grunow, 2016).

However, in each household, the combination or mix of resources and strategies that couples use will vary, depending on contextual as well as personal determinants (Knijn et al., 2013). Migration, with increased work opportunities for women and social pressure on men, can be a driver for changing caregiver status and gender roles.

In their Spanish studies, Flaquer et al. (2019) refer to a relationship between the increase in time spent by fathers on physical childcare and the growth of male unemployment during the economic crisis from 2008 onwards. Nevertheless, without a parallel social and cultural shift, there is no guarantee that this increased paternal involvement will be sustained beyond certain periods, such as that observed after the 2020–2021 pandemic lock-down.

Regardless of the outcome, Spanish women could be using migration as a means not only to partially compensate for the gender discrimination they face in their access to skilled, permanent and/or better paid jobs (Riemann, 2022), but also to pursue more egalitarian lifestyles, as well as for the well-being of their children (Herrero-Arias et al., 2020).

THE SAMPLE: SPANISH PROFESSIONAL WOMEN WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

This article is based on the responses of Spanish women in three European countries (UK, Germany and Belgium) who report having children, although it is based on a broader study.

A first quantitative phase, through an online survey conducted in April–June 2020, by random sampling with quotas per country, allowed us to obtain a sub-sample of informants who left Spain as a family or subsequently formed a family, in the context of the crises of the last 15 years¹. They have the following characteristics (Table 1): married or cohabiting couples, Spanish or mixed and with children under 16. The survey data indicate a similarity in the profiles of Spaniards in the three countries of residence. Table 1 shows that respondents, mainly women, have been living in their current country for an average of 6–8 years, coinciding with the years of the highest unemployment rate in Spain, which reached 27 per cent of the total Spanish labour force in 2013 (INE, 2021b).

Skilled emigration is common in all three countries; more than half of the respondents have university degrees, and almost 30 per cent have postgraduate studies (Master's, PhD). The reasons for emigrating coincide with the experience of job insecurity in Spain and expectations of better job opportunities abroad. However, in the UK, the desire to learn languages or gain educational experience also stands out. The decision to emigrate is part of a family project that includes educational opportunities for the children. Another difference between countries is monthly household incomes. More than half of respondents in Germany and Belgium have a monthly household income of more than 4000 euros per month; in the UK, 40 per cent report an income of less than 3000 euros per month.

TABLE 1 Main characteristics of Spanish families with children in a migratory context (2020)

		Germany (N = 115)	Belgium (N = 40)	United Kingdom (N = 98)
Age	Average	42	43	41
Nationality of your partner	From a UE member country	35%	22.5%	34%
Number of children	One child under 16 years of age	46%	42.5%	49%
	Two or more children under 16 years of age	38%	42.5%	39%
Number of years living in the country	Average	8	6	8
Current employment status	Employed	71%	65%	75.5%
	Household and care work	16%	15%	18%
Educational attainment	Secondary education (including vocational training)	15%	12.5%	17%
	University studies	50%	47.5%	43%
	Postgraduate studies (Master, PhD)	30%	27.5%	29%
Gross monthly income of the family household.	Between 2.001€ and 3.000€	16.5%	20%	25.5%
	Between 3.001€ and 4.000€	20%	7.5%	17%
	More than 4.001€	56.5%	50%	36%
How did you decide to move abroad?	It was a family decision	53%	40%	40%
	My own decision	29%	30%	41%
What reasons led you to leave Spain?	Not finding a job/precarious employment in Spain	62%	57.5%	66%
	To learn languages/to study	22%	22.5%	43%
Do you intend to stay in the country where you currently reside?	Yes	61%	50%	66%
Would you like to emigrate to another country?	Yes	8%	15%	16%

Note: Women make up about 70 per cent of the responses in each of the three countries.

Source: NewEUmob survey, Spring 2020 (during the Covid-19 lockdown).

The survey provides an overview of the characteristics of Spanish migrants. From there we focused on informants with children in the early years and proceeded to contact participants who left their email addresses after signing an informed consent. Thus, the sample of people interviewed in the second phase of the qualitative fieldwork was intentionally obtained through the snowballing technique; the first informants provided contacts with the next potential respondents.

The article is based on 13 in-depth interviews spread across the three countries, conducted mainly in the capital cities of Berlin, Brussels and London. The interviews present three types of different-sex couples with children under 16: the first type, Spanish couples formed before emigration; the second type, Spanish couples who met and joined abroad; and the third type, mixed or bi-national couples, where the Spanish informant lives with his or her partner in the partner's country of origin or in a different country for both. There are situations in which the children were born in Spain, and in others they were born in another European country. Almost all interviewees had higher education, some of them with Master and PhD degrees. For the latter, the acquisition of a high level of education and specialization has been an important driver for going abroad. The employment situation of interviewees is varied, including civil servants, employees of small and large companies, self-employed and those in unpaid jobs, who are fully dedicated

to home and family care. In addition, there are both situations of low mobility in emigration and others involving repeated mobility between countries linked to work or study needs.

These elements of variation move our analysis away from classical migration studies in which homogeneous individuals and families move from a single place of origin to a fixed destination and back again. Consequently, through the narratives provided by the interviewees, we explore how the context shapes and determines the management of family life in the new place of residence and how couples negotiate internally, with ups and downs, to find a balance between family obligations and economic activity. In the following sections, informants are referred to by pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

CHANGING FORTUNES OF SKILLED FEMALE MIGRATION

According to our interviewees, and the literature reviewed, the main reason for initiating a migration process is the search for employment opportunities, in many cases in highly skilled jobs. The pattern tends to be the difficulty of finding a paid or stable job in Spain, as indicated by 25–30 per cent of responses in the survey. Some 35 per cent identified the main cause of their migration as poor employment in Spain: badly paid or not in line with their career goals. Many respondents thought that they would find better jobs abroad to develop professionally – 41 per cent in Germany and 47 per cent in the UK, compared with only 27.5 per cent in Belgium. Reasons also include redundancies or cutbacks in social benefits. In short, one or both partners are forced to migrate, even if this means giving up important family and social relations:

(...) because she [female partner] was dismissed twice for pregnancies; she was not renewed [her contract] without reason twice.... I, at the university, as a part-time research associate, totally precarious, many hours of work, (...), we felt obliged to look for another solution, to go abroad. Fortunately, we accepted it. It was not a fairytale dream, nor was it in our plans. It is more and more complicated to return to Spain. We feel like economic refugees. The system has expelled us. We feel mistreated by our own country.

(Luis, PhD in Psychology, London)

This case reaffirms the thesis of the penalty for motherhood, since having children especially affects women's job stability by activating gender biases. Mothers in Spain continue to lack adequate social and employment protection since, as previously discussed (Díaz-Gandasegui et al., 2017), the application of anti-discrimination law is lower in some European countries than in others.

Opportunities are found, and jobs are arranged before emigrating, or the partner or single person goes "on an adventure", and the family regroups later. Men are more likely than women to receive job offers from abroad, with statements in the survey such as "My husband couldn't find a job [in Spain] and was offered a very good job here. I left my job and came with him". (Female, Germany).

However, there are several cases of women taking the initiative. For example, Sonia, an economist by training, faced with a lack of job prospects, passed a competitive examination at the European Commission, and dragged her male partner, who left his job in Spain, to move to Brussels together.

My partner had temporary and occasional jobs, but most of the time he had a job. So [when she passed the competition] I told him: "look, I need you to stop working because in April I have twelve interviews in three weeks and you have to stay with our son, because the interviews are in Brussels (...) so stop working because we are going to go (...). He didn't tell me, but I know he was scared to come.

(Sonia, economist, Brussels)

The educational level of Spanish women does not ensure that their life prospects include a full-time job or any professional activity. While it is true that 32 per cent of the workers surveyed have a university degree, 8 per cent of the Spanish women who participated in the survey, regardless of their level of qualification, are unemployed. Furthermore, the survey shows that of the 14 per cent of Spaniards who are mainly engaged in housework and care work, 8 per cent are women with tertiary education.

It is clear from these data that, on the one hand, migration often leads to an intensification of female employment, from which former unemployed or underemployed women in Spain benefit. On the other hand, parenting practices, distributed on the basis of gender stereotypes, together with the hindrances encountered in a migration context, may lead to the “housewifization” or “re-traditionalization” of highly skilled and professional mothers (Grunow & Evertsson, 2016). In the transition to parenthood, they may decide not to meet the expectations of the neoliberal “adult worker” (Santero & Naldini, 2020).

This process is exemplified in the cases of Maria, a computer science graduate living in Germany, and Eva, a law graduate in the UK, both married to Spaniards and with children, who see their part-time or very occasional jobs as a supplement and are mainly involved in childcare and housework.

In these two examples, the informants consider that the man's income is sufficient to live on without the woman working full-time. The couple's financial situation would be in line with our survey data, which indicate that more than half of Spanish households in Europe have an income of more than 4000 euros gross per month (Table 1).

However, the more complicated economic situations of other couples make it necessary to supplement with another salary or even reconsider emigrating again (Bermúdez, 2020). This is the case of Ernesto, a technical engineer, who persuaded his family (wife and 4-year-old son) to leave Spain for Belgium 3 years ago. His partner has been unable to find work and the only household income is his own, which is not sufficient. Thus, the couple sees her status as a full-time housewife more as a misfortune than as an opportunity or an ideal natural situation.

The time horizon of the migration project changes over time and the couples interviewed recognize that the future is uncertain. Some who have found a better fit in the new society come to the conclusion that they will stay, others plan to return to Spain 1 day and finally some believe that they will continue their training and employment in other countries, as part of their expatriate status.

This is the situation of one of the binational couples interviewed. Pau, married to a French professional with a PhD in Health Sciences, who, after several years in Belgium, has moved again with his partner and young children to another country outside Europe. The mother is employed in an international cooperation agency which provides support to its staff.

Rosa reflects a different profile of a binational couple. Asked about the future, she first longs for the idea of returning to Spain, where her mother and sibling live. Shortly after, she accepts that it would be best to settle with her partner and children in Belgium. She has a doctorate in Political Science and her partner, whom she met in the UK when they both lived there, is from Brussels. She recognizes that living in constant uncertainty, with short-term career projects and moving from one country to another, is incompatible with maintaining stable childcare arrangements, in line with the idea of making a more “grounded life” for their children (Bygnes & Erdal, 2017).

BETWEEN THE WELFARE STATE AND LABOUR FLEXIBILITY

All the couples interviewed refer to how their lives changed drastically when they became parents, a condition that first arose in Spain or once they had emigrated. They acknowledge having a Mediterranean and family-centred culture of care (Bettio & Plantenga, 2004; Pfau-Effinger, 2010) and, in some cases, miss extended family members, mainly grandmothers, lending a hand with childcare. Couples who are more attached to their families are aware that, being far away, this support depends on the grandparents' personal circumstances and their ability to join them abroad or to travel frequently. Poor health, reduced income and mobility restrictions have emerged as disruptive to these arrangements, especially since the Covid-19 health emergency was declared. In these circumstances, they can only

resort to public/private services and flexible work options. However, as highlighted in other studies (Bonizzoni, 2018; Plantenga & Remery, 2013), this is a situation that is not always entirely desired or satisfactory.

In other circumstances, couples ruled out family support from the very moment they decided to migrate and recognize that the destination was determined by the expected external support they could receive. Considering that the public and private resources available to families in the new countries of settlement are more numerous, the Spaniards surveyed think that it is easier to achieve work-life balance by living abroad ($M = 3.31$; $SD = 1.55$). In fact, a large proportion of couples interviewed acknowledged having used different family-friendly measures available in their jobs, such as flexible working hours for childcare, working hours adapted to school schedules, teleworking options or on-demand reduction of working hours.

Nonetheless, the ability to negotiate such support depends on the type of employment contract they have. Newcomers and those living more precariously suffer from social exclusion, as Kilkey and Merla (2014) show for the UK and Belgium. In the private sector, some equality and work-life balance measures exist, but it is mainly civil servants who have access to a range of possibilities. An example of this is Juani, a Biology graduate, who has a permanent position as a secondary school science teacher in Brussels.

Likewise, the group of nominal "expatriates", especially those working in the European institutions, enjoy more parental rights and childcare facilities than workers who arrive with their families at their own risk to earn a living in the private sector. Sonia, who recently joined the European Commission, highlights the existence of a department dedicated to helping employees achieve a work-family balance. It provides to its employees psychological support, sports activities, permanent childcare at the workplace and 30 family days per year that can be combined with holidays (with only the basic salary), among others.

However, some women working in the private sector also report that jobs are very flexible, in terms of working hours and/or requesting days off instead of holidays, a feature of the Anglo-Saxon employment sector (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020). Despite being initially unaware of both the laws or resources available in their sector, several women interviewed in London have been able to request leave to care for sick children or take holidays without difficulty. During the 2020-2021 lockdown decreed by the Covid-19 pandemic, they were able to work from home. We note, therefore, that satisfaction with company measures to reconcile family and private life with paid work is high when prior expectations are low, but sometimes expectations exceed reality. Thus, Shinozaki (2014) notes the shock of the foreign female academics she contacted when, contrary to their expectations, they discover that, although the number of childcare facilities at universities has increased in recent years, they are still scarce in Germany, a country with a low level of childcare provision in Europe.

In the fieldwork conducted, significant differences were found in the level of awareness, availability and access to public and private childcare facilities. Although gaining access can be a complex task for both Spanish and binational couples, those where the mother or father is a native of the place of residence have a clear advantage. Knowledge of the language and codes, as well as information and support networks, allows parents to quickly identify and seek solutions: educational, health, economic and social. Rosa's partner is from Brussels and lives close to his parents and sister, who occasionally lend a hand; in contrast, among respondents to the survey, an overwhelming 91 per cent have no family support to help with parenting. On arriving in Belgium from the UK, Rosa and her partner found that integrating their children into the education system was straightforward, and they were able to stay in nursery or school for as long as necessary while their parents worked. Despite all this support, Rosa's words betray the subtle discriminations and penalties that come with motherhood (Esping-Andersen, 2009), and she expresses frustration at not having achieved her high career aspirations.

What is certain is that if I had not had children at the time, I would have made much more progress....

To get into those [university research] networks that allow you to get those positions, you have to spend a lot of time with those people, to be there. And I totally accept that, but I am very aware that there has been a big penalty (...) but it is undeniable that at that time, without children, I would have

done things differently (...) because before I had children, I prioritised work as much as possible, and with children I no longer do that.

(Rosa, home-based researcher, Brussels)

The use of private external help for childcare and housework is not widespread among Spanish respondents (66% do not do it). In fact, the interviews describe situations in which couples with precarious employment and limited financial resources are motivated to seek social assistance. Interviewees in all three countries reported that this support is limited and restricted to particular situations. In the case of Luis and Mar, lack of language skills was a major constraint on their arrival in London in finding information about housing, the public health system, available social benefits and schools. Now, they are glad to have access to free public childcare, as private childcare costs range from £1000 to £1200 per month, which can be the average salary in a low-level job. Also satisfactory, in another sense, was the experience of Esther, another London resident, who gave birth during the pandemic and made use of the pregnancy and postpartum care available in the public health system. Compared to Spain, where such services are non-existent, she enjoyed in London health and perinatal services including family counselling and home visits after delivery. Thirdly, Maria acknowledges that she has had problems finding affordable childcare in Germany. However, the variety and availability of free municipal activities for children in the mornings have allowed her to take German courses to help her in the process of social integration.

There is no doubt that, regardless of their situation, the intensive care demands of a child's early years and the high cost of external services in the pre-school stage become factors that encourage professional women to withdraw from the labour market, especially in the private sector. One way to avoid (self-) exclusion is to become self-employed, as has been pointed out in an important strand of the literature (Ekinsmyth, 2011). In our sample, which is full of university mothers, self-employed women have taken more the path of the so-called *mumpreneurs*, who seek to reconcile professional ambitions with the ideals of intensive motherhood, keeping their children around as long as possible (Sevón, 2012). One modality of this type of work for highly skilled women, like Rosa, is to become a home-based advisor to private and public clients, offering intellectual and creative skills.

NEGOTIATING ROLES AND TIME IN THE FAMILY. THE EXPERIENCE OF TELEWORKING AND COVID-19

In the process of entering the labour market, changes may occur in the order of priority of each partner's employment over household and care tasks. As seen in the analysis above, in determining whether it is the man or the woman who is more likely to stay at home with the children, it is key who in the couple has initiated the migration project. The level of qualification and salary are other key aspects that affect the decision (Flaquer et al., 2019):

I studied Law, yes, I graduated in Law. I started working when I finished my degree, but then I got pregnant with my eldest child (they have four), and we decided that I was going to take care of the children mainly. At that point, I stopped working and haven't worked since... well, because logically he earned the highest salary and, in the end, he was the one who had the best chance of promotion... since then I have dedicated myself (to being a housewife) body and soul.

(Eva, Law graduate and unpaid home-based worker, resident in London)

It is mainly women who have to interrupt, or eventually abandon, their professional careers, given the higher salaries of men and poor or expensive childcare services. Other reasons for the gender division of labour in the household are individual preferences, such as negative views on non-parental care, lack of awareness of available social benefits and potentially even distrust of the childcare system in the host country. In line with our observations and other work (Röder et al., 2018), Eva's example represents the ambivalent position of this cohort of migrants, who are caught

between competing values. They see themselves as promoters of gender equality because women gained access to higher education and jobs but, at the same time, they occupy differentiated gender roles and spaces in their everyday family life and show reluctance to leave domestic matters in non-family hands.

Even when it is the woman who initiates the migration project, there are going to be tensions because of the amount of domestic and care work that the father has to take on.

Since she was hired at the European Commission, Sonia has been concerned about her partner's welfare in Brussels. He left his job in Spain and emigrated at her request. They both know that it will take him some time to get a new job because he does not speak French. Regardless of the new arrangements in the couple, Sonia acknowledges that there has been no fundamental change in the gender division of household tasks. Despite being unemployed, he takes only slightly more responsibility for her two-and-a-half-year-old son than before. However, she shows a particular indulgence towards her husband, downplaying the issue and adopting the role of the "supermother" who manages both a career and a family (Moreno & Mari-Klose, 2013; Sweet & Moen, 2006):

Occasionally there is a conflict when my husband has to go to school, and I am in a meeting and we have to pick up the child. There is a bit of conflict, and in the end, as I have more flexibility, I say "all right, I'll go", but it's the same as everywhere.

(Sonia, economist, Brussels)

On the other hand, when mothers have a lot of work responsibilities or less flexibility than in the previous case, fathers are forced to take a more active role in childcare and housework. Such is the situation of Luis, a clinical psychologist currently working in the UK public health service, who had played a secondary role in caring for his two children aged 5 and 2 in Spain until they moved to the UK, at which point the roles were reversed. They claim that this arrangement was implicit in the decision to migrate, although it is understood to be temporary.

During the episodes of pandemic-induced home confinement, Juani's partner in Brussels has also been more involved in childcare because, while she was required to continue attending her job as a schoolteacher, he was able to telework as an architect. The periods of confinement with their two children, 7 and 3-year old, ironically, have convinced him how important it is to work outside, even if only a few days a week, despite his previous home arrangement.

In the restructuring of time due to ICT-based teleworking, before or as a consequence of Covid-19, interviewees reveal that the distribution and organization of tasks between family members become more complicated. As Rodríguez-Modroño and López-Igual (2021) indicate, more time at home means more hours close to the children, but does not equate to more ability of adult men and women to delegate and save time for personal or professional purposes.

Because of the fatigue that men may experience in their new role, research shows a *boomerang effect*, so that staying at home too long causes conflicts between parents and with children, leading to male desertion and the consequent perpetuation of traditional female roles (Czymara et al., 2020; Minello et al., 2021).

Rosa had to explain at length to her partner what her daily activity consists of:

We have worked it out well, but there is friction. It turns out that he gets up early and leaves, so there are specific tasks that fall on me because he doesn't have a chance, he is at work. Also, sometimes with the cleaning or the cooking. And you know what happens, they are jobs that are not considered key, but they are things that have to be done on a daily basis (...) we have achieved a certain balance, although it has to be reviewed from time to time. And always the discussion (...) is 'how much do you think I do', because I think you have to explain to the other person what you spend your time on. When the children are at home it is more obvious.

(Rosa, home-based researcher, Brussels)

In Rosa's example, similar to another study on highly educated young binational couples (Gaspar, 2009), at first glance it seems that household tasks are shared. However, on closer analysis, a certain level of specialization is apparent. Women tend to perform activities related to cleaning and daily household chores, while men are more oriented towards cooking and childcare.

Another couple, living together in Berlin, initially without children, tended to share the housework more equally. However, according to Clara, she had more responsibilities. It was after the birth of her daughter that she became more aware of the division of gender roles, as her partner quickly assumed that she was primarily responsible for childcare. Only after discussing and renegotiating roles did the distribution of care work become more equal. Subsequently, the possibility of working from home through ICTs that has lasted until today for the father, a postdoctoral researcher, prompted him to take on more responsibility for his daughter:

One of the conversations we had at the beginning was about sharing care tasks, (...) It's very scary, (the baby) is a small thing that depends on you, you are exhausted, and if someone can tell you what to do, all the better, but it's very scary to face that. That was the reason why I transferred part of the parental leave to him. It was very important for me and for him to be alone with the child for 12h: [the child] has to eat, what to wear, whether it is hot or cold, (...) I know much younger women who, if they have to go out, they [women] are the ones who leave all the instructions [to their male partners], such as where things are, how to do them, what to do and what not to do, etc.

(Clara, accountant, Berlin)

It remains to be seen whether the combination of telework and the migration experience can foster other innovations and gender negotiation, assuming that the host context facilitates a less gendered division of responsibilities within couples. In agreement with Santero and Naldini (2020), our results suggest that the cumulative effects of resources and (gendered) narratives may structure parents' future choices when children grow up, a development that would require further investigation.

CONCLUSION

Intra-European mobility allows Spanish individuals and couples the possibility of broadening their life horizons, including starting a family with children while having a more suitable job abroad. However, couples' experiences and expectations about gender roles are subject to revision when children arrive. Household chores are time-consuming and energy-intensive, and children increase them even more in intensity and size. Gendered divisions of work at home and in the office, which may not have been previously acknowledged, emerge at this point in life. The fact that these couples are both professionals denotes an inclination towards an egalitarian partnership model. However, there are different determinants why women end up taking on a large part of childcare, which includes material but also organizational and emotional care.

It is a combination of structural factors, such as the lack of state provision or rigid working conditions and personal factors, such as ideals of intensive motherhood, certain gender expectations, all of which push the balance towards women's unpaid caring role, which is expressed through the sacrifices that mothers make at home and their adaptation to labour markets designed and organized with these gender divisions in mind.

The low or moderate level of women's satisfaction with care arrangements denotes that the mandate of professional women to simultaneously combine two separate worlds, two obligations, is based on unequal power relations. The work-life balance discourse is a trap both for their professional aspirations and for the very construction of what a woman is or should be (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016). Spanish women who move to other European cities for self-fulfilment find relative gratification in their achievements, while acknowledging shortcomings in their endeavours due to personal and structural limiting factors.

As for men, the cases selected in this article show that their dedication to childcare tends to increase in certain circumstances. Firstly, because emigration abroad often entails the inability to count on the continuous help of the extended family, as is usual in the Spanish *familistic* care culture. Secondly, respondents make good use of flexible working arrangements, when available, although fathers do so to a lesser extent than mothers. They are able to modify their working hours, their location and the working method used, which allows them to increase their dedication to children and the household. These are work-life balance measures which, moreover, are not always sanctioned or compulsory by law. In fact, they are often granted on the basis of selective criteria, or at the will of the organization or employers, showing significant differences and a tendency to target only mothers (López-Andreu & Rubery, 2021). The paradigmatic case is that of the rights and services offered to employees by international or European institutions in Brussels. However, some of these measures may have adverse effects on the careers and earnings of people in lower-level jobs, both in the short and long term.

Moreover, a disadvantaged position in the new city of residence may frustrate families' expectations of welfare states to assert their economic and social rights. They depend on the social and political climate of the moment, or on the will of specific individuals, rather than on acquired and legally enforceable rights. Institutional measures also generate comparative grievances between men and women. By targeting women, they reposition them materially and symbolically in the workplace in comparison to the greater availability of their male colleagues and even their childless female co-workers.

Finally, the 2008 economic and 2020 health crises experienced by the couples in this article put additional pressure on parents' ability to follow a well-planned strategy to meet family and work obligations. Since the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequences of children being confined to the home after successive waves of the disease, this debate is more vivid than ever.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study will be openly available in a repository of the University of Seville, Spain. We still do not know where or when this will happen.

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ENDNOTE

¹ The full survey was completed by 1134 individuals, of whom 537 were from the UK, 417 from Germany and 180 from Belgium. This article uses only the data collected for couples with children, which represent a sample of 253 individuals, of

whom 115 are from Germany, 40 from Belgium and 98 from the UK. The software used for the statistical analysis was IBM SPSS© v.24.

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