

## Is Spanish parental leave ‘traditionalising’ the gender distribution of childcare and housework?

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### Abstract

**Objective:** The question addressed in this study is the possible effect of mothers’ use of parental leave on the share of childcare and housework assumed by each parent.

**Background:** Whilst the length of parental leave is greater in Spain than in other European countries, as it is unpaid, take-up rates are low. Such leaves are taken more frequently and for longer periods by women than men.

**Method:** To determine the answer, two multivariate regression models were applied to National Statistics Institute 2018 Fertility Survey data. The main independent variables were fathers’ and mothers’ use of parental leave. The models also controlled for the effects of family and socio-economic variables on the share of childcare and housework assumed by each parent.

**Results:** The findings showed that mothers’ use of unpaid full-time parental leave traditionalises the distribution of domestic chores only when the leave extends beyond one year, whereas part-time leave-taking has no effect whatsoever. That such reversion to tradition can be neutralised when fathers take leaves attests to the advisability of encouraging paternal use. The effects apply to childcare only, however, for other household chores are still distributed along very traditional lines.

**Conclusion:** Unpaid parental leave use by mothers “traditionalizes” the allocation of childcare within the couple, but only when it takes longer than a year.

**Key words:** parental leave, gender, childcare



## 1. Introduction

One corollary to the challenge of balancing work and family life is the furtherance of intra-couple co-responsibility for unpaid work. European social policy has tended to jointly encourage balance and co-responsibility. One of the most prominent outcomes is the enactment of legislation establishing each individual parent's right to leave to care for their very young children (Karu & Tremblay, 2018).

Although the design and duration of such leaves vary across countries, three broad trends can be identified in Europe. The first is higher allowances for parents on leave; the second longer durations; and the third increasingly flexible eligibility requisites. Progress has been made in Spain in all three dimensions (Wall & Escobedo, 2009; Meil et al., 2021), although in essence the measures have revolved around extending the duration of paternity leave, with little change in the main characteristics of the others.

The extent to which such policies meet their stated objectives in terms of protecting employment or ensuring gender equality should be determined before any further action is taken in that direction. This study aims to contribute to an understanding of the effects of different types of leave, unpaid parental leave in particular, on how family responsibilities are shared by the two partners. According to the literature, the latter widen the gender gap in paid employment (Pettit & Hook, 2005; Boeckmann et al., 2015; Rossin-Slater 2017), in turn magnifying the imbalance in the distribution of unpaid work.

Spanish law provides both for well-paid but relatively short maternity and paternity leaves and the option to take longer unpaid leave. Denominated parental leave, it is used primarily by mothers (Meil et al., 2018; Bueno & Grau-Grau, 2020). Drawing from data collected in a survey targeting mothers, this study was designed to assess whether their use of such leaves 'traditionalises' the distribution of family responsibilities: in other words, whether a greater load of unpaid work is shouldered by women taking than those not taking parental leave. More specifically, it aimed to determine the relationship between the use of unpaid parental leave by Spanish mothers and how the time spent caring for children and performing household tasks is divided between the two partners.

The study contributes to the literature primarily in that it constitutes a first-time analysis of the effect of the duration of the leaves taken by the two adults in the family on the distribution of unpaid work in Spain. In addition, it draws a conceptual and empirical distinction between childcare and other domestic tasks. And thirdly, the analysis controls for the major variables affecting the distribution of unpaid work, especially the use of various types of leave by one and the other parent.

In this article a description of childcare leave policies and types of leave in place in Spain is followed by a review of the literature focusing on how unpaid domestic work is shared and the role in that respect played by parental leaves. A third section describes and substantiates the data sources and statistical analyses used, while a fourth sets out the results. The main conclusions, along with their implications for public policy, are set out under the fifth and last heading, which also addresses the methodological limitations affecting the study.

## 2. Parental leaves in Spain

Parental leaves have a long tradition in Spain, as maternity and breastfeeding leaves were introduced as early as 1923. In 1970 parental leave was introduced, albeit for mothers only, but was redefined as a family right in 1980 and as an individual right for both parents in 1999. Paternity leave was instituted in 2007, initially for less time than maternity leave, although it has been gradually extended (Wall & Escobedo, 2009).

In 2008 to 2018, the period covered by the database on which this study is based, mothers were entitled to 16 weeks of maternity leave, six of which were mandatory after delivery. The other 10 weeks were optional and could be taken by either parent. Until 2017 the other parent was entitled to up to two weeks of optional paternity leave, which was extended in that year to four weeks and in 2018 to five.

Only workers affiliated with social security for 180 days in the seven years prior (fewer for younger mothers) were eligible for maternity and paternity leave, both of which were remunerated at full pay up to a generously high ceiling. In 2021 those two leaves were replaced by a single, non-transferable, 16-week childbirth and childcare leave at full pay for both parents. Each parent has since been entitled also to full-time parental leave up to the child's third year and to part-time parental leave until the child is twelve years old. That leave may be taken uninterrupted or unconditionally split into several shorter periods. Employees opting for part-time leave can shorten their workday by one-eighth to one-half. Although such leave is unpaid, employees are accredited with making social security contributions throughout, with the concomitant enhancement of pension payable, health cover and leave entitlements. Workers taking full-time parental leave for one year or less are entitled to return to the same job. Thereafter, they are guaranteed only the same category of job, though that guarantee is more generous in the public sector (Meil et al., 2021).

While paid maternity and paternity leaves are widely used by eligible parents, unpaid parental leave, particularly full-time leave, is seldom used and is taken primarily by mothers (Meil et al., 2018). According to the *Fertility Survey 2018* (see Methodology), 82.5 % of mothers under 55 years of age eligible at the time their first child was born took maternity leave and 84.9 % when their second child was born. Rates are higher among younger mothers: 90.7 % of women having children after 2007 opted to take the leave (Table 1) for a mean 15.2 weeks. While paternity leave use rates are lower, take-up is fairly high: 65.5 % use it for the full duration stipulated according to women respondents (Table 1), although 74 % of the male respondents claimed to have taken the leave.

Parental leave, by contrast, is much less frequently used: 15.5 % of mothers of children born after 2007 took full-time leave, mostly for less than one year, while 16.5 % took part-time leave (Table 1). The mothers more prone to taking such unpaid leave were in general more highly educated and had both a steady job and a partner likewise with permanent employment, and valued childcare more highly than paid work (Meil et al., 2018). Based on the information provided by women respondents, only 2.4 % of fathers benefited from full- or part-time parental leave. According to previous studies, the profile of those who did was a university graduate employed in the public sector or by a large corporation (Lapuerta et al., 2011).

### 3. Distribution of unpaid work and use of parental leaves

Three key social structure-determined elements condition the distribution of unpaid household work: (1) the social context surrounding gender and child-raising roles, i.e., social and cultural expectations associated with fatherhood and motherhood; (2) job market characteristics (working hours, salaries, etc.); and (3) family policies. Further to 'doing gender' theory, gender roles adopt the form of and are built around daily social practice and interaction associated with paid and unpaid work (West & Zimmerman, 1987). That premise contends that people, aware that their actions will be judged in terms of such gender-based expectations, act and describe their conduct accordingly. Gender roles exist against a backdrop, among others, of the nature of the job market and public policy, which at the same time have the potential to foster change in that regard (Coltrane, 2000; Risman, 2017), as observed in childcare and gender roles and practice in recent decades.

In most European countries, the distribution of tasks whereby women bear the major share of unpaid work has been redefined to some extent. In Spain for instance, that change is attendant upon women's flocking to the labour market in recent decades and childcare policies for pre-schoolers ( $\leq 4$ ). The offering in number of places in formal care for 0- to 3-year-olds has grown substantially in the last 20 years, along with the availability of public subsidies of variable extent and nature. Whilst such services are scantily used by families in the first year of life (just 7 % of  $\leq 12$  month babies receive care), uptake rises substantially in the second (38.5 %) and third (68.9 %) (Meil et al., 2018). Family support, primarily from grandparents, continues to be a determinant. The percentage of cover (14.9 %) doubles that for outside care in the first year and remains high in the second (20 %) and third (14.4 %) (Meil et al., 2018).

In parallel, the mean amount of time devoted by men to childcare has risen in post-industrial societies (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017), Spain's among them (Borrás et al., 2018; Flaquer et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the unequal distribution of responsibilities continues to be the norm in most families (Sullivan et al., 2014; Domínguez-Folgueras et al., 2015). In view of such persistent inequality and following on the Scandinavian lead, many countries have introduced specific leave rights for fathers only, as their use has been shown to be associated with greater paternal involvement in childcare in the long term (Moss et al., 2020).

The effects of parental leaves tend to vary significantly depending on design and user characteristics. A substantial corpus of research shows that full-time parental leave has a variable impact on employment. Pettit and Hook (2005), for example, analysing time-use surveys in 19 countries, found the relationship between parental leave and mothers' employment to fit an inverted U-shaped curve: whereas short-term leaves, associated with an early return to the workplace, had a beneficial effect on employment, when taken for longer times the effect tended to be adverse. Using similar data for approximately the same countries, Boeckmann et al. (2015) show that employment was impacted not only by leave duration but also by remuneration: unpaid leaves tended to be associated with wider employment rate and working hour gaps between mothers and childless women, while paid leaves were either neutral or associated with narrower differences. In a number of countries, employees returning to paid work after full-time parental leave have been

observed to have lower incomes (Görllich & De Grip, 2008; Nielsen, 2009; Hegewish & Gornik, 2011), an effect found to intensify with leave duration. Rossin-Slater (2017) summarised results from a series of countries, concluding that leaves of 1 year or less typically raised the likelihood of returning to work, with a favourable or neutral impact on women's medium- to long-term employment rates and earnings. In contrast, they found entitlement to longer leaves to have an adverse effect on women's long-term employment and salaries. Lower levels of engagement in paid work, either in the form of longer leave time or shorter working hours, as well as broader gender wage gaps, have also been shown to translate into a more gender-intensive division of childcare and housework (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010).

Other authors have reported maternal use of unpaid long-term leave to be associated with less egalitarian intra-partner sharing of childcare and housework. In an analysis of time-use surveys conducted in 19 countries, Hook (2010) identified a wider gender gap where long unpaid parental leaves were in place than where leaves were shorter, fathers were eligible users and public childcare was more readily available. A study published by Saraceno and Keck (2008) on different combinations of parental leave provisions and childcare services in several countries concluded that long-term leaves may reinforce existing gender inequality in childcare distribution. Analysing German and British panel data, Schober (2011) observed that policies extending mothers' leaves affected the division of housework along gender lines not directly, but as a consequence of their impact on the duration of the interruption in mothers' paid work.

Research has also consistently shown that fathers' use of leaves has a beneficial effect on their involvement in childcare, possibly offsetting the return to traditional patterns induced by women's long-term use of parental leave, while the impact of their engagement in housework is less well documented. Analysing data from the EU Working Conditions Survey and controlling for job characteristics, Meil (2013) noted that leave-using fathers were more frequently involved in childcare irrespective of leave duration, although the longer the leave, the more intense their involvement. He observed similar results for their engagement in housework, albeit in terms not of the amount of time spent daily but in frequency of participation per week. Almqvist and Duvander (2014) working in Sweden and Bünning (2015) in Germany observed that fathers' use of parental leaves, even where short term, prompted more egalitarian sharing of childcare tasks. Their involvement in domestic chores, however, was found to rise only when the duration of parental leave was longer. Huerta et al. (2014) also reported greater participation in childcare by fathers who took paternity leave in Australia, Denmark, United Kingdom and United States.

Studies conducted in Spain have also shown the use of full- and part-time parental leave to have adverse consequences for women's careers and working conditions (Meil et al., 2018; Fernández et al., 2020). Their more intensive use of such leaves also weakens their negotiating power with their partners, often determining less egalitarian sharing of family responsibilities. Men's use of leaves, in turn, is associated with lowering the motherhood penalty that characterises the labour market (Fernández-Cornejo et al., 2018) as well as with their greater involvement in routine childcare. Whilst that effect intensifies with leave duration (Fernández-Cornejo et al., 2016), it is not observed in connection with other household chores (Romero-Balsas, 2015).

This study sought to determine the degree to which women's use of full-time parental leave has a traditionalising effect on how couples share unpaid work in the household, controlling for the effects of both the two partners' working status and leave use. The analysis conducted contributes to the state of the art by exploring the impact of leave policy based not on legally acknowledged leaves, as in most of the aforementioned comparative studies, but on the effective use of leaves, which may differ significantly from acknowledged entitlement. It also addresses all the leaves available and their use by both parents rather than the use of just one type of leave or by one parent only. And it analyses their individual rather than the pooled impact on the gender distribution of childcare and household tasks.

Drawing from the literature, the first hypothesis (H1) explored here is that leave use by mothers is associated with a more unequal distribution of unpaid work and the longer the leave the wider the gap. The second (H2) contends that a similar relationship can be identified for part-time parental leave, which also entails less intense employment. According to the third hypothesis (H3), leaves taken by fathers at least partially neutralise the traditionalising effect of mothers' unpaid leaves. The fourth (H4) sustains that the use of parental leave, whether part or full-time, affects childcare and household tasks to the same extent. These hypotheses were tested by conducting an innovative analysis that introduces: two dependent variables to distinguish between the effects of leaves on childcare and housework; and controlling for the duration of full-time parental leave, parents' employment status and paternal use of leaves, among other independent variables identified in the literature.

#### 4. Database and method

The *Fertility Survey 2018* conducted by Spain's National Statistics Institute provided the database for this study. Although the survey was designed to identify the determinants of fertility, the questionnaire also contained items on the use of parental leave by both parents and the intra-family distribution of housework and childcare. It was conducted among Spanish residents in the spring of 2018 on a representative sample of 14 556 women and 2619 men between the ages of 18 and 55. In light of the fairly small number of male respondents, this study focused on the sub-sample of women. Limiting that sub-sample to women who had given birth after 2007, were eligible for parental leave and lived in a heterosexual relationship yielded a total of 2731 respondents. Two OLS linear regression models were applied to the data to analyse the effects of unpaid parental leave on childcare.

##### 4.1 *Dependent variables*

Data on family responsibility sharing collected in the survey distinguished between childcare and domestic chores. The distribution of childcare tasks was recorded as the replies to questions on 'who is primarily responsible' for each of the following ten tasks: dressing; bathing; putting them to bed; planning their meals; staying at home when they

are ill; playing; helping with homework; taking them to school; buying their clothes; and choosing their extracurricular activities. The range consequently covered both instrumental / organisational tasks and play, with a predominance of the former. The possible replies to the multiple-choice questionnaire included: the woman respondent (scored here as 1), her male partner (3) and equally shared (2). Other options (grandparents, domestic staff, the children themselves, etc.) were scored as 0. An indicator was defined consisting in the mean responses to the 10 dimensions of childcare. Its values ranged from 1 to 3, with 1 meaning all tasks were performed by the mother, 3 that all were the responsibility of her partner and 2 equal sharing. A Cronbach alpha of 0.75 was found for internal consistency of the responses.

The distribution of housework was determined by asking the woman respondent to estimate the percentage of household chores she performed, the percentage performed by her partner and the percentage attributable to others. The variable studied was gender in/equality in the distribution of responsibilities, *measured as the percentage of work done by the father minus the percentage done by the mother*.

## 4.2 Independent variables

Information on the use of parental leaves was drawn from the replies to a filter question on whether the respondent and her partner were eligible when each child was born, i.e., whether they were employed or receiving unemployment benefits. Eligible mothers were asked whether they had taken maternity leave or full-time or part-time parental leave (such as shorter working hours) and to specify the duration (except for part-time parental leave, where the duration was not recorded). The other parent was asked the same questions. The information in the database was used to build the following dummy variables: mothers' use of maternity leave and of part-time parental leave, whilst their use of full-time parental leave was further divided into four dummy variables defined in terms of leave duration (less than 3 months, 3 to 6 months, 6 to 12 months and over 12 months). Only two dummy variables were defined for the other parent, given the scant use of parental leave by that set of respondents: partner used paternity leave; and partner used parental leave. Leave use scored as a value of 1 in all cases.

## 4.3 Control variables

Men's involvement in childcare and housework depends on many factors (see Aassve et al., 2014, for a summary). The proxy variable defined to measure time availability was time spent in paid work, distinguishing between non-employment, part-time employment and full-time employment by both partners, as shown on the questionnaire. The proxy variables for housework load included the youngest child's age, the *number of children* (grouping families with three or more children into a single category) and the presence of *paid domestic support*. The proxy for the effect of role ideology was *parents' level of schooling*, measured on a 10-point scale, ranging from no schooling (0) to a post-graduate degree (9). Each partner's relative power in the relationship was measured by *calculating the difference in their respective incomes*, using three categories: the male partner earned more than the

woman (reference); both partners earned about the same (1); and the woman earned more than her partner (2). The means and standard deviations found for all the variables used in the model are listed in Table 1.

*Table 1:* Model variables: means and standard deviations

	Mean	Standard deviation
Housework index	-31.96	32.75
Childcare index	1.63	0.33
Mother used maternity leave	0.91	0.29
Mother used 1- to 3-month full-time parental leave	0.04	0.19
Mother used 4- to 6-month full-time parental leave	0.03	0.17
Mother used 7- to 12-month full-time parental leave	0.05	0.21
Mother used >12-month full-time parental leave	0.04	0.19
Mother used part-time parental leave	0.16	0.37
Father used paternity leave	0.65	0.48
Father used full- or part-time parental leave	0.02	0.15
Mother not employed	0.21	0.41
Mother employed part-time	0.23	0.42
Father not employed	0.27	0.44
Father employed part-time	0.04	0.20
Age of the youngest child	4.46	2.98
Number of children	1.79	0.66
Paid household help	0.13	0.34
Mother's level of schooling	5.83	1.97
Father's level of schooling	5.17	2.08
Mother's and father's earnings similar	0.27	0.44
Mother earns more than father	0.19	0.39

*Source:* Authors' own elaboration, based on microdata from Spanish Fertility Survey, 2018.

## 5. Results and discussion

Table 2 gives the results delivered by the multivariate model used to analyse the effects of leave-taking on the gender distribution of childcare tasks. Use of maternity leaves by mothers yielded no significant effect on how childcare is shared. That finding may be attributable to the generalised use of such leave (Meil et al., 2018), the fact that all but the very highest income earners receive full pay and its 16-week maximum duration.

The present study showed use of full-time parental leave after maternity leave to be associated with more uneven sharing in childcare tasks, a finding consistent with reports for other European countries where lengthy leaves have been related to a more traditional distribution of childcare tasks (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010; Saraceno & Keck, 2008; O'Brien, 2009). In Spain care was only found to be more traditional when parental leave was taken for over 1 year ( $b=-0.085$ ; significance  $p<0.05$ ). That effect is in line with



the guarantee of post-full-time parental leave employment provided by law, for return to the same job is ensured during the first year only (although return to a similar position is guaranteed for longer periods). The inference drawn from these data is that besides the possible absence of other work-life balance alternatives, many women who adopt this decision are more family-minded, meaning that they prize caring for their children over their career. Further support for that premise can be found in the fact that most full-time parental leave-takers opt to return to work before a full year has elapsed (Lapuerta et al., 2011, Romero-Balsas, 2022). The finding whereby the adverse effects appeared beginning after the first year of full-time leave is consistent with the results for different countries summarised by Rossin-Slater (2017) on the adverse effects on employment after 1 year, but not earlier.

The statistically insignificant coefficient observed for use of part-time parental leave, on the contrary, attests to the absence of any effect of that variable on childcare sharing. The model results ( $b=-0.035$ ;  $p<0.05$ ) cannot be said, however, to infer that mothers working part-time did not devote more hours to childcare than when working full time, but rather only that the effects upon leave finalisation did not reinforce intra-household inequality. The possible explanation is that as a rule working hours are shortened only minimally (Meil et al., 2018).

Like earlier findings (Fernández-Cornejo et al., 2016; Meil, 2013; Tamm, 2019; Huerta et al., 2014; Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Bünning, 2015), the present results were indicative of a direct relationship between the use of parental leave by male parents and greater co-responsibility. That relationship was observed both when fathers took paternity leave (as most do, for the benefit equals the full salary except in the highest income brackets) and when they took unpaid parental leave, as only a small percentage did (Meil et al., 2018). The model yielded coefficient  $b$  values of 0.047 for paternity leave and 0.147 for parental leave, both at significance  $<0.001$ . The inference is that the traditionalising effects of mothers' long-term parental leave may be offset by leave use by fathers.

Further to the findings for the dummy variables for employment-related factors, fuller maternal engagement in paid work induced a fairer distribution of domestic chores. In households where the mother was not employed ( $b=-0.124$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) or worked part time ( $b=-0.035$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), childcare tasks were reported to be shared along more traditional lines than in families where they worked full time. That relationship between a lesser engagement in paid work and stronger commitment to childcare was not observed where the father was the non-working parent, however. Nor was any relationship found between fathers' part-time work and more egalitarian task-sharing.

While the children were young and require more intense care, more of the burden was observed to be shouldered by mothers than when the children were older ( $b=-0.005$ ,  $p<0.1$ ). Family size (number of children) had no significant impact, however. The presence of paid childcare appeared to lighten the load borne by fathers, for such households tended to lean toward more traditional childcare practices ( $b=-0.072$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

*With regards to the relationship between parents' level of schooling and involvement in childcare we find different results for mothers and fathers.* In keeping with earlier reports attesting to more intense involvement in childcare among fathers with a higher level of schooling (Sullivan et al., 2014), the present results indicated that more highly educated fathers shared such tasks more equally ( $b=0.024$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). That was not borne out by the

data for mothers with a high level of schooling, however, where the variable was associated with greater inequality ( $b=-0.020$   $p<0.001$ ), perhaps attesting to a more demanding opinion of what equality means for such mothers. *Regarding income differences*, the higher the mother's relative purchasing power, the more equally childcare was shared. The data showed that to be the case whether the mother's earnings were the same as ( $b=0.082$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) or greater than the father's ( $b=0.121$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

Table 2: Factors conditioning childcare practices among parents

Variable	Coeff. b	Standard deviation	Coeff. $\beta$	t	Sig.
Constant	1.646	.037		45.064	.000
Mother used maternity leave	-.019	.022	-.017	-.867	.386
Mother used 1- to 3-month full-time parental leave (reference: parental leave not used)	.050	.031	.030	1.625	.104
Mother used 4- to 6-month full-time parental leave	.015	.035	.008	.420	.674
Mother used 7- to 12-month full-time parental leave	-.003	.029	-.002	-.106	.916
Mother used >12-month full-time parental leave	-.085	.032	-.050	-2.679	.007
Mother used part-time parental leave	-.024	.017	-.028	-1.452	.147
Father used paternity leave	.047	.014	3.41	3.416	.001
Father used full- or part-time parental leave	.147	.040	.069	3.701	.000
Mother not employed (ref. employed full-time)	-.124	.017	-.156	-7.247	.000
Mother employed part-time	-.035	.016	-.045	-2.220	.026
Father not employed (ref. employed full-time)	.007	.014	.009	.472	.637
Father employed part-time	.053	.030	.033	1.743	.081
Age of the youngest child	-.005	.002	-.046	-2.449	.014
Number of children	-.011	.009	-.023	-1.230	.219
Paid household help	-.072	.019	-.076	-3.839	.000
Mother's level of schooling	-.020	.004	-.118	-5.157	.000
Father's level of schooling	.024	.004	.154	6.825	.000
Mother's and father's earnings similar (ref.: mother earns less)	.082	.015	.113	5.588	.000
Mother earns more than father	.121	.017	.147	6.979	.000
R squared	.093				
Number of cases	2726				

Source: Authors' own elaboration, based on microdata from Spanish Fertility Survey, 2018.

Table 3 shows the impact of using parental leaves on the distribution by gender of household tasks, measured as the difference between the percentage of time devoted by *the father minus the percentage devoted by the mother*. As in childcare, neither the use of maternity leave nor of part-time parental leave had any effect on the share of the burden, although for household tasks, no effect was observed irrespective of the duration of the mother's leave of absence. Analogously, no relationship was identified between leave use among fathers and task distribution. The inference may be that parental leaves are construed and used solely to care for children and not for other household tasks.

Table 3: Factors conditioning gender inequality in the distribution of housework between partners

Variable	Coeff. b	Standard deviation	Coeff. $\beta$	t	Sig.
Constant	-32.498	4.288		-7.579	.000
Mother used maternity leave	-3.163	1.675	-.049	-1.888	.059
Mother used 1- to 3-month full-time parental leave (reference: parental leave not used)	2.921	3.108	.018	.940	.347
Mother used 4- to 6-month full-time parental leave	-1.300	3.453	-.007	-.376	.707
Mother used 7- to 12-month full-time parental leave	5.424	2.893	.036	1.875	.061
Mother used >12-month full-time parental leave	-4.977	3.221	-.030	-1.545	.122
Mother used part-time parental leave	-1.062	1.680	-.013	-.632	.528
Father used paternity leave	1.584	1.444	.023	1.097	.273
Father used full- or part-time parental leave	6.925	4.043	.034	1.713	.087
Mother not employed (ref. employed full-time)	-15.697	1.862	-.186	-8.429	.000
Mother employed part-time	-6.557	1.629	-.085	-4.025	.000
Father not employed (ref. employed full-time)	-2.217	1.513	-.030	-1.466	.143
Father employed part-time	3.291	3.202	.020	1.028	.304
Age of the youngest child	-.440	.216	-.040	-2.036	.042
Number of children	-.879	1.258	-.018	-.699	.485
Paid household help	5.600	1.921	.060	2.915	.004
Mother's level of schooling	-.112	.398	-.007	-.282	.778
Father's level of schooling	1.317	.366	.084	3.601	.000
Mother's and father's earnings similar (ref.: mother earns less)	4.567	1.536	.063	2.974	.003
Mother earns more than father	8.356	1.801	.103	4.640	.000
R squared	.095				
Number of cases	2731				

Source: Authors' own elaboration, based on microdata from Spanish Fertility Survey, 2018

Likewise as in childcare, household task-sharing was affected by the mother's but not by the father's employment status. When mothers were not employed ( $b=-15.697$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) or employed part-time ( $b=-6.557$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) domestic tasks were shared less equally. Fathers' employment status had no impact on task-sharing.

Only one of the two variables relating to children impacted household task-sharing. Whereas family size had no significant effect, the age of the youngest child did: the older the age the wider the gender gap ( $b=-0.440$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). That may denote generational differences, with parents of older children tending to behave along more traditional lines (Domínguez-Folgueras, 2015).

Level of schooling was observed to have a bearing on the gender distribution of household tasks only for fathers: those with a higher level ( $b=1.317$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) adopted a less traditional allocation of these tasks than other men.

Income imbalance, in turn, was a determinant in household task sharing, as in childcare. The opportunity cost, along with income-based bargaining power asymmetries, may explain more egalitarian sharing among parents with similar earnings ( $b=4.567$ ,  $p>0.05$ ). The effect was more intense when the mother earned more than the father ( $b=8.356$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

## 6. Conclusions

Analyses of the effect of parental leaves are a key element in designing policies that both meet their stated objectives and do so cost-effectively. Such analyses are intrinsic in reviewing gender structures (Risman, 2017) that combine socio-cultural expectations with labour market conditions and public policies. The general aim of the present article was to determine the possible relationship between the use of unpaid leave by Spanish mothers and the way couples share the time devoted to unpaid work. The findings showed that whereas mothers' use of full-time parental leave for periods of over 1 year was associated with greater inequality in the distribution of childcare, no such relationship was observed in the event of shorter term leaves. The impact of leave-taking for over 1 year may be attributable to legal provisions whereby return to the same position is not guaranteed after 12 months, perhaps weakening the incentive to resume employment and enhancing dedication to childcare. That finding deviates from earlier results (Saraceno & Keck, 2008; Pettit & Hook, 2005; Boeckmann et al., 2015) according to which mothers' use of unpaid leave of whatsoever duration amplifies inequality. A number of external factors may underlie this divergence, one possibly being the selective bias inherent in the use of the leave. As shown, parental leaves are taken primarily by women with higher levels of schooling, which in itself may mitigate the traditionalising effect, only observed after the first year. At the same time, it alerts to a limitation to the range of this harmonising resource, which may not be within reach of all social groups.

Nor was any relationship observed between leave use by either parent and partner sharing in household tasks outside childcare. The lesser satisfaction deriving from such tasks than from childcare (Domínguez-Folgueras, 2015) may determine greater reluctance to redistribute them, despite the socialising effect of leaves (Moss et al., 2020). The

inferences would appear to be, on the one hand, that it is harder to tackle the unequal distribution of non-childcare household chores with leave policy, and on the other that women's use of full-time parental leaves does not deepen the imbalance in task-sharing in the short or the long term.

In line with that reasoning, the present analysis similarly failed to identify any relationship between taking maternity leave (fully paid for up to 16 weeks) and the persistence of the traditional distribution of unpaid work. That partially confirms H1, insofar as such a traditionalising effect was observed in full-time parental leaves taken for over 1 year and confined to childcare. It would disprove H4, however for no such effect was observed in connection with other household chores. As the findings attested to no significant relationship between mothers' use of part-time parental leave and greater inequality in the distribution of unpaid work, H2 likewise went unconfirmed. The explanation may be that part-time parental leave does not entail full departure from paid employment or any detriment to working conditions.

These results would indicate that parental leaves widen intra-parental inequality only as regards childcare and only when mothers waive paid employment by taking full-time parental leave for more than 12 months. In other words, the traditionalising effect studied is simultaneous with the loss of an employee's entitlement to return to their former position. That being the case, one area meriting study would be whether extending the entitlement period might contribute to women's ongoing interest in keeping their job and mitigate the adverse effect of leave-taking on the distribution of childcare. Qualitative analyses would be desirable in this regard to explore the reasons women decide to continue (or otherwise) full-time parental leave after 1 year. That would reveal whether such women construe that as a turning point in the short-term and emotional detachment from paid employment.

H3, in turn, was only partially confirmed, for men's use of leaves was associated with more egalitarian distribution of childcare but not with more intense participation in other household tasks. Male leave-taking consequently neutralised the traditionalising effect of women's, but not in all respects. Those findings reinforce the importance of analysing the effects of leaves in terms of the two parents' behaviour in response to the benefits available to them. While also supporting the efficacy of policies encouraging fathers' use of parental leave in narrowing gender inequalities, they identify their limitations in that regard.

The present study is also subject to a number of limitations. Firstly, whereas the data source was cross-sectional, a longitudinal survey would have more consistently revealed the causalities inferred. Secondly, as the distribution of unpaid work was measured from the mothers' perspective, the results would need to be cross-referenced with sources such as time-use survey data based on diaries, preferably kept by both partners. Those considerations aside, the study casts new, rigorous light on the effects of full-time parental leave on the intra-household distribution of domestic chores. The findings may prove useful for designing parental leave policies that more effectively further co-responsibility for childcare by men and women.

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## Data availability statement

The data used in this article (Fertility Survey 2018) is available in the Spanish Statistical Office (INE) webpage:

([https://www.ine.es/dyngs/INEbase/es/operacion.htm?c=Estadistica\\_C&cid=1254736177006&menu=resultados&idp=1254735573002#!tabs-1254736195425](https://www.ine.es/dyngs/INEbase/es/operacion.htm?c=Estadistica_C&cid=1254736177006&menu=resultados&idp=1254735573002#!tabs-1254736195425)).

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## Information in German

### Deutscher Titel

„Traditionalisiert“ die spanische Elternzeit die geschlechtsspezifische Verteilung von Kinderbetreuung und Hausarbeit?

### Zusammenfassung

**Fragestellung:** Diese Studie untersucht, ob die Inanspruchnahme der Elternzeit durch Mütter die Verteilung der Kinderbetreuung und Hausarbeit zwischen den Eltern beeinflusst.

**Hintergrund:** Obwohl die Dauer der Elternzeit in Spanien länger ist als in anderen europäischen Ländern, bleibt die Inanspruchnahmequote sehr gering, da sie unbezahlt ist. Elternzeit wird häufiger und länger von Frauen genommen als von Männern.

**Methode:** Unter Verwendung von Daten der Fertilitätserhebung 2018 des Spanischen Statistischen Instituts wurden zwei multivariate Regressionsmodelle berechnet. Die wichtigste unabhängige Variable war die Inanspruchnahme der Elternzeit durch Väter und Mütter. Die Modelle kontrollierten auch die Auswirkungen familiärer und sozioökonomischer Variablen auf den Anteil der Kinderbetreuung und Hausarbeit, der von jedem Elternteil übernommen wurde.

**Ergebnisse:** Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Inanspruchnahme der unbezahlten Vollzeitelternzeit durch Mütter die Verteilung der Hausarbeit nur dann traditionalisiert, wenn die Elternzeit länger als ein Jahr dauert, während die Teilzeitelternzeit keinerlei Wirkung zeigt. Dass eine solche Traditionalisierung neutralisiert werden kann, wenn Väter Elternzeit nehmen, legt nahe, die väterliche Nutzung zu fördern. Diese Effekte gelten nur für die Kinderbetreuung, andere Hausarbeiten verteilen sich aber noch sehr traditionell.

**Schlussfolgerung:** Die Inanspruchnahme unbezahlter Elternzeit durch Mütter „traditionalisiert“ die Aufteilung der Kinderbetreuung zwischen den Eltern, allerdings nur, wenn sie länger als ein Jahr dauert.

**Schlagwörter:** Elternzeit, Geschlechterungleichheit, Kinderbetreuung

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