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DISCUSSIONS GROUP OF WORKING FATHERS AND MOTHERS

Meaning and effects of being a father and a mother

All the participants recognise that, logically, to become the father or the mother of a child entails substantial changes in their lives. However, mothers emphasise the change more, for they have a more explicit discourse in which they state that the main effect is to stop doing things related to their personal lives.

According to what they say, during this process, mothers' needs (rather than the fathers' ones) move to a second-rank position, for they focus on meeting their children's needs, but not forgetting the work and housework ones (all the participants are working mothers). Then, the part they give up may be found in the mothers' personal lives (they do not go anymore to gym classes, they have less time for their personal hobbies, etc.). The availability of time for themselves diminishes. On the contrary, this circumstance does not seem to occur in the same degree in fathers, who tend to continue practising their hobbies or sports and to keep the relationship with their group of friends.

This feeling is more nuanced in those mothers that enjoy reduced their working hours, although they adhere to the general consensus on this issue. Only one mother does not agree, for she and her partner have agreed on reducing their working hours (she works thirty hours and he twenty); she thinks that their time available is rather well balanced. They have to plan their schedules, but since they have much time available, they may coordinate them well; there is even some time left for them. For the mother who explains this pattern, it is an ideal one. It is an atypical case within the group.

Despite this specific case, the pattern that appears as being predominant is that of the mothers who devote their time mainly to childcare. One of the mothers says that she feels like being dependent on her children, not the other way around.

Taking care of the children is tough work, especially the two first years, for it may entail for instance months of not being able to sleep well. Afterwards, the whole situation improves, as long as there is just one child. If there are two or more and their ages are close, childcare tasks increase substantially.

Distribution of tasks and house-family roles between fathers and mothers

Most mothers –especially those that work full hours– recognise that, although sometimes their husbands help, in fact, they carry out most of the tasks related to childcare. As they express it, it appears that their husbands carry out auxiliary tasks, support ones (shopping, replacing the mother when she cannot do something, washing the dishes once in a while...), but these are not the main or the heavy ones, and they do not carry out them on a regular basis.

Again, the only exception is the case of the couple with the husband working twenty hours, and the wife, thirty. In this case, the husband is the person that does most of the childcare.

However, one of the fathers thinks that he was never able to play a role focusing more on the son during the time he lived with his partner (he is presently divorced). He observes that, often, men are not allowed to deeply involve themselves in realms that women occupy almost automatically. Some of the female participants agree with him on this point. It appears that there is a voluntary –almost unconscious– monopolisation of some tasks by women. Somehow, there is some consensus on this matter.

Thus, it is considered that the monopolisation of the child by the mother from his/her birth to four months is due to the fact that, until now, maternity leaves were only provided for women. All the participants consider that the last legislative reforms are a great progress in this aspect.

Furthermore, this dynamics is very often socially reinforced. The father that referred to this subject explains that when both (the father and the mother) went to meetings with the teacher, the latter usually addressed the mother. Also, when a couple goes to the market, usually the salesperson talks to the woman. Furthermore, the general perception is that a man that focuses too much on his children's care is considered not normal (in a pejorative sense) by society, including the closer environment –family, groups of friends, etc.–; in the case of women this does not happen. Consequently, the effectiveness of the true exchange of roles between men and women appears to be rather conditioned by the attitudes of the social environment that play against it and show very traditional cultural patterns.

Nevertheless, some mothers specify that, often, the problem may be found in a lack of men's initiative regarding these tasks, so that mothers take on them immediately. They think that a kind of game takes place in the couple, in which the proactive role of women encourages the passive role of men, and vice versa. In addition to it, we must take into account that, according to what they observe, when women are faced with the non-fulfilment of necessary tasks they find it more unbearable than men do.

However, this inertia shows an informal logic and not a specific negotiation between the two partners of the couple. When this negotiation takes place and is made explicit, there is a higher degree of balance. Nevertheless, in any of both participants' cases, a systematic, explicit negotiation has taken place. In some cases (even though, the minority), some negotiations have taken place to face momentary situations, or sporadically. Sometimes, they also take place when some conflict comes up due to too much work in any of both partners, which leads to a couple's controversy.

Be that as it may, we have to take into account tasks that cannot be carried out directly but that are also there. For instance, housework planning and the fulfilment of the children's agenda (to know –and to remember and keep in mind- when there is a visit to the paediatrician, what to buy for meals, when bed sheets must be changed, etc.). The women participating in the group especially emphasise this point.

Regarding aspects such as playing with the children, teaching them things, educating them in some values and even imposing some limits, women's perception is that in these "tasks" there is a greater balance between men and women. Furthermore, very often they play complementary roles (one exerts a more punishing authority; the other, an authority that is more willing to discuss). Surprisingly enough, in this

dualism of roles, among the participants there is no clear option for one gender role or the other. There are couples in which the father plays the most authoritarian role, but in some others it is the opposite. The generalised perception of the group is that in this aspect roles have changed; that what in the past was the traditional authoritarian father figure is no longer true, this role being more distributed.

In the case of children's education, it is a field that is usually agreed on by the couple's partners, as long as there is a reflexive discourse on this issue. If this matter has not been specifically reflected on, the partners will go back to the logic of inertia in role assumption. However, usually, the decision made by one of the partners is not discussed by the other (at least, this situation does not happen in any of the male and female participants in the group).

Strategies of reconciliation of personal, family and work life

For the women who have participated in the group, their presence in the job market is necessary, regardless of the fact that it may make the situation more complicated. As one of the mothers points out, for her, not being with the child (a baby-sitter stays with him) to go to work alleviates her. She thinks that if she were to spend all the time with her children, not doing anything else, this situation would end up provoking some anxiety in her. The other women also consider that they need to work, not only for economic reasons, but also on a personal level: as a way to enrich themselves and to relate and socialise with other people. Focusing only on house-family tasks appears to be as an almost unbearable confinement at home. Therefore, in the case of the women participating in the group there appears a clearly predominant life style based on a focus shared between the mother's role and the wage-earner woman's role.

The resources that are more frequently used for reconciliation to happen, if possible, usually have recourse to the extended family (grandfathers

and grandmothers), although it is a solution that is not completely satisfactory, for sometimes the behavioural patterns of the grandparents with the grandchildren clashes with the educational guidelines that the parents would like for their children. Perhaps, this is why, in addition to the grandparents, other complementary resources such as kindergartens, the "baby-sitter" figure, etc. are implemented. Only in one case, the grandmother lives with her daughter/son's family; in this case, the grandmother's role becomes an educating role as important as that of the parents.

In other cases, resources such as "baby-sitters" or grandparents are used in order to make the achievement of personal life for fathers and mothers (to develop their hobbies) possible, or even for the couple to enjoy some spaces for itself. However, these situations happen in few cases linked to working days and/or schedules planned to develop this dynamics.

The different models of reconciliation that are represented in the group are evaluated very differently. In the cases of reduced working hours, or continuous working days, the model is positively evaluated. In the cases of full working days, the mothers express an extreme situation of psychological exhaustion (stress, anxiety...) and of physical and personal energy exhaustion. In fact, in some cases, this exhaustion discourages them from having more children. We must say that none of the fathers and mothers participating in the group has more than two children, and there are many cases of one child. We infer that all these elements are part of what we could consider personal costs of the twofold presence and the difficulty to reconcile.

However, the men who also work full working hours do not express any sort of similar dysfunction, perhaps due to the fact of being less involved in house-family tasks (sometimes, they recognise this), or due to the fact that can very easily have recourse to the extended family –in the case of

a divorced man-. In this last case, although they ask for shared custody, if they do not obtain it, the burden of having a child is not especially heavy. However, he observes that he always wanted the shared custody, but he was unable to obtain it.

With regard to children, the costs of the difficulties in reconciling work and family of the fathers and the mothers appear in refractory or direct rejection attitudes towards school. There are cases of little boys and girls that miss the father or the mother and do not want to go to school. It is considered that children should spend as much time as possible with their parents outside the context of school socialisation (which, opposite to this, does not usually happen). In the cases of mothers with longer working hours and more complicated schedules, they have the feeling that they are missing an important part of their children's lives and, consequently, of their own lives. Furthermore, some express their concern for the future consequences that this may have on the development of their children's character as they grow up due to not having spent as much time with their parents as they should have spent ideally.

Nevertheless, there are also people that think that the relations with other children at the kindergarten or at school are positive, even having a baby-sitter or doing things with the grandparents.

Reconciliation at work

Although there is a basic legislation that regulates (and imposes) reconciliation measures in companies, the general perception is that they are not at all inclined to allow employees to ask for these practices, especially if these are men rather than women.

One of the paradigmatic examples is the case of unexpected events (such as when a child is sick and must be taken care of). Most often, women are the ones to take on a period of momentary or partial absenteeism from

work. The reason they adduce is that in the companies where these women work the situation may be understood more easily by the managers –mostly, because they may realise what to be a mother facing a situation like this-, whereas in their husbands' companies, the fact of being a man entails many more problems for managers to understand and tolerate this situation.

Regardless of the fact that they are women or men, the most widespread practice is that the hours that are lost for these reasons are deducted from the holidays. Only in the case of the female participant that works in a foundation devoted to social research there is a rather favourable regime of absences.

In addition to it, many female participants consider that companies do not have a transparency policy when making explicit what can be done and how it must be done in these cases, and they take advantage from the employees' lack of knowledge of the legal framework. In this sense, business' opacity appears to be deliberate.

On the contrary, the people that work in the Public Administration enjoy clear regulations on the different casuistries, and they do never encounter difficulties when need arises.

The participants also highlight the fact that, mostly in private companies, if reconciliation means less devotion to work (in extended informal working hours this happens frequently), it makes the promotion of professional woman much more difficult. Female participants state that they do not want to give up their professional career, but not their children either. However, for instance, a partial withdrawal from the job market may be fatal in most companies regarding women's later aspirations of getting promoted.

Institutional resources and adjustment of schedules

Obviously, the mother that has reduced her working hours to thirty finds her working day appropriate; in addition, it has the peculiarity of being relatively flexible according to her interests. Insofar as the mothers participating in the group achieve some flexibility in their working hours in the morning and when leaving work, or succeed in reducing their working hours, or enjoy continuous working days, they express feelings of absolute satisfaction. In the cases of women working full hours (forty or more effective hours), mostly when they have working days with a lunch break, the degree of dissatisfaction substantially increases.

At any rate, even in the cases of continuous working days, if they work full hours, some mothers say that, as the day goes by, they notice their exhaustion and they keep on losing energy, so that they are not able to carry out all the tasks they would like to take on in optimal conditions.

There is some consensus on the fact that forty hours are not appropriate as a working day's length when people have children. In fact, participants consider that, well structured, fewer hours might be more productively efficient than other more extended working hours.

However, although being considered beneficial regarding reconciliation and enjoying good general evaluation, reduced working hours present the disadvantage of salary reduction, which, according to the life style of the person (we should add that children entail added costs) and of the amount of the salary, may be important. Low salaries notice the impact of it more, but sometimes it is better for these people to reduce the working hours or to quit working because, if they calculate what they would spend in baby-sitters, kindergartens, etc., working becomes worthless.

It is significant that the measure that employees ask for more often is that the reduction of the working hours due to recent maternity are paid

100%, as they say happens in the Administration. In fact, the reflection people make is that something to be achieved is extending the juridical regime of reconciliation that rules the public sector to the private one, within the limits of that what is considered feasible, for they consider that, in this way, the issue would be acceptably solved.

The participants make explicit a misuse of the hours into which working hours are divided. For instance, they consider that more than one hour for lunch is too much (some companies devote two). Also, the habit (very widespread in management staff, but also in the companies' general personnel) of thinking that an employee that stays long hours at work is someone who works harder. They also emphasise the amount of time lost in going from home to work and vice versa.

With regard to the opening hours of the institutions (schools, summer day-care centres for schoolchildren, etc.), they consider that they are very functional, but usually they are expensive and always entail an additional expenditure. Measures such as the school's sixth hour are very positively valued. However, they criticise the model based on deriving the children to institutions that take care of them too many hours because they consider that for the children to be so much outside the family home is not an optimal solution. But some also counter-argue that if we opt for the full incorporation of women into the job market and for the twofold career, someone will have to take care of the children when the parents cannot do it. Precisely, this seems to be the balance still to be solved: optimising the time with the children prevents from working the hours and getting the income people would like to; adjusting the working hours to the financial needs perceived usually prevents people from having enough time available to devote to their children, as they would like to.

Finally, regarding the use of institutional resources such as kindergartens, extra-curricular activities, summer day-care centres for schoolchildren,

etc., it is considered indispensable. However, criticism regards the fact that there are few and public coverage is far from being optimal. In particular, participants criticise the lack of kindergartens and the insufficient alternatives available during the period of school holidays (Christmas, Eastern, and, especially, the three summer months). In these cases, alternatives such as summer day-care centres for schoolchildren or summer camps are usually short and also very expensive. Participants ask for solutions that, so far, are perceived as non-existent.