

MARCH 8TH, WORLD WOMEN'S DAY

What would happen if men went on a care strike?

95% of Spanish mothers devote part of their day to children compared to 68% of fathers. Recent studies associate this inequality in family tasks with differences in salaries and job promotion. Stewardship and non-transferable permits are some of the solutions to a problem that some still try to justify is due to biological issues.

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Inequality in the distribution of tasks affects women's careers and creates a masculinized corporate culture in which women are considered the least considered when it comes to accessing positions of power. / Stock

Today, we celebrate **International Women's Day**, which this year is marked in Spain by a **feminist strike** against discrimination at home and at work. Recent studies point to the fact that **wage inequality** between both genders is related to **inequality in family care**, which invites us to ask a question: what would happen if males were the ones who went on a care strike?

All the sources consulted for this article have given a similar answer: unfortunately, it would be noticed very little. The CSIC researcher and first woman to get a Sociology Chair in Spain, María Ángeles Durán, believes that **"the care strike that is really noticed is that of women"**, although "it would be good for men to have 'a Japanese-style strike'. We would be very happy. This would be a strike that would make many people happy!", she jokes during the telephone conversation.

"There are always more co-responsible couples, but the studies indicate that the men are dedicated, above all, to taking the children to nursery school in the morning, bathing them and being with them over the weekend," Teresa Jurado, the sociologist and researcher of the UNED and expert in social policies, youth, family and gender tells Sinc.

"If the care of young and old is stopped, the country stops, as it happened in Iceland", recalls Pérez Sedeño

Eulalia Pérez Sedeño, professor of research in Science, Technology and Gender at the CSIC, recalls that the paid care of children and adults are also in the hands of women: "If that stops, the country stops, as happened in Iceland."

The data supports this impression. According to Eurostat, 95% of Spanish mothers aged between 25 and 49 spend some time every day looking after their children, compared to 68% of fathers. The differences are greater in domestic tasks, with 84 and 42%, respectively. It is true that men have higher employment rates than women (64.8% versus 54.3%), but also that this difference increases with the offspring: from 7.7 points in people without children to more than 26 when they have more than three kids.

This inequality in the distribution of tasks has an impact on women's careers. A study still awaiting review and publication in a scientific journal has aroused much interest in recent weeks. More than three decades of data from a country with generous family policies, Denmark, show that most of the wage gap between the genders has to do with children. Better said, with the differences in their care.

In Denmark, maternity leave is 18 weeks plus 32 additional weeks that can be

shared between both parents. In addition, the Government offers subsidized day care centers during the first year of the baby's life. In comparison, Spaniards have 16 weeks, ten of which are transferable; and men, since January 2017, four. There are also parental leaves until the child is three years old.

Long, non-egalitarian leaves

These differences do not matter: the wage gap between Danish women and men is around 20%, as it is in Spain and countries without guaranteed maternity leave such as the USA. The study claims that 80% of this difference is due to motherhood because the rest of factors, such as lack of education and discrimination, are disappearing. Having a child penalizes mothers' income during the next decade, while women without children are not affected in the same way. Men, whether parents or not, are not affected.

"Policies that support reproduction do not always help women, because a long maternity leave can hurt their career. The strong subsidy for upbringing in Denmark doesn't seem to be enough to eliminate the wage gap", summarizes the researcher of the University of Copenhagen and co-author of the study, Jakob Egholt.

Men are reluctant to change their work routine for fear of not meeting the provider stereotype

Not only is it difficult to recover one year in professional terms, but women assume 90% of the loss. In 2015, Danish fathers took an average of 31 days ... and mothers almost 300. This has led the country's authorities to launch the campaign 'Paternity leave: take it like a man'.

Nordic mothers are no different from Spanish mothers. An article published in 2015 in the *Spanish Journal of Sociology* declared that women are still the ones who take leaves. Jurado points out the paradox that, in a world in which young people identify more and more with egalitarian values, the unequal distribution of tasks is repeated, especially with the arrival of the first child, because stereotypes "are very strong".

"We interviewed 68 couples who were waiting for their first child. The expectations were the same: to enjoy the baby, to continue working ... but when asking about the plans of each parent we saw that they were very biased," Jurado explains to Sinc. Biological and economic explanations came to the surface, related to breastfeeding and promotion possibilities.

"Everyone takes their leave and inequality begins, which is structural because until 2007 nobody thought that parents could also have paid leave. We live in a time of great changes and desires for equality but still reminiscent of the past."

At the moment of truth, men are reluctant to change their work routine for fear of not fulfilling the supplier stereotype. When the leave is paid, 80% of the parents make use of it, a figure that falls to 9.4% if it implies a decrease in income. Only 4% of Spaniards with a small child reduce their working day compared to 25% of women.

Nobody remembers the elderly

Durán strongly opposes extrapolating Danish data to Spain for one reason: the elderly. "Everyone looks at children, but in Spain we have few children and many old people," says Durán. A new type of motherhood arises that makes women become mothers of their parents.

"Women who take care of older people are usually out of the labour market and do not take them into account," says Durán

In this sense, Durán criticizes the bias of many surveys. "Women who care for very old people are usually, by force or not, outside the labour market. If you only measure those who are employed, you are measuring those who have been able to make it compatible, even if it is wrong, and not those who abandoned it because it was incompatible," she adds: "The true and worst discrimination is in those that have not triumphed. We would have to ask them."

To ask the less favoured, one would have to travel far from Denmark and Spain. A UN report published last month has studied the relationship between poverty and gender. One of its conclusions is that women between 25 and 34 years of age, in reproductive and working age, are 22% more likely

to live in extreme poverty compared to their peers.

The ideal employee: a man without a family

Jury criticizes the way the labour market operates. "It is very much focused on the ideal employee, who is a man with no family responsibility and always available. In Spain, in addition, we have very long working days; the reduction protects against unemployment and helps to conciliate this, but reduces the salary and penalizes the career".

"Employers and the public administrations are not sensitive with this issue", says Pérez Sedeño. "The other day I discovered that a female researcher, when evaluating whether she should continue the contract or be promoted, we did not take into account her maternity leave during which she could not perform the same".

Durán also attacks the current economic system which, based on the idea of competition, "forces in the short-term specialization of roles instead of equal distribution". Even so it is a system that, "if everything goes well", can be an "effective and rational" option for the couple. The sociologist believes that the strategy is profitable, "especially for the male" and assuming that "solidarity in the couple works forever." However, "it is negative for women who assume the cost of moving away from the labour market. In case of divorce, illness or unemployment, it is risky, especially for women."

Non-transferable leaves towards a redefinition of wealth

The interviewees for this article agree that inequality in care has no easy solution. Jurado defends non-transferable maternity and paternity leave: "If we do not want the traditional model where the woman raises and the man provides, and it seems that we do not want it because during the crisis women continued working, the right to take care should be non-transferable. The responsibility is for both."

"The care must be redistributed with fairness, just as we feel the obligation to redistribute the money," says Durán

This measure has been applied in Iceland, the country that saw the first feminist strike in 1975. There, parents have 13 weeks of exclusive leave, which can be used or lost, and now more than 90% use them. This need for greater involvement on the part of men is not only a relief for mothers, since children develop their cognitive abilities better.

"As long as we continue with the idea that wealth is money, care will be interpreted as a cost," says Durán, who invites us to transform our ideas about what success is. "In reality, care is a huge wealth and it has to be fairly redistributed, just as we now feel the obligation to redistribute the monetary".

If this idea of wealth does not change, in her opinion, there will be no solution. "Then it's a matter of power and care is given to those who do not have the power to get rid of it, which are women, especially older women." Regardless of what biologists, psychologists and sociologists may say, changing diapers does not hurt.

An educational and social, not natural inequality

At this point there remains a key question: why do women care for children more than men? Is that so by nature? There are several possible explanations: that social and cultural norms favour this inequality; that they have a greater natural predisposition towards care-giving; or a combination of both.

"The ideas about natural predisposition imply a very deterministic conception of biology that I do not share," Carmen Fernández Montraveta, professor of Psychobiology at the Autonomous University of Madrid, told Sinc. "We build ourselves as organisms in a social environmental context and plasticity is one of our footprints as a species", reflects this specialist in animal behaviour and evolutionary ecology.

Egholt's study confirms that the environment is essential. "Women who grew up in traditional families with a male provider and a female housewife suffer greater penalties when they become mothers," she says. At the same time, "there is no relationship with the labour history of the paternal grandparents".

This leads to the conclusion that **the key lies in the "gender identity formed during childhood" of women.**

Durán explains that the biological impact was very strong in the past, when families had many children, as happens in other parts of the world. "In those countries there is a really strong association between being a human female and caring for children, but here now the birth rate is programmed and scarce, and life expectancy is high, so the effect is small. **The rest is all culture.**" With 1.3 children per Spanish woman and 85 years of life expectancy, there are few years in which the upbringing of children is a limitation.

"Many animal species take care of the progeny as a group. The inequality in the distribution of care is educational and social, not natural ", settles Pérez Sedeño.

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