

WORKS AND CARE

How Can We Generate Feminist Work-Life Balance Policies and Encourage Co-responsibility?

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The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the conflict between our personal, family and work lives into sharp focus, especially for women. Existing gender inequalities have worsened, working has become more difficult, and the urgent need for care in all areas has been exposed. (Corbera et al., 2020; Alon et al., 2020; Wenham et al., 2020, Farré and González, 2020; Eurofound, 2020a). There is, therefore, a pressing need for a feminist reflection and review of the possibilities, requirements and policies that must be implemented to regenerate responsibilities and facilitate reconciliation and enrichment between the various spheres of life for all.

In this context, it makes more sense than ever to take advantage of the transformative potential of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, approved on the 25th of September 2015 by the 193 Member States of the United Nations. The Agenda aspires to a 'world in which all women and girls enjoy full gender equality and where all legal, social and

economic obstacles to their empowerment have been removed; a just, equitable, tolerant, open and socially inclusive world, in which the needs of the most vulnerable are met'. To achieve this, the 2030 Agenda sets out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), one of which, SDG 5, is dedicated to gender equality. At the same time, the 2030 Agenda resolution states that 'achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a decisive contribution to our progress towards all the Goals and targets'.

The EU 2020-2025 Gender Equality Strategy responds to SDG 5 and the condition of gender equality as a cross-cutting priority in all SDGs. Key objectives of the European strategy include closing gender gaps in the labour market; achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy; addressing the gender pay and pension gaps; closing the gender care gap and achieving gender balance in decision-making. It also sets out goals related to eradicating gender-based violence and challenging gender stereotypes. Its implementation will have a lot of bearing on compliance with European directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance, as well as on our steady progress towards achieving the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In Catalonia, we're contemplating an overhaul of our national status to become a republic, and we must ensure that our journey towards this possibility is feminist at its constituent base (Verge et al., 2019).

Our approach to work-life balance has seriously underestimated the care issue, prioritising the masculinised labour market and its demands instead

The latest Eurobarometer on work-life balance shows that Spain has one of the lowest work-life balance satisfaction levels in Europe (European Commission, 2018). This difficulty in achieving a balance between our family and work life has a negative impact on well-being, health, productivity, the family and emotional environment, and the social and political participation of individuals, among others (Allen et al., 2000). Furthermore, these impacts are unequally distributed between genders and are deeply affected by other intersectionalities, such as place of origin, age, class, and functional diversity. Work-life balance has long been a demand of feminists and is increasingly being called for by younger generations (Asirvatham & Humphries-Kil, 2017). Yet current changes in employment, social, and demographic trends are making it even harder to achieve, and Catalonia is no exception.

On the labour market

In recent decades we've seen a marked increase in the number of women in commodified work, particularly in mothers with children under 18 years of age. The dual-earner family model, where both parents engage in paid work, has become predominant. We're making progress but at the cost of far too many difficulties and imbalances. In our case specifically, we still haven't reached the European target of getting 75% of women and men into paid employment.

Significant gender inequalities and discriminations persist in commodified labour as a whole, such as the wage gap, the sexual division of labour, gender violence in the workplace, as well as the 'sticky floor' or 'glass ceiling' that makes access to positions of prestige and responsibility impossible (Mata, 2019; Serrano, 2019). Moreover, part-time work is still seen as an intrinsically female phenomenon, and much of it is still involuntary. Overall, we're dealing with a failing system based on an alliance between capitalism and patriarchy, which means that opportunities to achieve work-life balance, especially for women, are still few and far between (Verge et al., 2019; Perez Orozco, 2014). Our approach to work-life balance has seriously underestimated the care issue, prioritising the masculinised labour market and its demands instead.

In addition, technology has further blurred the boundaries between work and personal life, changing their pace and intensity. In some situations, telecommuting generates more conflict in our lives; in others, it can facilitate balance (Eurofound, 2020b). Although COVID-19 has accentuated the role of telecommuting, it has only sought to respond to the needs of commodified work. Meanwhile, the provision of face-to-face care services has declined. Has it, therefore, become just another tool for maintaining the capitalist and patriarchal system? In fact, it may have been responsible for overburdening women, a refeminisation of care, and perpetuating the public underestimation of care requirements and their impact on life balances (Alon et al., 2020; Eurofound, 2020a). Thus, we also need a review that puts the spotlight on care.

On care work

Target 5.4 of SDG 5 is directly related to the care economy and calls for us to recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family.

The COVID-19 crisis has proved just how crucial the need for care is. Our deeply capitalist and patriarchal economic and social system ensures that the task of social reproduction still primarily rests with women (Carrasco, 2014; Pérez Orozco, 2014). Care work, which meets the most basic physical and emotional requirements for our survival, is still carried out, mostly free of charge, in homes and by women, mothers, grandmothers, or other carers (Verge et al., 2019; Vives, 2019). The sexual division of labour that generates additional gender discrimination allows governments and companies to shirk their responsibilities. A sustained belittling of the care sector is also relevant (Torns and Recio, 2012, Fulladosa et al., 2019).

Although care needs are constant, there are also significant variations in our life cycles as a result of our differing sociodemographic situations. Our ageing population intensifies the need to address situations of dependency, and the need for care is a growing concern (Roig, 2020). Furthermore, around 8% of the population of Catalonia has a recognised functional diversity. Single parenting has also increased significantly in Europe and Catalonia, and women head the vast majority of these families. Moreover, there are people with specific

care and reconciliation issues, such as women interns or those with transnational families. These situations not only increase vulnerability and the risk of poverty but also show that heteropatriarchal family values and hitherto established policy responses have been inadequate (Almeda et al., 2016).

The responsibility for care work must be shifted from the individual to the collective: governments and public institutions must assume greater responsibility for care

The increasing age of motherhood and decreasing fertility rate, in addition to the opinion polls reminding us that women are not able to have all the children they would like, are further proof of how hard it is to achieve balance (Esteve et al., 2016; Vives, 2019). Women, especially, find it difficult to reconcile the ideals of motherhood and employment that are materially impossible to achieve. Taking into account the total workload, paid and unpaid, women are working harder than men. They still do almost twice as many household chores and account for the vast majority of paid care workers. Many of these jobs are precarious, often in the form of internships or based on discriminatory contracts; even more so in the case of migrant women (Fulladosa et al., 2019). Many feminists are calling for care to be the cornerstone of our society in order to definitively guarantee the sustainability of our lives and ensure quality of life for the population as a whole (Perez Orozco, 2014; Fulladosa et al., 2019).

Co-responsibilities, public included

For all the aforementioned reasons, the responsibility for care must be shifted from the individual to the collective. Following the feminist premise that the personal is political, governments and public institutions must assume greater responsibility for care. It's time to foster a culture of care which contributes to a work-life balance that enriches all of our lives (Greenhaus, & Powell, 2006). The increased responsibility for care being taken on by men, governments, institutions, and companies is still insufficient. The care economy, which is included in the Feminist 2030 Agenda, recognises the economic and social centrality of care work and, therefore, treats it as a social responsibility and a priority political issue to be addressed with committed policies.

Public policy research and evaluation inform us that some policies designed to be gender-neutral can actually end up harming women, such as transferable and unpaid parental leave (Meil et al. 2017; Castro García, 2016). However, the research also tells us that some measures, in the right circumstances, can work. Moreover, they can generate gender transformations, co-responsibilities and reduce the conflict between our personal, family and work lives, especially for women. Interestingly, there seems to be more of a tendency towards this co-responsibility in same-sex couples (Rothblum, 2017). And there are other contexts where people are more satisfied with their work-life balance and quality of life than we are, in addition to having more and better work-life balance measures in place (European Commission, 2018).

Increased measures would make it possible to advance in facilitating enrichment between the various vital spheres. Some of the measures that work include, for example, the provision of free and universal early childhood education services, paid and non-transferable parental leave for fathers (Castro García, 2016), as well as measures to extend flexible working hours and increased opportunities to work from home, which can help us balance our working lives with our personal lives and care duties (Sherman, 2020). Other measures relate to our time, such as time-banking, our freedom to choose when we take holidays, or our control over when a meeting ends, among others (Kossek, & Lee, 2017). Finally, we have a multitude of measures with sufficient resources already provided for in regulations that are yet to be implemented, such as the law on dependency or a plethora of others in the field of gender equality.

Some questions for a feminist reflection

The points outlined above lead us to the conclusion that we must re-think our approach to the work-life balance, and that a broad church of feminists must formulate this new approach. From a feminist perspective, some of the questions we ought to ask ourselves and which could serve to start the debate and inform public policies could include the following:

Can the precarious (re)feminisation of care brought on by COVID-19 be reversed? What public measures can be applied to prevent it from being sustained over time? Is it possible for telecommuting to serve as a liberating tool that improves our work-life balance? How can that be achieved? How can care be managed remotely, such as during COVID-19? How can we counter the anti-feminist and neoconservative forces of the far-right in this context? How could austerity policies be avoided?

How can we generate collective co-responsibilities for care? How can we foster a culture of care? Would compulsory and rotational care duties help? How? Could children be brought up and cared for collectively? How? And older adults? What would the duties be, and how would they be applied? Would the rights and obligations of people, institutions and companies not engaged in care change? Would there be monitoring and sanctions for non-compliance?

How can we generate public care networks that go beyond family and blood ties? And beyond heteronormative biparentalism? Should having a child be a right? Should care duties be included in the professional curriculum? To what extent, where and how? Should paid maternity leave be extended and/or made more flexible? How could it be applied outside of the heteropatriarchal logic?

How can we generate public care networks that go beyond family and blood ties? How can we incentivise the co-responsibility of men with regard to care duties and their incorporation into highly feminised occupations?

How can we encourage the incorporation of men into highly feminised occupations? How can we incentivise the co-responsibility of men with regard to care duties? Should paternity leave be longer or more flexible? Could there be room for fiscal measures in this regard? How can we encourage society to be more involved in caring for older adults and dependent persons? How can we foster a culture of care that doesn't penalise the careers of men who decide to be long-term carers?

How can we encourage the incorporation of women into highly masculinised occupations? How can we improve the advancement of women in paid employment? How can we reduce gender discriminations in jobs? How can we prevent gender violence in the workplace? How can it be monitored? How can we disincentivise the negative career impact of pregnancy and/or maternity? How can we incentivise a sustainable return to work after maternity?

Would we back a diverse range of policies and conciliation measures and the chance to choose between them? Under which circumstances might each one work best? What role would telecommuting play? What conciliation measures should public and private companies have as a minimum? How can they be incentivised? How can they be informed? Should the public subsidising of early years education between 0-3 years be expanded? Would the way it's funded and provided change? And what about long-term care for older adults? Should a law on dependency be rolled out? How? Would it be possible to propose time redistributions and working hours reforms? How can they be incentivised?

How do we ensure better rights and conditions for people engaged in care work? Will Convention 189 of the International Labour Organisation be ratified? How can we make care work less precarious? Is there any room for changes to migration policies? How can we work on gender intersectionalities through our approach to work-life balance? To what extent would we support a feminist, social and solidarity economy?

And ultimately, how can we lessen the conflict between our professional and personal lives? How do we make balance and even enrichment between the various vital spheres a possibility? Who will make all these decisions and how?

All these issues make a feminist review of the work-life balance in our country imperative on every level. This feminist reflection must identify problems and critically evaluate the policies and measures that have been taken so far, both here and in other contexts. However, above all, it must serve to propose situated and transformative public policies that generate increased co-responsibility from men, but even more so, from businesses, institutions and governments. Similarly, it must influence the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs in Catalonia.

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