

ARTICLE/ARTÍCULO

How to Reconcile Work and Family Life Outside School Hours? Demands of Spanish Dual-Income Couples with Children

¿Cómo conciliar la vida familiar y laboral fuera del horario escolar? Demandas de las parejas españolas de doble ingreso con hijos

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ABSTRACT

Balancing work and family life is one of the challenges faced by today's societies. Spain is characterised by a labour market with long working hours and a lack of family policies, which forces many couples to seek help from their network. This article presents the results of a qualitative study. Fifteen couples, in which both spouses work full time and live with children aged 3 to 15 years old, were asked what actions should be taken by public authorities and companies to facilitate reconciliation. Work flexibility, telework, direct financial support and greater availability of out-of-school-hours services, particularly during school holidays, are some of the most common demands. Finally, the degree of acceptance among parents of the promotion of community cooperation networks, such as time banks, to care for children is analysed. These networks could be built using pre-existing relationships both in educational centres and in neighbourhoods with the support of local authorities.

KEYWORDS: reconciliation; Mediterranean welfare model; time bank; out-of-school-hours services; family policies.

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RESUMEN

Conciliar la vida laboral y familiar es uno de los retos a los que se enfrentan las sociedades actuales. El caso español se caracteriza por un mercado de trabajo con largas jornadas laborales y una escasez de políticas familiares, lo que obliga a muchas parejas a buscar ayuda entre sus redes. En este trabajo se presentan los resultados de un estudio cualitativo, con entrevistas a quince parejas en que ambos cónyuges trabajan a tiempo completo y conviven con menores de 3 a 15 años, en las que se interroga por las medidas que se deben tomar para facilitar la conciliación. La flexibilidad laboral, el teletrabajo, las ayudas económicas directas y una mayor disponibilidad de servicios extraescolares, especialmente durante las vacaciones, son algunas de las demandas más mencionadas. Por último, se analiza el grado de aceptación entre los progenitores de fomentar redes de cooperación comunitarias, como los bancos de tiempo, para cuidar a menores, empleando para ello las relaciones ya existentes tanto en los centros educativos como en los vecindarios y con apoyo de las Administraciones locales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: conciliación; modelo de bienestar mediterráneo; bancos de tiempo; servicios extraescolares; políticas familiares.

1. Introduction

Reconciliation is one of the main worries for people who work and have children. According to data from the OECD (2019), among Spanish couples with children under the age of 14, the most common situation is that both parents work full time (43.8%), in 14.1% of cases, one partner works part time and the other, full time, and only 28.1% of couples have just one partner working full time¹. Balancing different areas of life is positively associated with life satisfaction in adulthood (Harr et al., 2014) and with satisfaction with family life (Miguel-Luken, 2019). Furthermore, the time that parents spend with their children affects the physical and emotional welfare and the academic performance of the latter (Martínez and de Andrés, 2011).

The conditions of the Spanish labour market, with long days and a lack of flexible working hours, make it more difficult to reconcile work and family life. Half of Spaniards indicate that they cannot adapt either their work start or end time to tend to family responsibilities (National Statistics Institute, *Instituto Nacional de Estadística*, INE, 2018). In 2022, according to data from the INE, around a quarter of people in employment between the ages of 25 and 54 work until late in the evening on more than half of the days while another quarter do so occasionally. Furthermore, public expenditure for childcare is lower than in other neighbouring countries. According to the OECD, in 2017 total public expenditure of GDP for families was 1.31% and for family cash benefits, 0.51%, both the lowest in the EU.

This predominantly empirical study addresses, firstly, the demands made to public authorities and private companies by heterosexual couples in which both partners work full time and who live with children. This topic has been touched on incidentally in previous studies; for example, when analysing the share of care and tasks between parents with young children (González and Jurado, 2015),

the preferences of the Spanish population as to whether it is the state or the family who should look after pre-school children (Valarino, Meil and Rogero-García, 2018), and the work-life reconciliation policies developed by Spanish companies (Abril et al., 2021). However, rarely has the question been posed directly to the affected parents; rather, it is more common to ask the general population. For example, the Fertility Survey by the INE (2018) questioned the incentives to increase birth rates, while the Andalusian Studies Centre (*Centro de Estudios Andaluces*, 2021) asked about the measures that must be driven by the government to facilitate reconciliation. Similar previous studies have been conducted in Galicia (Fraguela-Vale et al., 2013; Varela and Gradaílle, 2021), using a quantitative approach. However, there are few studies, particularly of a qualitative nature, on this subject in Andalusia. Furthermore, the fieldwork was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period which posed a significant challenge for Spanish families in terms of reconciling work and family life.

Secondly, this study explores these couples' acceptance of pioneering solutions to facilitate reconciliation, which are in line with the guidelines of the Strategic Plans for Equality recently approved by the Spanish National Government (2022–2025) and by the Regional Government of Andalusia (2022–2028) and which encourage alternative innovative policies linked to the new municipalism (Blanco, Gomá and Subirats, 2018).

2. Theoretical Framework

Spain has been grouped in the Mediterranean welfare model together with Italy, Greece and Portugal (Ferrera, 1996; Naldini, 2003)², which has three characteristic features: (i) high rates of structural unemployment and precarious jobs for young people and women, with marked regional differences; (ii) social policies that are focused more on families than on individuals and underdeveloped family policies; and (iii) a family culture with family-oriented values and great importance on intergenerational solidarity (Jurado Guerrero and Naldini, 1996). However, the recent evolution of three indicators (female employment, social policies and family values) has led some to question whether it follows this model (Arpino and Tavares, 2013; León and Migliavacca, 2013; Naldini and Jurado, 2013).

Firstly, female employment rates, particularly among younger, educated women, are similar to those in countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany, although they are still behind Scandinavian countries (León and Migliavacca, 2013). In 2021, for example, according to Eurostat data, the rate of employment of Spanish women aged between 25 and 54 years was 70.1%, while the EU average was 75.1%. The figure for Spain is higher than that for Greece (61.3%) and Italy (60.1%), however it is lower than the figure for Portugal (83.3%).

The lack of part-time work in the Spanish labour market, a trend seen in other Mediterranean countries, forces many mothers to choose between full-time work or family caregiving (García-Faroldi, 2020; Moreno Mínguez, 2010).

Furthermore, the quality of part-time employment tends to be worse (in terms of labour rights, stability and remuneration) than that of full-time employment, while the reduction of working hours in a full-time job tends to imply better working conditions (Fernández-Kranz, 2018). Domínguez-Folgueras, González and Lapuerta (2022) have revealed how salaries are negatively affected after taking parental leave or reducing working hours, with the former being more penalised than the latter³. The employment rate for Spanish mothers with children under the age of 14 (OECD, 2019) was 67.5% (the EU average was 73%), compared to 57.5% in Italy, 59.9% in Greece and 83.8% in Portugal. In terms of female employment, there is a growing divide between Spain and Portugal and Italy and Greece. In the case of Spain, the vast majority of these mothers worked full time (74.2%), with only a minority working part time (22.8%), with no information on the type of work contract for the remaining 3%.

Secondly, new policies have been developed since the start of the 21st century (Moreno and Marí-Klose, 2016). There are two significant measures in reconciling work and family life. The first, relevant due to its implications in increasing the co-responsibility of men, has been the gradual increase of paternity leave since 2017, finally equalling maternity leave in the year 2021 (16 weeks). Both forms of parental leave were replaced by “birth and childcare leave” in 2021⁴. In the rest of the Mediterranean countries, that equalisation has not occurred, with fully paid paternity leave ranging from 10 mandatory days in Italy to 20 mandatory days in Portugal. This commitment to the equalisation of leave separates Spain from the rest of the Mediterranean countries and has resulted in greater co-responsibility in physical child caregiving tasks (Romero-Balsas, 2022).

The second policy is the increase in the offer of nursery school places (both in public and public-subsidised schools) for children under the age of three. According to data from the Economic and Social Council (2016), enrolment of children aged one was 13.9% for the 2004–2005 academic year, and 27.9% for children aged two. In 2019, the figures had risen to 43.9% for the former and to 63.1% for the latter (INE). Even among children under the age of one, the rate increased from 9.7% in 2014 to 13.3% in 2019. If the enrolment of children in the 0–2 age group in Spain is compared with the rest of the Mediterranean countries, the figure in Spain is somewhat lower than that in Portugal (38.2% and 39.7%, respectively), but is higher than that in Greece (35.3%) and, especially, Italy (27.8%). Previous studies have shown the positive impact of the offer of daycare places: using them complements the reduction of working hours by mothers, while unpaid parental leave would be a strategy that replaces nursery school attendance (Romero-Balsas, Rogero-García and Meil, 2022).

Thirdly, there is an increase in egalitarian attitudes and a better balance in the division of domestic chores (Naldini and Jurado, 2013). Arpino and Tavares (2013) reveal how, in the decade of the 2000s, individualistic values and values related to gender equality grew substantially in Spain, above the other Mediterranean countries. This evolution of values has not, however, meant a drop in family

solidarity, especially if Spain is compared to other countries belonging to other welfare regimes (García-Faroldi, 2015). Greater co-responsibility between men and women is also noted in childcare and in domestic chores (Ayuso, 2019; González and Jurado, 2015). However, there are still substantial differences in the images associated with motherhood and fatherhood, as the father figure is mainly associated with the role of the breadwinner while the mother is assigned more diversified roles, particularly routine and care tasks (García-de-Diego and García-Faroldi, 2022).

The three aforementioned trends imply a shift away from the Mediterranean model, particularly Italy and Greece. Another characteristic of the Spanish labour market that affects the reconciliation of work and family life is associated with the long working hours and the lack of synchronisation with school start and end times. Split shifts with a lunch break lasting two hours or more are uncommon in the European environment and result in the working day ending later than in other countries. Split shifts are more common among men (45.6%) than women (32.6%) due to the latter searching, to a greater extent, for jobs with hours that enable childcare (*Closinggap*, 2019). Added to this is the desynchronisation of work and school calendars, with two and a half consecutive months of school holidays. In 2013 in Spain, a Subcommittee was created in the Congress of Deputies to study the Rationalisation of Work Schedules, the Reconciliation of Personal, Family and Working Life and Co-responsibility. Their report proposed that the latest end time—in general—should be 6 pm, as well as the shortening of lunch breaks. However, these proposals are yet to materialise in the legislation a decade later.

Despite long working hours, Spain is the OECD member country with the lowest percentage of children who make use of out-of-school-hours services, and the average weekly hours of the few that do make use of such services is lower. These services are defined as services that have an element of “care” and are not purely educational, spaces in which children can use the time to do schoolwork and/or participate in recreational activities⁵. In 2017, 5% of children aged between 6 and 14 years used a service of this kind, doing so for an average of 5.9 hours per week, compared to an average attendance of 28.3% in Europe, with some countries exceeding 60% (Denmark and Sweden) and with significantly higher figures in neighbouring Portugal (45.6%). These services facilitate the work-life balance of those parents who work; nevertheless, they have received little attention from the authorities (Plantenga and Remery, 2013).

All the commented features of the labour market and family policies in Spain underscore the complexity of reconciliation for parents with children, as well as the need to pay attention to the demands they make so as to be able to balance work and family life. This is precisely the objective of the first research question.

The second question posed by this study asks for these parents' opinion of an innovative care network approach that, emerging from the civil sphere with the support of public institutions, could aid in the reconciliation of work and family life⁶. These experiences are part of the community exchange system initiatives, favouring the reconstruction of community links and generating possibilities for autonomy for the civil society, promoting public welfare (Blanco, Gomá and Subirats, 2018; Subirats, 2005). Local authorities can promote such initiatives; in Catalonia and the Basque Country, for example, so-called "time banks" have been established in recent years, community social networks where services are exchanged such as childcare, although evaluations of the actual impact of these initiatives are scarce. There are also examples in Andalusia, such as the initiative by Málaga City Council. These kinds of initiatives are included in the recently approved Strategic Plan for the Equality of Women and Men in Andalusia (2022–2028), which states (p. 66 of the Spanish-language document):

Las Administraciones locales también juegan un papel decisivo en este ámbito [el reparto social de los cuidados], ya que su cercanía a los ciudadanos puede ser clave a la hora de desarrollar proyectos de cuidados innovadores, activando redes vecinales y comunitarias que promuevan la participación y la activación de nuevos servicios y recursos de proximidad para apoyar la conciliación (Local authorities also play a decisive role in this area [the social distribution of care], as their proximity to citizens can be key to developing innovative care projects, activating neighbourhood and community networks that promote participation and the activation of new community services and resources to assist the reconciliation of work and family life).

3. Methodology and Data Source

The results presented here form part of the project "Reconciling in the schoolyard: Collaboration strategies for the care of children of working Andalusian couples", funded by the Andalusian Studies Centre (PRY121/19); the main findings of this project can be consulted in García Faroldi (2023). The main aim of this project is to analyse the role of non-family childcare support networks. Previous studies have shown the important role that family plays, particularly grandparents, so that working couples in Andalusia (and Spain) can balance work and family life (Tobío, 2005; Tobío and Fernández Cordon, 2013). However, other non-family members may also play an important role, especially when family members are not available (Meil, 2011).

In line with the research questions raised in the previous section, the first general objective aims to understand the demands in order to improve the work-life balance of dual-income couples with dependent children. Three more specific objectives are derived from this general objective: (1.1) to understand the demands made to companies; (1.2) to understand the demands made to public authorities; (1.3) to analyse whether there are differences in the demands, as a result of differing circumstances in terms of work and family (age of the children). The second general objective (2) aims to understand the opinion of

parents on community initiatives such as time banks to promote reconciliation. A specific objective is to discover the main difficulties that initiatives of this kind would face (2.1).

The semi-structured script included open questions so as not to condition the kinds of measures that could be mentioned by the members of the couple, who were interviewed together for this part. They were asked two specific questions: *What measures do you think would have made the work-life balance easier when your children were younger? What measures would aid this balance today?* Subsequently, to respond to the second research question, the couples were asked for their opinion of time banks as an initiative to facilitate the work-life balance.

Following a pilot study with three couples in the researcher's circle, a specialised company contacted twelve unknown couples by telephone who met the following three criteria: 1) they work full time; 2) they live with children between the ages of 3 and 15 years (although they could have other children outside this age range); and 3) they live in Málaga province⁷. These criteria are justified because the study objective was to analyse the reconciliation issues of couples who have greater demands in terms of work (both partners work full time) and family (they have highly dependent children). Lastly, the reason for the geographic criterion was that it was an individual project lasting only a few months, which prevented the fieldwork from being extended to several provinces. Furthermore, being an individual project also limited the number of interviews that could be carried out by a single person. Despite this, with the fifteen couples studied (30 interviews) theoretical saturation was achieved, and the research questions were answered.

As regards the analysis of the interviews conducted, a thematic analysis strategy was employed. Throughout the interviews, in addition to recording the audio, notes were taken by hand of the most recurrent main ideas and narratives that emerged. After the contracted company made all the transcriptions, all the interviews were read to compare them with the notes taken. Finally, with the help of the program ATLAS.ti, the main themes and concepts covered in the interviews were identified.

The interviews (11 in-person and 4 online) were carried out between September and November 2020. The profile of the couples interviewed is diverse in terms of their age, level of studies, type of employment, and number and age of children (Table 1)⁸. As will be seen in the Results section, the measures proposed differ according to these variables. To maintain anonymity, in the verbatim transcriptions the first initial indicates whether the interviewee is male (M) or female (F), followed by their initial(s) and age.

Table 1*Characteristics of the interviewees (n=30)*

	%
Age of the couple	
30 to 40 years	36.6
41 to 50 years	63.4
Educational attainment	
Low (primary education, compulsory secondary education)	23.4
Medium (upper secondary education, incomplete university education)	40
High (university education)	36.6
Work activity	
Public sector employee	30
Private sector employee	56.7
Self-employed	13.3
Number of children aged 3–15 of each couple interviewed	
1	26.7
2	60
3	13.3
Distribution of the age of the children (total of couples interviewed)	
3–5	32.1
6–11	53.6
12–15	14.3

Source: own research.

4. Results

This section shows the measures that would have proven more useful for these couples in terms of reconciling their work and family life when their children were born and those measures that could currently be of help. The demands made to companies will be looked at first, before turning to those made to public institutions (Table 2). Lastly, the degree of acceptance that time banks, as a community initiative, could have to facilitate reconciliation is analysed.

Table 2*Demands to balance work and family schedules*

Demands made to companies	Demands made to public institutions
Flexible working hours	Direct financial support More daycare places that are also less expensive
Telework	Increased duration of parental leave
Rationalisation of working hours	Public offer of camps during school holidays
Priority to choose holidays	Introduce parental leave of absence during school holidays and in the event of illness
Flexible working hours during school holidays and in the event of illness	Expand reconciliation measures from 12 years to 14 years School meals in secondary education centres

4.1. Demands Made to Companies

As regards the measures that can be taken by companies, flexible working hours are mentioned most frequently, so that parents can balance their working hours around school start and end times. Split shifts are the subject of particular criticism due to the length of the working day.

M-J48: Split shifts shouldn't be allowed by law [...] it's impossible to achieve a work-life balance with split shifts.

M-P50: Working hours often aren't tailored to children's schedules, because of course, a child starts school at 9 in the morning... Tell me a job where you can start at 9 in the morning! And then...

F-A48: Well, I start at 9 am.

M-P50: And then tell me a job where you can leave at 1:30 pm to be able to pick them up at 2 pm.

However, some interviewees recognise that flexible working hours is not the solution in their case, such as M-P50, employed as a haulier.

M-P50: I'm going to be straight with you: my job is a real pain in the ass, because we start early and we normally end late... it's not a timetable that lets you say, "I can divide it into two shifts", in other words, when we go out delivering, for example, you go out to make your deliveries and you haven't finished until you've delivered to the last customer.

Another of the measures that was mentioned most often is the rationalisation of working hours so that they are shorter.

F-A37: Reducing the working day is important, it would be elementary, plus I don't think you can work so many hours in certain jobs, you perform better when you work fewer hours, that's for sure [...].

M-L50: With the hours they set, that we have and so on... it's complicated. No... being able to finish earlier isn't prioritised...

The reduction of the working day is particularly mentioned by younger couples with a higher level of education, as some of them have had experience working abroad or know people living in other countries.

M-JA41: We lived in England for a time, and you know what, apart from the catering industry, shopping centres usually close at 5 pm and libraries close at 5 pm.

In some cases, the interviewees mention the possibility of not attending the workplace in person some of the working week, particularly when, during term time, there is a day without school. This is particularly the case for service sector workers who can meet the public's needs online. Once again, there is awareness that not all jobs can opt for these kinds of solutions.

M-JA41: The possibility of offering a day as a one-off, as I was saying, I have to work and my son goes to school, that day is a scheduled school holiday [...] well, that day, as I said, if they're not going to give you leave, they could at least let you work from home where possible, of course, but it isn't applicable to all jobs either.

F-A37: If you're a supermarket cashier, you can't.

M-JA41: Exactly, if you work as... if you're a haulier, you're employed to stack shelves... right?

4.2. Demands Made to Public Institutions

The demand for paid parental leave, especially maternity leave, to be prolonged for several months emerges in several interviews.

F-M48: Well, ideally... like in other countries perhaps, they say that mothers in other countries can stay at home for I don't know how long, one or two years, right? And... so as not to lose out financially... there's the possibility of receiving some kind of contribution during the first years of the child's life, until the child at least starts school.

One of the reasons behind this demand is the defence of breastfeeding, which is interrupted, at least partially, on the mother returning to work.

F-C39: You breastfeed your child for 6 months, you don't breastfeed for 16 weeks with your breasts like this... I was lucky, well, lucky and unlucky, because I lost my job when I had my children [...] I was able to breastfeed them, I could be at home, I could... Obviously it affected me financially and he had to work a lot more hours.

Another of the reasons for increasing the duration of parental leave is infants' vulnerability to illness, to which they are exposed in daycare.

M-F40: Institutions and the government should encourage you to spend time with your child during the first year of their life, because a child of that age is very vulnerable.

Some mothers with more stable jobs chose to make a financial and professional sacrifice to be able to spend longer with their babies. This is the case of F-Y43, employed in the public education sector in Andalusia.

F-Y43: When I had my daughter, my first child, I was eager to spend more time with her when she was still very young and I just wish I'd had the financial help to have been able to do so, but instead, I had to request a reduction of hours, earning less money to be able to be with my daughter.

In the case of one self-employed couple, their young children were able to be looked after in the business for a few months, but they demand more public daycare places at more affordable prices.

F-L43: Well, to start, when they're younger, daycare costs a fortune [...] I had my elder son in the shop with me for a long time because he was very well behaved [...] and it was going okay, but there came a time when I couldn't cope with both the shop and my son and so I had to find daycare as a matter

of urgency, but it wasn't what I'd planned. There wasn't one at first, and then when you find one... well, half of your salary goes on daycare, and when I was able to transfer him to a public-subsidised one, there were also meals, because of the schedule, the meals were also... that is to say, in terms of help, there is more daycare that is also cheaper.

The reduction of working hours (unpaid) permitted by law is not usually considered an option due to the loss of income it entails. Furthermore, this option is frowned upon by private company workers, to the point of jeopardising a parent's own position.

M-F40: A measure that I don't consider... which the public authorities don't handle well in this case, is... for example, how they reduce my salary a lot for two hours of work. So, I say, "come on, I don't need to earn more money, I'm going to rethink... one hour or two..." they take a lot of money from me, it's not cost-effective.

F-C39: Or at least for them to give you... for example, less hours, less hours, reduced hours, but not the feeling that you're going to lose your job.

One of the fathers interviewed, a local police official, reduced his working day by two hours when his daughters were young to be able to coordinate his schedule with that of his wife. However, the experience was not a positive one, given that he was not met with a lot of understanding in his work environment.

M-J48: When I had a reduction of two hours... I arrived at around five o'clock and they gave me the first thing that came in, "of course, you've just come from..."

F-ME47: From touching yourself...

M-J48: As if I'd got back from... from holiday or from a trip to the Caribbean. In that time, well, in these two hours, while you've been here having a coffee, for example, I've been getting lunch ready for my girls, tidying the kitchen...

Many couples mention direct financial support as a necessary measure. At times, there is the complaint that the 100-euro allowance for children under the age of 3 years is only allocated to working mothers, and they claim that it should be universal.

M-F40: Yes, well, the baby allowance is great, because the truth is they start by... by giving you, I don't know, say 2,500 euros, which I think was the amount in that case, which is actually a pretty big contribution. Eh... and they should help... for example, they should help independently of the household income, whether the woman, for example, wants to be around... well, that year... they help the household with 120 euros or... because in this case they only help working mothers, it's funny, they help working mothers who are working, but they don't help those who aren't financially.

F-I38: That's it, it's something that really angered me because of course I wasn't working when I had [daughter's name] and that would have really helped me, well... as you know, some vaccines aren't funded and... and I was pissed off, I used to say, "let's see, why do they give money to people who are working, while those of us who don't work because we can't, because we haven't... we haven't had the opportunity to work, why don't we receive any help?"

A distinctive narrative is also detected in the case of the self-employed, who are unhappy with the criteria of the scales to receive aid or access school meals. This is the case of couple M-A44 and F-L43, who own a bar in the historic heart of Málaga.

M-A44: Because we're self-employed, we have less... and seeing as both of us work, we both make social security contributions... and when it comes to filing our tax returns and presenting documentation, we're both working individuals and we're supposed to be able to pay whatever the government wants.

F-L43: What's more, I don't know, in the scoring of schools and that, for example, I see it the other way around, as in you're penalised if you both work... as if it's worse, and parents who don't work receive more aid and that.

4.3. Critical Moments for Reconciling Work and Family Life

There are two moments when parents find it most difficult to care for their children: during school holidays and when they are ill, a pattern that has existed for decades (Tobío, 2005). In terms of the former, there is a call for a greater offer of school camps, adapted for younger children (under the age of 6), with longer schedules that cover lunchtime and at more affordable prices. In the absence of an appropriate offer of camps, the family network becomes essential for childcare.

F-L43: I think it would be good if there were more holiday camps that were better and more varied during Easter, half term, summer... when we parents have to work and it's a long time to leave them with their grandparents. There are currently very few, I think they're poor quality or the price is astronomical.

F-E35: I also think, for example, that summer, or rather, summer... well, children finish at the end of June, so you have July and August, for example, if you want to send your child to a camp, which isn't subsidised, nor are there free camps, and if the council does run camps, the places are limited, so what do I do with my child the entire summer? Because it's a big cost. Thank God if you have family you can rely on, they have to swallow it, but of course... you make your family... have to limit their summer because they have to stay with your children.

M-A44: Summer camps [...] don't solve anything either because the day ends at maybe 1 or 2 pm... What's on offer doesn't provide us with a solution.

Even for couples where either one or both partners are self-employed and they have certain flexibility when it comes to adapting their hours or closing their business during these periods, school holidays are too long and several strategies have to be combined. This is the case of the self-employed couple discussed previously.

M-A44: Well, we have to rely on the grandparents come what may, there's no other option. (Partner's name) can maybe get away at certain times, but... summer is... the big unknown. In fact, we close... being in the historical centre and being in a tourist area, we close for all of July, which is unthinkable, but we have to.

Another measure proposed to improve reconciliation is a regulation enabling one of the two parents to adapt their working hours or request specific leave during school holidays. In some narratives, the possibility is raised of people with children having priority when it comes to choosing holidays in the workplace.

F-M48: Today... for example... when it comes to choosing holidays... I, for example, don't have priority because I have children when choosing my holidays in periods in which the children don't have school, I can't, I have to reach an agreement with my colleagues.

M-JA41: A formula needs to be found so that those parents or at least one of them could be at home with a kind of special leave. There needs to be regulation of that kind.

Days on which children are ill make reconciliation very difficult. The interviewees demand greater flexibility at work to be able to care for them or the possibility of taking caregiving leave, without it entailing a financial cost for the family.

F-E35: That doesn't happen, them facilitating it, and I often say, "dude, employers are fathers and mothers, they have to understand, right?" Your child can get sick, they can wake up the morning after a rough night, and you've had to spend the entire night with them [...] It's complicated, it's also complicated because the state doesn't give you the option of saying, "well, count it is a sick day and the state pays your company for that day, so that the company doesn't lose out either".

F-M47: Time availability... when it comes to children's illnesses, it's a problem every time your child gets sick [...]. With justification, of course.

Several couples have children in secondary education, and their narrative differs from that of parents with younger children. These parents demand that the measures in place for children in nursery and primary education be extended to secondary education, at least while education is compulsory.

F-ME47: Yes, for example, I think it's really bad how the option of reduced hours ends when they're 12 years old. Just look at where we live! Do you think my daughters can go to school on their own? They can't because a heavy backpack with those hills... [...] I'd also give the option of school meals at secondary education centres, but that's going to be impossible.

Another measure that would facilitate the work-life balance is if these centres offered school meals, just as many primary schools do. According to data from the Spanish Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, only one in ten children who study compulsory secondary education have school meals, compared to nearly half of primary school pupils (2020–2021 academic year).

F-M47: The state secondary school that my son goes to doesn't offer meals, that's appalling.

4.4. Valuation of Time Banks as a Strategy for Reconciliation

In the interviews performed, a section was dedicated to asking about time banks. The majority of the couples had not heard about this initiative. After explaining the concept to those who were not familiar with it, the valuations were generally positive, despite not being mainly linked to a method for facilitating reconciliation, but rather to a more general exchange.

M-J48: Yes, of course, it could help if... for example, you have neighbours who are unemployed and they can be in charge of picking the children up from school or... even feeding them and reaching an agreement with the person needed.

M-R47: Very good, very good, it's what's needed, especially now that there's such little work and people aren't well off, someone to help you... as you say, who knows about computers or who knows English or another language...

One of the most positive aspects of time banks is the possibility of children taking part in activities that the parents cannot afford.

M-JA41: Well, the truth is it could be interesting... in some respects, right? It's like you say, "I can't..." or "I just can't", "I'd like my child to take... ballet classes, or to do such and such", but I can't... I can't afford to pay for an extracurricular activity. That said... in exchange for my child going to that kind of activity, I can then do another one another day so that others can take their children to learn English [...]. At the end of the day, it's a way, well, for children to be somewhere where they're going to be looked after, they're going to learn something, they're going to do something entertaining...

M-L50: Yes, the chain of favours, right? [...] I get that there are people who due to their working hours or... without a job can't aspire to certain services and well, they can help each other out.

M-P50: I think it [the initiative] is quite interesting, it's something that I'd have to look into and that, but it sounds quite good. And I understand that there may be a lot of people, well, who... either don't have the resources or don't have the time to do certain things and look, if there's something that someone can help you out with in some way, well I think it's good.

While the feedback about this initiative is generally positive, there is mistrust among some of the interviewees about leaving their children with strangers.

M-C42: Yes, leaving my children with someone I don't know and that... I don't know, I'm not... and so young, that's not for me.

M-M32: Let's see, I think it's very good [...] Well, I think for the children's sake I'd find it hard to say, "look, come to my house for two hours".

The most common drawback mentioned by the interviewees is the lack of time to be able to participate in the exchange, offering services to other people in exchange for childcare or giving classes out of school hours.

M-AJ31: Yes, I could do it if I had the time, the problem is that this year I'm going to be... I don't even think about anything else because I have to study in the morning, train in the afternoon and play at the weekend...

F-M48: But in my case, I don't think I'd be able to do much... and mostly because I can't offer time, that's my problem... I can't just ask and not give!

5. Conclusions

Throughout this empirical study, the main measures that working couples with young children propose in order to better balance their work and family responsibilities have been described, thus meeting the first objective. Spain stands out in the EU community (Eurobarometer 470, 2018) as one of the countries with a lower percentage of people satisfied with their work and personal life (66% compared to an average of 78%). Some of the measures called for include responsibility mainly of companies (specific goal 1.1), especially flexible working hours, a measure mentioned by 53% of Europeans and by 71% of Spaniards (*ibid.*). Working hours are even less flexible in Andalusia than in the rest of Spain. According to data from the INE (2018), in Andalusia only 40.5% of employees can modify the start or end time of their working day to assume childcare responsibilities (the Spanish average is 46%) and it is impossible for 54% to do so (compared to the national average of 50%), while 5% of the people surveyed did not answer the question. Recent reforms in this area (Spanish Royal Decree-Law 6/2019) cover the right of working people to request flexible working hours for reconciliation purposes.

Another of the demands companies receive most in the aftermath of the experience of the pandemic and lockdown is the possibility of telework for at least a few days, an aspect that is also contemplated in the new wording of Section 34.8 of the Spanish Workers' Statute and which is regulated in the Spanish Telework Legislation, approved in July 2021. Given the short time that has elapsed between the approval of said measures and the fieldwork conducted (one year), it has not been possible to analyse whether these reforms have improved couples' work-life reconciliation strategies; thus, future studies on this subject are required. These qualitative results are in line with the findings of recent surveys of the Andalusian population (*Centro de Estudios Andaluces* [Andalusian Studies Centre], 2021).

There is a call to public authorities (specific goal 1.2) to extend parental leave, to provide more direct financial support and, in particular, to regulate leave to care for children in the event of illness. Spain's Family Law, the draft of which was approved by the Council of Ministers in 2023, transposes the measures covered in Directive (EU) 2019/1158 and introduces a new right to absence from work for five working days a year so that working people can provide personal care or assistance to a family member, in addition to the four days of *force majeure* leave, both of which are paid. An eight-week parental leave will also be granted,

which can be taken continuously or discontinuously, until the child reaches the age of 8, and which, according to the directive, must be paid before August 2024. Lastly, in the General State Budget for 2023, the 100-euro monthly allowance for working mothers with children under the age of 3 is to be extended to people who are or have been registered under the Spanish social security system or mutual benefit scheme for 30 days or who have received a contributory benefit or allowance from the unemployment protection scheme, a measure which will also be incorporated in the future Family Law. In the coming years, an analysis should be carried out as to whether these measures, designed to facilitate reconciliation and co-responsibility in caregiving, meet their objectives.

The narratives analysed reveal some differences according to the type of occupation and the age of the children (objective 1.3). Flexible working hours, for example, is not a feasible measure in sectors such as transport, while telework is mentioned by people employed in customer services. Working in the public or private sector also entails differences, given that the reduction of hours is seen as a threat to the continuity of employment for private sector employees. Lastly, the self-employed call for a new way of assessing access to public aid and services, as they consider the current criteria to be detrimental to them. As regards the differences according to family situation, parents with children aged 12 and over ask that regulations on length and distribution of the working day be extended to include children of an older age (measure covered in the draft of Spain's Family Law) and that meals be offered in secondary schools.

In terms of the second general objective, Andalusian couples are seen to have a positive opinion about time banks as instruments for achieving a better work-life balance. Innovative measures are required to promote reconciliation and to promote actions that encourage a redistribution of care work, with co-responsibility between public and private authorities and the general public, as set out in both the Strategic Plan by the Regional Government of Andalusia (2022–2028) and the Third Strategic Plan (2022–2025) approved by the Spanish government. International experience shows that out-of-school-hours services can be implemented with the collaboration of schools and cultural and sports centres, accepting not only nursery and primary school pupils, but also secondary education students, young adolescents who, although they have more autonomy than the rest, also require care while their parents work and whose needs are often neglected by public authorities (Plantenga and Remery, 2013).

With regard to the challenges to implement such measures (specific objective 2.1.), to dispel possible misgivings around leaving children with strangers, it is worth taking advantage of pre-existing friendship and collaboration networks that are formed in settings such as school centres or neighbour associations to promote these collaboration networks to help reconcile work and family life, channelling the organisation of these initiatives through local public authorities, which can also offer free spaces to offer activities that children can participate in.

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Notes

1 5.4% of couples are made up of partners who do not work and 8.6% are in other situations.

2 Esping-Andersen (1990) classifies these countries within the conservative or corporatist regime, however several authors have proposed differentiating a Mediterranean regime with characteristics that differentiate it from continental European regimes, represented by countries such as Germany and Austria.

3 Spanish legislation (Article 34.8 Spanish Workers' Statute) sets out that working people can request to adapt their hours and length of their working day, including remote working, in order to be able to reconcile work and family life. The reduction of hours ranges from one eighth to half of the working week until the child's twelfth birthday, with a proportional reduction of income and payment of social security contributions, with full contributions considered to have been made. On the other hand, unpaid parental leave can be requested until the child is 3 years old, with social security contributions and the ability to return to the same post for the first year.

4 The law establishes that the first 6 weeks are compulsory, while the other 10 can either be enjoyed before the child's first birthday or the right can be waived. It is a non-transferable right. A contribution of 180 days in the previous 7 years or 360 days over the course of the working life is required, which is reduced to half if aged between 21 and 26 years, with this requirement being removed for those under the age of 21. In all cases they must be registered and affiliated or in an equivalent position.

5 The OECD notes that the definitions of these services can vary between countries and therefore comparability may be limited. These services are usually public and often use school facilities, but there is a wide array of situations. Escobedo and Escapa (2014) point out the methodological problems for Spain both in terms of data collection and the definition of these services.

6 Escobedo and Escapa (2014) have analysed the role that associations of mothers and fathers play in Catalonia to offer different kinds of services, including childcare, although they detect significant differences depending on the socioeconomic status of the families.

7 There were only two cases in which the couples had a child under the age of 3, and in no case did they have children over the age of 15 years.

8 It is a qualitative sample, and finding comparable data for the general Andalusian population is complex. According to data from the LFS from the last quarter of 2020, among the employed, 17.8% were self-employed and 19% were public sector employees, with the remainder being private sector employees. On the other hand, the age of the parents coincides with the time at which they have children in Andalusia, with an under-representation of children aged between 12 and 15 years old in the sample with respect to the child population, due to their greater autonomy, which facilitates their parents' work-life balance.