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Policy Progress, Practical Gaps:
Why Cultural Norms and Rigid Work Structures Limit Work–Life Balance in Spain

Pedro Manuel Bellón-Jiménez

AT A GLANCE

- Mothers and fathers approach work–life balance from different starting points, shaped by gendered expectations around work and care.
- However, parents converge in identifying key barriers, particularly rigid working-time structures and unsupportive workplace cultures.
- They also highlight similar strategies, emphasising flexible working arrangements and predictable schedules.
- Improving work–life balance requires changes in family policy, workplace organisation and cultural expectations around care.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, many European countries have expanded family policies to support gender equality and help parents combine work and caregiving. Spain is a prominent example. Although the country adopted reforms later than many of its European counterparts, it has introduced ambitious measures over the past decade, including extended parental leave and the promotion of flexible working arrangements.

However, the everyday experiences of families suggest that policy expansion alone is not sufficient to achieve effective work–life balance. Research shows that inequalities in paid and unpaid work persist despite the expansion of work–family policies. Mothers continue to assume a larger share of care and household responsibilities and often experience employment penalties related to caregiving. This indicates that formal policy rights alone do not guarantee equal opportunities to combine work and family life.

Policies operate within broader institutional and cultural frameworks that shape expectations around work and caregiving. Normative models such as that of the adult worker,[1] workplace expectations linked to the ideal worker[2] and social norms surrounding parenthood[3] influence how parents understand work–life balance and how they make use of available policies. Beyond formal entitlements, social expectations and organisational cultures shape the constraints parents face and the strategies they develop to reconcile work and care.

HOW FAMILIES EXPERIENCE WORK–LIFE BALANCE POLICIES

Despite these developments, many families still experience difficulties balancing paid work and family responsibilities. This policy brief draws on findings from a recent mixed-methods study on work–life balance in Spain. The study combines quantitative text analysis of open-ended survey responses from 2,200 parents of young children with three focus groups designed to explore how parents frame and interpret work–life balance in everyday life. It examines how families perceive and interpret recent family policy reforms, focusing particularly on how parents understand the broader narrative of work–life balance and where they place the emphasis between employment, caregiving and family time.

The study shows that the effectiveness of work–life balance policies depends not only on formal entitlements but also on how workplaces organise working time and how caregiving responsibilities are socially understood.

Two key insights emerge from our research. First, mothers and fathers often approach work–life balance from different starting points, reflecting their distinct everyday experiences of paid work and caregiving. These differences are shaped by persistent social norms and organisational practices that influence how parents understand their roles and responsibilities. Second, despite these different perspectives, parents converge in identifying the main barriers to work–life balance—particularly rigid workplace cultures and persistent gendered expectations—and in highlighting similar strategies to address them. In particular, both mothers and fathers emphasise the importance of more flexible and family-friendly workplace arrangements that allow employees to better coordinate work and caregiving responsibilities.

GENDERED EXPERIENCES OF WORK–LIFE BALANCE

These dynamics become particularly visible when examining how mothers and fathers describe work–life balance. Our research shows that mothers and fathers often approach work–life balance from slightly different starting points. Fathers tend to frame balance in broader terms, emphasising the importance of spending time with their families while maintaining their role as economic providers. Mothers, by contrast, more often describe work–life balance in practical terms, focusing on the coordination of childcare, work schedules and everyday caregiving responsibilities.

However, the differences between mothers' and fathers' perspectives are not absolute. In the focus groups, parents largely agreed on the main barriers to work–life balance and the strategies needed to address them. Both mothers and fathers emphasised the importance of workplace flexibility, supportive organisational cultures and accessible childcare that fits working hours and family routines. At the same time, their perspectives often originate from different experiences within families and workplaces, which are shaped by persistent social norms and expectations around caregiving. Fathers who request flexible working arrangements or take parental leave may encounter stigma[4] in the workplace, as such choices can be perceived as a lack of work commitment in contexts where the ideal worker norm prioritises uninterrupted employment. Mothers, in contrast, more often report feelings of guilt when engaging in paid work, as they frequently experience tension between expectations to participate in employment and the persistent norm that they should remain the primary caregivers responsible for children's daily care.

These differing experiences reflect persistent social expectations that associate men primarily with paid work and women with caregiving responsibilities, leaving remnants of earlier gender role arrangements that continue to shape attitudes and behaviour. Even in dual-earner households, women frequently shoulder a larger share of unpaid care work,[6] while workplace cultures often continue to reward long working hours and constant availability. In Spain, parental leave entitlements are formally equal for mothers and fathers, and flexible working arrangements are available to workers with caregiving responsibilities. However, the outcomes of these policies often differ in practice. Parents make use of them from different starting points shaped by existing divisions of paid and unpaid work, as well as by internalised expectations about caregiving roles. As a result, policies that are formally gender neutral may still lead to unequal experiences and outcomes.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings suggest that improving work–life balance requires action beyond the expansion of formal family policies. Parents generally view existing policies positively and consider them important resources for reconciling work and caregiving. However, when these policies are embedded in broader social and organisational dynamics, their effects can be limited. Social expectations around caregiving and employment, as well as workplace cultures and everyday family arrangements, continue to shape how policies are used and experienced. Achieving genuine work–life balance therefore requires coordinated action across public policy, workplace organisation and social norms surrounding care and employment. The following recommendations draw on parents' gendered understandings of work–life balance and reflect the barriers and strategies they identify in everyday life.

1. Strengthen Family Policy and Care Infrastructure

Public policy plays a central role in enabling parents to reconcile work and caregiving responsibilities. Expanding access to high-quality and affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC), integrated within the broader education system, can significantly reduce the coordination burden families face, while supporting children's development. Treating ECEC as part of universal education rather than solely as a work–life balance tool can help ensure more stable and equitable provision. At the same time, family policy should strengthen paid parental leave and introduce more flexible leave arrangements, including short-term leave for caregiving emergencies. Policies supporting flexible and predictable working arrangements, such as remote work and adaptable schedules, can also give parents greater control over their time.

2. Promote Family-Compatible Workplaces

Workplace organisation remains a critical factor shaping whether policies translate into real opportunities for families. Governments, employers and social partners should work together to address rigid working-time structures, such as split shifts, excessively long working days or strict office attendance requirements, which many parents perceive as incompatible with family life. Labour market regulation and collective bargaining can play an important role in promoting predictable schedules, time autonomy and flexible work arrangements across sectors.

At the same time, access to flexibility should not remain limited to highly skilled or privileged occupations. Ensuring more equal access to flexible arrangements across the labour market is essential to reducing inequalities in families' ability to balance work and care.

3. Encourage Cultural Change Around Work and Care

Policies and workplace practices operate within broader social norms that shape how caregiving and employment are understood. Many parents continue to experience stigma or pressure when using work–life balance measures, particularly those fathers who request leave or flexibility, and those mothers who face expectations of intensive caregiving.

Encouraging cultural change within organisations is therefore essential. Employers and managers can play a key role by normalising the use of parental leave and flexible arrangements for both mothers and fathers, supporting shared caregiving responsibilities and reducing stigma around family-related rights. Public discourse and policy frameworks can also contribute to shifting expectations by promoting more egalitarian models of parenting and employment.

While this analysis focuses on Spain, the findings speak to broader debates across Europe. In recent years, Spain has rapidly expanded formal work–family rights, particularly through equal parental leave and broader access to flexible working arrangements. At the same time, these reforms are unfolding within social contexts where norms around the gendered division of labour remain deeply rooted. In this sense, the Spanish case illustrates a wider European challenge. Even after decades of expanding family policy support, inequalities in work and care persist across countries. See, for example, the high rates of part-time employment among mothers in Germany[7] or the growing debate on regretting parenthood in Sweden.[8] These experiences suggest that strengthening formal rights or promoting care infrastructure are important steps, but that more profound changes in social expectations, workplace practices and economic structures are also necessary to achieve more equal and sustainable arrangements of work–life balance.

Key Message

Recent reforms have significantly expanded work–life balance policies in Spain, but their effectiveness depends on how they interact with workplace organisation and social norms. Three elements are particularly important:

- Strong family policies, such as paid parental leave and accessible early childhood education and care, provide the structural foundation for reconciling work and caregiving.
- Family-compatible workplace organisation, including flexible working hours, predictable schedules and opportunities for remote work, allows parents to coordinate employment with childcare responsibilities.
- A cultural shift in workplaces and society is needed to normalise the use of family-friendly policies by both women and men and to support more equal caregiving.

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