

Farewell to Spanish 'superwomen'

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Abstract:

Family transformations and the emergence of new social risks (NSR) are main areas of observation in this paper. Young workers, families with small children and working women are groups mostly affected by NSR. The role played by the Spanish 'superwomen' has been pivotal within families, which have historically functioned as effective (though informal) 'shock absorbers' across a whole range on social policy areas. It does not seem plausible to expect superwoman's daughters to reproduce past family strategies. Two interrelated issues have emerged in debates about advancing gender equality within households, and mobilising women into paid work: the unequal sharing by family members of domestic responsibilities, and the lack of external support for family life (child care facilities, personal social services and parental leaves). The transition to a new model of welfare provision will actively concern society as a whole. In so doing, what was considered to be a 'women's issue' would no longer be coped with 'behind closed doors'.

(WORK IN PROGRESS. COMMENTS WELCOMED)

The Spanish welfare state belongs to the Mediterranean regime typology. As in other Southern European countries, Spain's single most characteristic trait is the crucial role played by the family as institution of welfare production and distribution of income and services.

A strong household micro-solidarity, manifested in intra-familial pooling of resources and mutual support and care between family members, has allowed high levels of citizens' well-being.¹ Self-reliance of families has traditionally been taken for granted by governments in matters of social care and material support.

The main focus of analysis in this paper is that interconnecting work and family lives. Such an interrelation is visible in the emergence of new social risks in a variety of welfare areas. NSR affect collectivities at various stages of their life courses in rather non-linear trajectories and crosscutting social divisions. Young workers, families with small children and working women are groups mostly affected by NSR. More generally, issues concerning care for children and the frail elderly, household gender equality, active labour market policies, 'safety net' programmes, or changes in welfare state financing and pension reform have come to the fore of the political debate.

In a country representative of the Mediterranean 'familistic' welfare regime, the increasing women's participation in the paid labour market can be singled out as the development inducing the most enduring knock-on effects in the future configuration of Spanish welfare. This development has important implications for issues of balancing work and family responsibilities and also for the support that families are able to provide to members who lack the skills necessary to find an adequately paid job or who are finding difficulty in entering the labour market, in a situation where unemployment among young people remains very high. Reforms designed to improve the flexibility of the labour market further exacerbate these new risks, because they increase insecurity and uncertainty.

'Superwomen' and households: balancing work and family life

In the last decades, cohorts of women in the age groups of 40-64 years, who have been able to combine traditional unpaid caring work in households and demanding professional activities in the labour market, are ideal typical representatives of the Spanish 'superwomen'. Effects of their hyperactivity have been multiple and of a transversal nature. Not surprisingly, Spanish young citizens have continued to identify the family as the most important institutional resource for vital satisfaction.² Likewise, 'superwomen' have contributed to maintain social cohesion in a country in the process of democratic consolidation and with the highest persistent unemployment rate in the European Union. The phenomenon of 'superwomen' has manifested in all Spanish social groups, classes and geographical areas (Moreno, 2002).

Sustained personal sacrifices made by superwomen in the 1980s and 1990s allowed Spain not only to cope better with welfare retrenchment as compared to Central and Northern Europe. Unpaid care within the households also made possible that Spanish welfare would be less exposed to public

¹ This reflects in the lower rates of absolute poverty as compared to other EU countries. In Spain, severe poverty rates (established as having less than a quarter of the mean equivalent household income per head) are lower due to the role of the family as a 'clearing house' in the distribution of material resources. Note that, in terms of individual income, 36% of the total Spanish population was severe poor in 1993, but they amounted to only 5% of the aggregate population living in households (Carabaña and Salido, 1999).

² Among youngsters in the age group of 15-29 years: 76% were of the opinion that the family was 'very important'; 23% considered it as 'quite important', and only 1% regarded it as 'of little or no importance' (CIS, 1996).

expenditure cuts³ and governments could expand social expenditure in welfare programmes not directly related to household and personal services. The latter continued to be provided by superwomen 'free of charge'. Spain still continues to be the country with the lowest expenditure devoted to families and infancy in the EU-15 (2.7% of the total social spending as compared to the mean European figure of 8.2% in 2000) (EU, 2002).

Mediterranean families have historically functioned as an effective (though informal) 'shock absorber' across a whole range of policy areas such as social care, unemployment assistance, housing, or social assistance. In contrast with developments in other European countries, there is evidence that internal family support has intensified over recent years.⁴ Within families the role of women has traditionally been pivotal, as they have often cared particularly for children or older relatives at the expense of erratic careers or full withdrawal from the labour market. Such commitment to unpaid domestic activities has usually translated into low rates of female employment as compared to the EU mean. However, the situation is changing if we consider the correlation between a higher level of women's formal education, a growing prioritisation for professional careers, and a greater female participation in the labour market (Alberdi, 1999).

As a consequence of the reforms implemented mostly in the 1980s, the universalisation of the educational system has meant that 100% of the population in the 4-15 years age group has access to nursery, primary, and secondary schooling. In 1998, relatively and absolutely, more women than men were under education in all primary, secondary and university stages. These educational shifts massively increase women's chances to compete in the labour-market, but impose additional pressures on superwomen who traditionally borne a heavy domestic burden.

Low fertility and women's labour participation

Superwomen cannot be merely ascribed to the skilled, middle-class and high-educated categories. Unskilled and low-educated superwomen also decided to keep both household and professional commitments but not for the same kind of reason as their mothers, who restricted themselves to unpaid household activities. They wanted to avoid situations of poverty or to maintain their more 'expensive' lifestyles and, after getting married,⁵ a second salary in the household was most welcomed. As a consequence, 'dual earner' families have proliferated throughout the Spanish social ladder⁶, and now account for more than half of Spanish couples of working age (see Table 1).

Cultural changes in peoples' value systems are key elements influencing the relationship between paid work and family life, and ought to be considered as main explanatory variables relevant to the latest demographic transition in Mediterranean countries.⁷ Individualisation of lifestyles and

³ Note that in the period 1975-1995, Spain's public expenditure grew 13.1%. This rate compares to the mean 5.3 percentage points for all EU countries (Moreno, 2000).

⁴ This is somewhat reflected in the Mediterranean rites of passage and social reproduction. Note that in 1986, for instance, more than two thirds of young people aged 20-29 were still living with their family of origin in Greece, Italy and Spain (72% in the latter). In 1994, the gap had widened: 71% in Greece, 78.5% in Italy and 79% in Spain. These latter figures compared to 44% in Germany, 41% in France and 36% in the United Kingdom (Fernández Cordón, 1997)

⁵ Marriage continues to be the preferred way for Mediterranean men and women to create a family. Note that, in 1997, only 14% of the Spanish population considered 'living together without being married' as the preferred option (CIS, 1997). Likewise, nine out of ten married women in Spain are mothers whereas only 5% of unmarried women have children.

⁶ The 'male breadwinner' model is found unacceptable by two of every three Spanish women (CIS, 1995).

⁷ The population pyramid has taken the shape of an inverted pyramid due to the sharp declining birth rate and the increasing number of citizens over the age of 65.

prioritisation of professional concerns by both men and women have resulted in a sharp decline in fertility rates. Note that in 1998 as many as 362,000 babies were born in Spain, just about half the number of those born in 1976 (Spain's population is of around 40 million). In 2001, 75% of all persons in the age group of 25-29 years were singles, whereas in 1977 the percentage was 35%. An increasing refusal by young men and women in their twenties to commit themselves to family formation has been noticeable in the last decades.⁸

Table 1: Full and Part-Time Working in Dual Earner Households with and without children, 2000 (ranked by proportion of dual breadwinner households with children)

	% of couples in employment with two earners:	Dual Breadwinner (DB): Both f/t		Modified Industrial (MI): Male f/t, Women p/t		Ratio of DB to MI among those without children	Ratio of DB to MI among couples with children
		% of those without children	% of those with children	% of those without children	% of those with children		
Portugal	74	57	67	8	7	7.1	9.6
France	64	52	45	13	16	4	2.8
Greece	44	44	44	3	5	14.7	8.8
Belgium	73	37	41	20	28	1.9	1.5
Austria	67	52	39	15	28	3.5	1.4
Spain	56	35	36	6	8	5.8	4.5
Italy	46	35	31	9	13	3.9	2.4
UK	70	55	29	21	40	2.6	0.7
Germany	60	48	26	20	33	2.4	0.8
Ireland	45	44	27	11	16	4	1.7
Netherlands	67	38	11	29	53	1.3	0.2

Part-time is fewer than 30 hours a week.

Source: Eurostat (2002).

Postponement of motherhood and the decreasing number of children can be identified as the causes why the fertility rate in Catholic Spain was the lowest in the European Union in 1998 with 1.07 children per woman.⁹ Spanish couples seem to have opted more for the 'quality' than the 'quantity' of the family.¹⁰ In Spain around half of all births are first children. Low fertility rates in Spain should not

⁸ The mean age for getting married was 26.9 years for women in 1995, a figure that compared with 23.4 in 1980 (Castro Martín, 1999).

⁹ This was a figure provided by a macro survey carried out by the Spanish *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (National Institute for Statistics) and which referred to an ill-defined 'structural fertility rate'. Subsequently, the fixed ratio corresponding to the 1999 brought up the figure to 1.2 children per fertile woman, still the lowest in the whole of the European Union.

¹⁰ Women with higher levels of formal education who can have access to better jobs --but also more competitive and demanding-- in many cases simply choose not to have a second child. In the most fertile 25-34 age group the mean figure for illiterate women is 3.13 children per head, although the equivalent figure for those university-title holders is 0.33 per

be understood, however, as evidence of a declining interest among younger Spanish women in maternity. Younger generations of women continue to express a great desire to become mothers (9 out of 10, in the age group of 15-24 years, and 8 out of 10 in the 25-29). Half of all the women of childbearing age survey (excluding those with physical impediments) stated that they wished to have children (INE, 1999).¹¹

Increased women's participation in the formal paid labour market is an important factor in explaining not only low fertility rates but also changes in welfare arrangements. Massive entrance of younger generations of women into the labour market is expected in the future. Although female activity rate for the 30-34 years age group was only 30.8% in 1989, by 1999 it had jumped to 68.1%. On current projections, women's labour market participation for the 35-39 age group will reach 85% by 2005. As a whole, Spanish female activity rate is still relatively low (except for the public sector)¹² in comparison with other EU countries, but is increasing rapidly. The major difference is that in Spain, in contrast to other EU countries, a negative correlation between female participation in the labour market and fertility rates persists.

Superwomen often managed to accomplish two-working days in one throughout a good deal of their lives. The absence of shared domestic work by other family members also meant sacrifices and long hours of commitments both inside and outside the home. Indeed, the position of Mediterranean women worsened with an increasing burden of responsibilities *tout court* and also because their small involvement in policy-making usually translated in discriminatory outcomes for them (Trifiletti, 1999, León, 2001).

The current generation of working-age mothers is the first one in which a majority of its members is in paid work. They cannot simply reproduce past behaviour and, therefore, they have displayed innovative ways and means to deal with the 'reconciliation' between households and jobs. A brief examination of the family strategies deployed to sort out this 'impossible situation' (Nicole-Drancourt, 1989) is illustrative of the transitional phase households are facing concerning NSR.

Family strategies, household gender equality and 'de-familisation'

For Spanish 'puzzled fathers' the preservation of their professional careers is no longer the one and paramount objective around which family used to be mobilised. Women's labour concerns have become as important, if not more decisive, as men's occupations.

The main family strategy of Spanish couples is to count on 'substitute mothers', usually a family or kin member living nearby. Note that three quarters of the working mothers have a close relative living in the same town; in more than half of the cases it is their own mother (Tobío, 2001). Help provided by 'granny-mothers' has become indispensable for Spanish working mothers, who can rely on them without reservations. Moreover, 'granny-mothers', as surrogate mothers, eliminate any feeling of 'guilt' working mothers might have as they engage in paid employment.

women. This latter figure translates into one child for every three potential mothers, precisely in the same age group in which eight out of ten women had declared their desire to have children (INE, 1999).

¹¹ However, the 'child gap' (ratio of actual over desired number of children) was 0.5, or half the 'ideal' figure of offspring, in Mediterranean Greece, Italy and Spain (Esping-Andersen, 2002: Table 2.10).

¹² Female activity rate in the public sector in 1997 was 39.4% as compared to the mean figure of 47.0% in the EU. Note, however, that in 1986 there was a difference of 12.8 points, which has been reduced to 7.6 points. In 1990, the proportion of female civil servants within the 25-29 age group was already of 105 for every 100 male public employees (Salido, 2000).

The transfer of caring responsibilities from young parents to grandparents or relatives has traditionally reinforced the cultural bases of the model of 'family and kin solidarity' in Southern Europe (Naldini, 2003). However, a long-standing perverse effect of this family micro-solidarity has traditionally resulted in a limited state intervention, usually passive and in many cases 'unfriendly', towards working mothers.

Two interrelated issues have emerged in debates about advancing gender equality within households, and mobilising women into paid work: the unequal sharing by family members of domestic responsibilities within the household, and the lack of external support for family life (child care facilities, personal social services and parental leaves). As regards the latter, and since 1995, maternal leaves in Spain cover up to 16 weeks with full salary for gainfully employees of the contributory Social Security system. It is also possible for fathers to take up to 4 of the 16 weeks of maternal leave, and for both working parents to have their respective leaves at the same time or successively. Note, however, that these last options were made effective in 2001 by only 1.3% of the total number of fathers entitled to it (Salido, 2002).

Debate is gradually gaining political momentum in Spain on policies of what some authors regard as a process of 'de-familisation'.¹³ It has been argued that women had to previously be 'commodified' as a first step to 'de-familisation' (Orloff, 1996). These processes should be mainly accomplished by state intervention. In Spain there is an ambivalent and uneasy relationship with top-down statistic policy-making. In political terms, it has been argued that *dirigiste* state intervention in family matters brings back memories of authoritarian policies during Franco's dictatorship (Valiente, 1995).

In cultural terms, debates on 'de-familisation' in a country where often mothers have taught their daughters to assume domestic activities as a female responsibility are sensitive.¹⁴ Discussions of 'women-friendly' policies necessarily involve the re-definition of household roles in the sharing of domestic work.¹⁵ The promotion of choice in either to do or not unpaid work, or to engage or not in paid work, continues to be a pending dilemma of far-reaching consequences in Spain.¹⁶ It influences not only women's family and working lives but also a good deal of NSR policy-making.

In recent years, some legislation has been implemented so that measures of 'positive discrimination' targeted on female employees aim at facilitating the conciliation of paid work and family life (*Ley de Conciliación de la Vida Familiar y Laboral*, 39/1999).¹⁷ Following the approval of the Law

¹³ The expression 'de-familisation' is subject to no little critique. It is generally meant as externalisation of household domestic work and is regarded as a 'win-win' --or 'positive sum'-- strategy for the development of national 'sheltered sectors' of personal social services (Esping-Andersen, 1999).

¹⁴ They have induced these practices in the belief that household management would effectively provide women with power to become the real 'bosses' within families (Guillén, 1997).

¹⁵ Some analyses sustain that there is no 'revolution' in the private field of couple's relations, and that the traditional model might persist despite unstable and gradual changes (Gutiérrez Sastre, 2002).

¹⁶ As Jane Lewis has put it in a wider context: "The problem is that women's complicated relationship to paid work, unpaid work, and welfare means that we have to consider their right not to engage in paid work (de-commodification) and by extension their right to do unpaid work, and also their right to do paid work (re-commodification) and by extension their right to not engage in unpaid work" (1997:173-4).

¹⁷ Among these: (a) the consideration of women as a priority group for labour hiring on permanent bases, and allowing an increase of this kind of contracts from 36,6% of total contracts in 1997 to 44% in 2001; (b) the 'cost zero program', which establishes an exemption in the payment of social contributions for new job contracts of substitution for maternity leaves; (c) insertion programmes for unemployed women; (d) the promotion of female entrepreneurs; or (e) the transformation of the 16-week parental leave into a family right rather than a disability entitlement (Salido, 2002).

39/1999, two other related pieces of legislation have been implemented which regulate maternity leave and a new risk benefit during the time of pregnancy, as well as maternity/paternity leaves concerning premature births, or post-birth hospitalisation.¹⁸ Further to this, since 2003 an annual tax break amounting to 1,200 Euros per child has been made available to all working mothers affiliated to the social security system. Beneficiaries can cash monthly the corresponding amount as an anticipated payment, which must be adjusted in the annual statement of income tax according to the characteristics of the taxpayer.

All these public interventions may be regarded as 'modest' measures in facilitating a degree of reconciliation between work and family for female employees. But they indicate a trend of a growing concern by society as a whole, and the political parties in particular, towards the issues raised by the NSR. Concerning services of day care provision it is unreasonable to foresee that 'granny mothers' will continue to be central actors in the main family strategy of Spanish working mothers. It is also unlikely that these arrangements will disappear overnight.¹⁹ However gradual is the transition, a considerable public effort must be addressed for the provision of care for children of working mothers but also for the frail elderly.

Controversy on these matters has been mainly between political parties, but it has not involved directly either the trade unions, the employers' associations or other major social actors. This uneven concern may indicate that the traditional view that family matters are an 'individual responsibility', rather than a general concern for the society as a whole, still persists. However, the debate is gaining political relevance and it most likely to become a contested electoral issue in the near future to come (Moreno, 2002).

Youth unemployment, activation and insecurity

Unemployment has long been identified as the leading social problem in Spain, the country with the highest level of joblessness population in the EU. Some observers continue to be puzzled by the stable social situation in the country, particularly concerning sections like the young, among whom unemployment rates reach percentages of around 40 and 45%, respectively, for males and females aged 20-24 years. Explanations rest upon two main considerations: (a) the considerable public expenditure related to unemployment benefits, which amounted to 12.5% of social spending in 1999, the highest among EU countries averaging 6.2 per cent in that year (EU, 2002); and (b) support to the unemployed by family and household networks of micro-solidarity.

The 'emerging' of informal tax-free employment remains as one of the main challenges for bringing the Spanish labour market into line with those of its European counterparts. All four Southern European countries were said to have the largest informal labour market as percentage of the GDP (Greece: 30.1%; Italy, 27.2%; Spain: 23.0 %; and Portugal: 22,8%). According to a much-criticised memorandum elaborated by the European Commission in March 1998, the 'underground' economy of Spain could be estimated between 10 and 23% of its GDP. The European average percentages were said to range between 7 and 16 % (Moreno, 2001).

Within this general context, families continue to provide stability and security for the young unemployed. These can often maintain lifestyles and have family emotional support without the

¹⁸ Decree Law on legislative development of the *Ley de Conciliacion (Real Decreto 1251/2001)* and Law on Urgent Measures for the Reform of the Labour Market (*Ley 12/2001*).

¹⁹ According to some lineal calculations, Italy and Spain would need to produce annual growth rates for day coverage three times higher than Denmark (standing at 57% after three decades of sustained development), if the they were to comply with the EU goal of reaching 60% of female employment by the year 2010 (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 62-3).

pressing need to take up jobs. However, one problem that is bound to 'mature' in the future is the inability for these young unemployed to complete working biographies so that they can have later access to 'old risk' entitlements of income maintenance and contributory pensions. On the other hand, the implicit intergenerational family pact by which older members usually transfer resources and material support to younger members is becoming increasingly 'untimely', as life expectancy rises continuously, and young member families face increasing material difficulties in 'standing on their own two feet'. Family formation is consequently postponed and the trend of low fertility is thus reinforced.

Training and workforce activation --introducing and modifying different sorts of job contracts so as to cut down labour costs and to improve incentives for hiring workers-- have been strengthened in recent decades. However, most of new jobs have been created on a temporary basis and many are of a precarious type as they do not generate stable working biographies for the achievement of contributory entitlements and full social rights.

In fact, the immediate effect brought about by deregulatory policies in recent years has been an exponential rise in the number of temporary and part-time occupations (now standing at around 40% of the total labour force). Note that in 1996 only 4% of all new jobs were established on a permanent basis. New contracts have benefited from fiscal subventions and have often consolidated the spurious practice of formalising *de jure* temporary contracts that replace *de facto* permanent working positions (Moreno, 2000).

As in other European countries, labour market activation seeks to counteract the perverse effects produced by the weakening of job security. In this respect, social reform is designed to meet problems of the welfare state that creates further difficulties for the lower skilled and labour market entrants. In turn, the emergence of these new social risks put further pressures on the family, which is losing --in a gradual but unequivocal manner-- its traditional capacity as an informal but very efficient social 'shock absorber'.

Care for the dependent elderly

The social problem of dependent elderly people is not new in Spain because some needs of dependent people are already protected under various social schemes of the social security system. However the dimension of the dependency problem is new in many senses, because of the impact of recent demographic and changes in the traditional patterns of care within families.

In 1999, and taking into account all levels of dependency the total dependent elderly people in Spain was around 1,167,504 (Rodríguez-Cabrero, 2002). Dependency of the frail elderly is bound to be aggravated because of the current transformations in the family informal care system.²⁰ Women are the overwhelming majority of informal carers (83%). Personal social services only protect around 3% of dependent population. Care received by friends, neighbours and private caregivers is simply residual. Private care by economic immigrants, mainly Latin Americans, is increasing as a main support to many middle-class and professional women primarily in urban areas.

²⁰ Although the majority of elderly people live independently those who are dependent live with a main caregiver permanently (59%) or temporarily (16%). Only 3% of elderly people live under institutional care, half of them in nursing homes. In terms of care, 73% of dependent people get all help they need (it reaches 76% when considering elderly people), 8% receive some care and 16% do not demand any personal care. Most of the families (87%) take by their own this very wide coverage of informal care (only 20% of caregivers receive some payment) (Rodríguez-Cabrero, 2002)

A growing demand of social services and cash benefits for the care of children and the elderly is being voiced by larger sections of the Spanish society, although not always in an interest-articulated manner. Family solidarity is still working strongly but demands are rising for public investments in NSR programmes (mainly community-care services: home help and day centres).

Concluding remarks

Economic problems, high levels of unemployment, a severe demographic imbalance and the abrupt decline of the traditional system of domestic care are challenging Spain's welfare settlements. In all areas analysed in this paper, family changes are the main thrust for renewal. In the last decades sacrifices made by the Spanish 'superwomen' have kept functional the state/market/ family triangle of welfare organisation. The traditional non-participation of women as relevant actors in political debates and policy-making²¹ has significantly changed as the increasing numbers of women in the Parliament illustrate (now reaching nearly 30% of all MPs in the Congress of Deputies).

It does not seem plausible to expect superwoman's daughters to reproduce past family strategies within households. Future re-arrangements will have profound implications for the Spanish welfare as it now stands. The transition to a new model will actively concern society as a whole. In so doing, what was considered to be a 'women's issue' would no longer be coped with 'behind closed doors'. Sacrifices made by Mediterranean 'superwomen' in the last decades have allowed not only a greater degree of gender equality for future generations and a general climate of social cohesion and economic prosperity, but they have indirectly challenged the political agenda on how Spanish welfare ought to be recast in the years to come.*

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²¹ An emphasis on women's individual civic and political rights has often left aside the interconnection between the domestic and the out-of-the-household areas, something to put into perspective against the political background of Francoism (Salido, 2002).

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