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Work-family balance in times of COVID-19: a survey-study

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ABSTRACT
The COVID-19 pandemic has led transformative changes worldwide, significantly affecting work-family balance. This cross-sectional survey study conducted during the early stages of the global pandemic (April-to-May 2020) presents findings from a snowball convenience sample of 383 employed adults with children in Spain. It delves into the evolving dynamics of work-family conciliation during confinement. The study findings unveil two distinct family profiles: those grappling with substantial work-family challenges (63.9%) and those experiencing minimal disruptions (36.3%). Noteworthy are the significant gender-related differences, family size, and the perception of personal freedom as pivotal factors shaping these profiles. The current study underscores the urgency of democratizing family life and elevating work-family conciliation as a core element of values education in a post-pandemic world.

This article investigates work-life balance during the confinement period of COVID-19, particularly the interplay between parents' teleworking and their children's education. The study examines how individuals allocated their free time, their engagement in domestic chores, and their other responsibilities as citizens. Once again, this exceptional context has underscored the persistent gender disparities and emphasizes the ongoing imperative of democratizing family life. It has also revealed society's vulnerability within the socio-economic contexts of families. The study findings offer insights with implications for education, both in terms of shaping gender-related behaviors and refining approaches to child education.

Despite spending a substantial amount of time with their children, parents have grappled with excessive usage of available technological devices within their homes. Notably, significant disparities have emerged, particularly concerning gender, where women have been more affected by this situation. Additionally, the number of children in a household has been inversely associated with ease of family management. To address these challenges, ongoing efforts should focus on dismantling patriarchal norms and promoting the evolution toward more equitable, negotiating family dynamics. Furthermore, instilling values conducive to work-life balance within families should remain a priority in our collective endeavors.

Introduction

The concepts of 'work-family balance' or 'work-life balance' have gained popularity and recognition across various academic disciplines and cultural contexts. Although these terms are often used

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interchangeably, they encompass multi-layered and controversial ideas that resonate differently among scholars and practitioners. Amidst these complexities, Lewis and Beauregard (2018) identified two primary streams within the literature: 'work-family interface research' and 'critical management and organizational studies' (pp. 720–721).

The current study predominantly aligns itself with the realm of 'work-family interface research', which examines the intricate interplay between work and family domains. However, it is essential to contextualize this focus within the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic a global crisis that undeniably reshaped the landscape of work-life balance. The pandemic's profound repercussions on work arrangements, family dynamics, and individual well-being have prompted a renewed exploration of the challenges and opportunities associated with achieving balance in this context.

Considering the pandemic's far-reaching influence, this study delves into the specific nuances of work-family balance during the COVID-19 era. By concentrating on the 'work-family interface research' stream, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolving dynamics and strategies that individuals and organizations have employed to navigate these unprecedented circumstances.

In Spain a significant number of studies have employed the term 'conciliation', rather than 'balance' (for instance, see Barbero, 2006; Parella & Samper, 2007). Although in some instances the two terms are used interchangeably, this study will utilize the first definition to convey a broad and *ethical* perspective. We interpret the conciliation of the different spheres as a tangible manifestation of a hierarchy of values and as a particularly crucial method for imparting values within the family. In general terms, this ethical emphasis is the most characteristic feature of the study's theoretical approach.

In a context marked by the entry of women into the workplace, the decline of the patriarchal or traditional family models, and the consolidation of 'family negotiating' practices (Gimeno, 2008; Meil, 2011), it seems clear that in order to achieve a work-life conciliation balance the families themselves need to assume a very dynamic role, towards a further democratization of the familiar and societal domains. There is also a clear need for authorities and stakeholders to adopt preventive rather than remedial approaches (Instituto de la Mujer, 2020).

Previous studies of work-life conciliation by the GREM Research Group of Moral Education Barcelona University (Buxarrais & Escudero, 2013), some of them employing qualitative and grounded theory methodology, have also highlighted the importance of: 1) the 'family-based leisure' construct; 2) the value of co-responsibility; 3) the usefulness of telling stories as a strategy for non-formal values education; and 4) the pedagogy of care tenets.

The field, of course, encompasses many more variables and scenarios (Bhattacharya et al., 2020; Heras et al., 2020), and several models have been put forward to address the complexities of achieving work-family balance in modern societies (Pérez et al., 2020; Rothbard et al., 2021; Schnettler et al., 2020). This is because variations in the components of work-family balance have been observed depending on the type of employment (Bass & Grzywacz, 2011). Furthermore, it should be noted that there are two types of attributes that influence perceptions of work-life balance: 1) structural attributes, such as the value that society assigns to work in terms of wages and benefits (pensions, insurance, etc.) and 2) psychosocial attributes, including intra- and interpersonal aspects of work (autonomy, opportunities to learn new skills, social support from colleagues, stress levels, etc.). These attributes must be considered collectively (Voydanoff, 2005). Sometimes, aspects of the work domain conflict with family needs.

Currently, although numerous studies suggest that teleworking could enhance work-family balance, for example, by allowing more flexible arrangements and reducing gender disparities (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020), the full realization of these benefits remains an outstanding issue (Eurofound & the International Labour Office, 2017). The effects teleworking on the work and family dynamic are still not definitive (Carvalho et al., 2021). Gender disparities continue to be a significant problem impacting self-care, cohabitation, children's educational performance, birth rates, family health and leisure.

Additionally, the pandemic forced sudden global changes as movement restrictions were enforced and schools, as well as daycare centers, were closed. This resulted in increased stress and mental strain as people struggled to juggle work demands with family obligations. New challenges emerged, while others cast in a new light:

1. Integrating parents' remote work with children's online learning (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020);
2. Balancing work, study, leisure time and household tasks, by establishing routines, responsibilities and schedules to distribute the load of home maintenance among all family members, including the youngest (Lapierre et al., 2016);
3. Overseeing schoolwork in homes without access to computers, internet connections or smart devices (Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2020);
4. Finding alternative educational support when adults in the home are unable to assist with homework, whether due to own education level of because the children have special education needs;
5. Preserving family routines when a member has contracted the virus and is in isolation, especially in very small houses; and,
6. Caring for children when their parents are sick and safeguarding them, particularly if hospitalization is required.

Despite the advantages of teleworking, initial findings from ongoing research exploring the pandemic's impact on caregiving and equality were somewhat disheartening: men were contributing more, yet women continued to shoulder the primary burden care (Lyttelton et al., 2020). Women found themselves taking on more caregiving responsibilities and making their work conditions more flexible to accommodate this (United Nations, 2020). For academics (Corbera et al., 2020) – who are part of our study sample – the lockdown meant a rapid transition to domestic chores, a shift to online teaching and mentoring, and a realignment of research activities. Despite the considerable diversity of family structures, the entry of women into paid work has not typically resulted in an equitable redistribution of household duties (Kotowska et al., 2010; Larraz et al., 2023).

In a survey conducted by Farré and González (2020) in Spain, a shift in task distribution during confinement was observed. Men exhibited increased participation across various responsibilities, including cleaning, child education, meal preparation, and laundry duties. However, this increase did not offset the additional unpaid work in households caused by the pandemic. Some studies concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic had deepened the gender gap overall (Rodríguez-Rivero et al., 2020), especially among heterosexual couples with young children up to secondary school (Aguado et al., 2020). Women were not only teleworking but also talking on a larger share of caregiving tasks and managing not only their time but also facilitating the their partners' telework. The continuity of schooling was maintained 'at the expense of mothers' and the burden of work flexibility felt disproportionately on women (Martucci, 2021).

Nevertheless, the challenge for parents to maintain a work-life balance impacted not only adults but also their children (Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2020). Children needed extra parental attention as they were required to complete their schoolwork remotely under the guidance of their teachers. Addiontally, the pandemic disproportionately affected individuals unable to work from home, such as essential workers and those lacking a suitable workspace. These individuals were compelled to continue their employment on-site amidst movement restrictions.

Therefore, some of the most significant consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic include (Morero-Mínguez & Ortega-Gaspar, 2022; Patrick et al., 2021): increased stress and burden; challenges in work-life balance due to the need to juggle professional demands with family obligations; financial difficulties; mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, stress, and emotional distress; as well as communication problems. It is critical to acknowledge that these impacts varied among parents based on their unique situations, and their access to resources and support. For example, families with lower income were more susceptible to the economic impacts of the pandemic, while families with greater economic resources had better access to services and resources that facilitated the balancing of work and family responsibilities, such as the ability to afford quality childcare, or the option to work from home. Jurado's (2020) interpretation of the data remained optimistic. However, he emphasized that it would take time to fully understand the concrete impact of confinement on caregiving and to assess the permanence of these changes.

Moreover, intra-family communication is presumably more important than ever in lockdown situations. For this reason, we included this variable in our study which also depends on both the number of

children and their age (Buxarrais, 2010). We assume that the family is an ethical community of people (Mínguez, 2014) in which the morality of children is built, where the responsibility of parents towards their children is made effective (Mallette et al., 2017). Although, ethical perceptions of the family can vary significantly across cultures and social groups, the family is seen as a privileged space for learning values so that can contribute positively to society, because daily life is impregnated with values, consciously or unconsciously (Buxarrais, 2010). For example, parents who value responsibility and solidarity may be more willing to make personal sacrifices to protect the health of their loved ones and society at large, while those who value individual freedom may be more likely to challenge restrictions and social distancing measures (Morero-Mínguez & Ortega-Gaspar, 2022).

Likewise, lockdown did not affect all families equally (Blundell et al., 2020). Socio-emotional issues in children were likely to be amplified by confinement. On the one hand, confinement contributed to make more visible some positive aspects of family life: the disposition to support the personal growth of its members, an increased awareness of certain values, feelings of self-realization, and improved relationships between couples, for instance. Additionally, some families could have faced confinement in a different way, when some members have special needs or health problems. There could also be differences between those who have had to telework and those who have had to work outside the home (Blundell et al., 2020). Therefore, several studies such as this one aim to analyze the consequences of the pandemic on people's work and family life, to propose solutions to improve the reconciliation between these aspects of life, either through public policies or personal strategies (Feinberg et al., 2021). Similarly, the present study was designed to address the following problem: How did the state of alarm declare in response to COVID-19 affected the work-family balance among Spanish families? Therefore, its main goal was to provide a preliminary assessment of the intra-family dynamics induced by the pandemic. Thus, the study focused on two specific aims:

- To identify work-family balance profiles during the confinement.
- To compare the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants of the found profiles to determine further differences about the conciliation of their working and family lives during the confinement.

Method

The research design was a cross-sectional survey-study from a snowball convenience sample of employed adults with children in Spain to study work-family balance during the early stages of the global COVID-19 pandemic (April-to-May 2020).

The instrument employed was an online questionnaire with 28 items and four dimensions of analysis (domestic chores, childcare, family communication and confinement valuation) as well as sociodemographic information, which was adapted from a previous I + D project, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (EDU 2009-10250) (Buxarrais & Burguet, 2014; Buxarrais & Escudero, 2014). The questionnaire was content validated by a panel of experts of the Observatory on Civic behavior and values in Catalonia who ensured that the questions were relevant, appropriate, and measure what they are intended to measure.

Specifically, the variables and questions included were: 1) Sociodemographic data (12 questions): age, gender, level of studies, people living at home, people living at home with special needs, number of children and their age, number of children with special needs, occupation or professional activities, forms of work including teleworking during the confinement, hours of work per week; 2) Domestic chores (2 questions): type of tasks, time dedicated to the week; 3) Childcare (8 questions): daily dedication hours, supervision of their schoolwork, sources of support and reasons behind it, type of conflicts that affect them, technological devices available to their children, rules of use; 4) Family communication (5 questions): educational agreements within the couple, educational agreements within the couple related to values, types of values to transmit, key person in decision making, activities to carry out; and, 5) Confinement valuation (2 questions): positive and negative aspects.

The questionnaire was administered online through a snowball procedure, with a public call for participants mainly diffused by social networks, between April 15th and May 5th of 2020, considering that

the state of alarm was declared by the Spanish government on March 14th of 2020, and after several extensions it was lifted on June 21st. Following the six degrees of separation theory, the authors of the study started the process of sharing the survey on various network groups whose participants in turn asked their colleagues to share the survey among their social networks. This chain reaction of sharing was intended to reach a diverse and representative sample of participants. The selection of the initial network groups was based on the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED).

The research process complied with the Code of good research practices of the University of Barcelona (2010). Data confidentiality and respondent anonymity was guaranteed by design. Participation was voluntary and informed.

Sample

A total of 405 persons answered the questionnaire, but those who did not respond at least 70% of the questions were excluded, considering the information they provided was not enough for a proper analysis. Since no other exclusion criteria was applied, the definitive sample were 383 people. Table 1 shows the main characteristics of the sample.

Analysis

Once the data recollection phase was finished, univariate, bivariate and multivariate analysis were performed employing the *IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS v.27) and the *Système portable pour l'analyse des données* (SPAD_N v.5.6). For the analysis, p values <0.05 were considered to be significant.

First, wet the study utilized SPSS v.27 to perform data processing, demographic profiling, outlier detection, and handling missing values. Descriptive statistical measures, including frequency, percentage, mean, variance, and standard deviation, were calculated to categorize the characteristics of the survey participants. Additionally, we conducted bivariate analysis to examine the relationships and associations between different variables within the dataset.

Following the identification of statistically significant discriminatory variables from the preliminary bivariate analyses, a profile analysis was conducted. The goal was to establish a comprehensible profile of work-family balance, thereby enhancing our understanding of differences during the lockdown. To

Table 1. Description of the sample.

Variable	Distribution
Gender	254 women (66.3%) and 129 men (33.7%).
Age	54.8% between 41–50 years, and 39.9% between 41–50 years, only 3.9% under 30 years, and only 1.3% older than 50 years.
Level of studies	Elementary and secondary (17%), university degree (64.2%), and graduate level studies (18.8%)
People living at home	More than half (52.2%) of their families have 4 members, 36.6% have 3 or less members, and 11.2% have 5 or more members.
People living at home with special needs	In 99.5% of the cases none of them have special needs.
Children in charge	Nuclear families with one (35%) or two children (56.9%), 8.1% of families with more than 3 children. Among these, only 0.3% reported 4 children.
Children with special needs	In 98.2% of the cases none of them have special needs.
Children age	34.4% were under 2 years old, 31% between 3 to 5 years old, 18.1% between 6 and 8 years old, and 16.5% reported having children older than 8 years
Occupation or professional activities	Public officials (28.2%), office and sales personnel (25.8%), liberal professionals (22.3%), self-employed workers (11%) and manual or skilled workers (9.9%). Among the rest (3.2%), 0.8% reported to oversee household work.
Forms of work including teleworking during the confinement	88% are full-time working whereas a 12% have their working reduced. A 65% is teleworking, compared with a 34.5% that has not that option. Despite the possibilities raised by teleworking, a 46% works at least some hours outside the home, while a 54% does not.
Hours of work per week	37.5 hours a week (37%), between 21 and 37.5 hours (23.7%), between 10 and 20 hours (22.2%) or less than 10 hours a week (17.2%)

accomplish this, we employed the criterion variable method by using SPAD_N, which facilitates the characterization of a variable's values based on all other variables. Like all multivariate exploratory data analyses, this method considers all variables recorded. This approach ensures that each group remains highly homogeneous internally while exhibiting significant heterogeneity compared to other groups (Sánchez-Martí & Ruiz-Bueno, 2018). For this, the study took as main criterion the nominal and dichotomic (yes/no) variable 'Many difficulties for balancing family life with working life'. Thus, this analysis provides a deep understanding of the association among all the variables included in the study and the perception of having or having not great difficulties for balancing the demands of family life and work. SPAD_N orders influential characteristics by the p-value associated with its corresponding statistical test. This test-value, distributed according to a standardized normal, is a critical component in identifying influential characteristics, with a threshold of greater than 2 or less than 2 usually considered significant at the 0.05 significance level.

Secondly, an analogous exploratory analysis in terms of telework and the participants' sociodemographic characteristics was made with the purpose of further exploring the previously identified differences about family life and working life balance. Chi-square tests of independence were conducted. To do so, SPSS v.27 was used.

Results

Below the results are presented our results according to the two specific objectives of the study. In first place, *to identify work-family balance profiles during the confinement*, the statistical analysis provided the characteristics associated with family life and work balance during the pandemic as a function of having or having not great difficulties for achieving this balance.

As shown in Table 2, for the people who have declared more difficulties for balancing their family and work lives (63.97% of the sample) this is related to the fact of being employed under a hybrid employment model. The need of teleworking has implied this dilemma between their roles as workers and as family members. They are, for the most part, public officials with a graduate or PhD degree, they work more than 37.5 hours a week, and have had only a child that is currently between 3 and 5 years old. The most important values they try to instill into him or her are tolerance and empathy, and they sometimes speak with their spouses about this theme. It is important to note they have had little time to be with them. About the cohabitation with their partners, it has worsened during the lockdown. They also pointed out they have had no time to get bored, although sometimes they have felt quite lonely, and have not experienced freedom sensations.

The group of people who have not had problems conciliating family life and work (Table 3) (36.3% of the sample) currently is not teleworking and their working hours have been reduced. They have basic instruction (elementary or secondary level of education) and their job is linked to professional activities: manual or skilled workers and/or self-employed. They are young, with ages between 20 and 30 years and with a child older than 8 years. They have been bored during the alarm state and their relationship with their spouses has improved. They have had time for themselves – and even freedom sensations. Although they have spent a high number of hours with their children, their children have overused the technological devices available at home (mobile phone, tablet, TV, and videogames).

In second place, *to compare the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants of the found profiles to determine further differences about the conciliation of their working and family lives during the confinement*, below we provide a general overview of the intrafamily situation lived during this period, as well as the family and work balance strategies developed.

Analyzing (in terms of the found profiles) the condition of being a teleworker or a hybrid worker (associated with the first profile) and the condition of being employed but having suffered from a reduction of working hours (associated with the second profile), with post-hoc contrast tests, we have found new elements associated to each of these profiles. For the former, telework has implied they have had to pay more attention to their children because of sibling fights (72.5% vs. 58.8%; $\chi^2_{(1)} = 7.983$; $p = .005$) or because problems with their homework (71.4% vs. 62.1%; $\chi^2_{(1)} = 3.393$; $p = .041$). However, in this sense, it is also interesting they are the ones demanding a more responsible use of the technological devices available at home. Teleworking parents were less likely to say their children have

Table 2. Group: many difficulties for balancing family life and work.

Yes (n = 245; 63.97%)

Dimension	Variables	Categories	Test value	p
Profile	Have your working hours been reduced?	No	7.84	0.000
Profile	Do you have to telework?	Yes	7.57	0.000
Profile	Highest completed educational level	Master and/or PhD	3.22	0.001
Profile	How many hours do you work per week?	More than 37,5 hours	3.12	0.001
Profile	How many hours do you work per week?	Between 10 to 20 hours	2.05	0.020
Profile	Highest completed educational level	Secondary education (3rd cycle)	3.09	0.001
Profile	Age of your first child	3–5 years	2.57	0.005
Profile	What is your job or profession?	Public official	1.76	0.039
CA	Have you been quite bored?	No	4.40	0.000
CA	Have you felt freedom sensations?	No	2.55	0.005
CA	Have you felt quite lonely?	Yes	1.74	0.041
CA	Has the relationship with your spouse worsened?	Yes	1.94	0.026
TWC	Television	No	2.56	0.005
TWC	How many hours do you spend with your children at home?	Less than 5 hours	1.82	0.034
TWC	Mobile phone	No	1.94	0.026
TWC	Quarrels with brothers	Yes	1.83	0.033
FC	Please choose the three most important values to convey to your children: Tolerance	Yes	2.26	0.012
FC	Please choose the three most important values to convey to your children: Empathy	Yes	1.71	0.043
FC	Do you and your spouse talk about what type of values want to convey to your children?	Sometimes	2.01	0.022
FC	Communication with friends and relatives	Yes	1.74	0.041
DC	Buying	Yes	1.66	0.049

Note: Abbreviated dimensions. DC: Domestic chores; TWC: Time spent with their children; FC: Family communication; CA: Confinement appraisal.

technological devices for their own use (61.2% vs. 76.6%; $\chi^2_{(1)}$ = 8.100; p = .004). For the latter, in addition to the already pointed out observations, the fact of not being involved in telework apparently has also implied some maladjustments since their children have had more conflicts with friends (58.8% vs. 33.3%; $\chi^2_{(1)}$ = 4.673; p = .031).

As we delve into the relationship between teleworking and value transmission, notable differences come to light. Individuals engaged in teleworking emphasize empathy as the primary value they prioritize for their children (76.2% vs. 23.8%; $\chi^2_{(1)}$ = 9.065; p = .003). On the other hand, those not engaged in teleworking highlight respect as a key value they are actively instilling in their children (73% vs. 27%; $\chi^2_{(1)}$ = 5.252; p = .022). These findings shed light on how teleworking status might influence the values parents consider essential for their children's upbringing.

The data analysis has illuminated notable differences associated with the number of children within families. A clear trend emerges: as the number of children in a family increases, so does the availability of technological devices for their individual use. Specifically, families with one child have 63.4% availability compared to 36.6% without; families with two children show 76.6% availability versus 23.4% without; and families with three or more children indicate 77.4% availability compared to 22.6% without. These disparities exhibit statistical significance ($\chi^2_{(1)}$ = 7.633; p = .022).

Table 3. Group: many difficulties for balancing family life and work.

No (*n* = 138; 36.3%)

Dimension	Variables	Categories	Test value	*p*
Profile	How many hours do you work per week?	Less than 20 hours	8.08	0.000
Profile	Do you have to telework?	No	7.57	0.000
Profile	What is your job or profession?	Other	3.76	0.000
Profile	Highest completed educational level	Primary ed./ Secondary ed.	3.64	0.000
Profile	Highest completed educational level	Secondary education	3.48	0.000
Profile	Age	20-30 years	3.28	0.001
Profile	Age of your first child Recoded	More than 8 years	3.05	0.001
CA	Have your working hours been reduced?	Yes	7.84	0.000
CA	Have you been quite bored?	Yes	4.40	0.000
CA	I have had a feeling of freedom	Yes	2.55	0.005
CA	I have felt quite lonely	No	1.74	0.041
CA	Has the relationship with your spouse worsened?	No	1.94	0.026
TWC	How many hours do you spend with your children at home?	More than 16 hours	2.56	0.005
TWC	Television	Yes	2.56	0.005
TWC	Mobile phone	Yes	1.94	0.026
TWC	Quarrels with brothers	No	1.83	0.033
FC	Please choose the three most important values to convey to your children: Tolerance	No	2.26	0.012
FC	Please choose the three most important values to convey to your children: Empathy	No	1.71	0.043
FC	Communication with friends and relatives	No	1.74	0.041
DC	How much time do you spend a week doing housework?	Between 10 to 15 hours	1.82	0.034
DC	Buying	No	1.66	0.049

Note: Abbreviated dimensions. DC: Domestic chores; TWC: Time spent with their children; FC: Family communication; CA: Confinement appraisal.

Moreover, the possession of more gadgets is significantly correlated with instances of sibling rivalry. Families in which children have access to technological devices for personal use also reported a higher incidence of conflicts between siblings. More specifically, 79.5% of such families reported sibling rivalry, as opposed to 65.7% among families without such devices ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 9.057$; $p = .003$). These findings underscore a potential relationship between gadget availability and sibling dynamics. Respondents who reported talking with their spouses about their children's education, also reported a lesser availability of technological devices for the personal use of their children (69.4% vs. 86.4%; $\chi^2_{(1)} = 7.162$; $p = .007$).

There are also gender differences. During the lockdown, gender-based inequalities have persisted or worsened. Women are the ones who bear most of the burden in all the domestic chores considered: cleaning (67.3% vs. 32.7%), buying groceries (65.4% vs. 34.6%), doing the laundry (70.8% vs. 29.2%), preparing meals (66.9% vs. 33.1%) and tidying up (67.4% vs. 32.6%), being the differences statistically significant in the case of doing the laundry ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 22.449$; $p = .000$). It is also interesting to analyze how women perceive their responsibilities toward their children. Our female respondents reported they are the ones who decide the activities to be done at home (77.9% vs. 22.1%; $\chi^2_{(2)} = 17.162$; $p = .000$), the ones who act as intermediaries with the school (76.3% vs. 23.7%; $\chi^2_{(2)} = 16.625$; $p = .000$), and the first to help their children when needed (76.3% vs. 23.7%; $\chi^2_{(2)} = 9.662$; $p = .008$). Another relevant datum is that our male respondents reported boredom during the lockdown to a greater extent (63% vs. 37%; $\chi^2_{(1)} = 11.150$; $p = .001$).

Finally, a variable specifically analyzed due to its importance for the study is the general meaning of the unexpected situation that has befallen families around the country. For some people the confinement has been lived as a loss of freedom, while for others it may have been experienced as a space for self-realization and reflection. An 88% of the respondents reported having not experienced sensations of freedom, while a 12% said this process has brought some kind of liberation. This variable is closely related with self-knowledge: those who have had freedom sensations said they have been able to increase their self-knowledge (43.5% vs. 19.9%; $\chi^2_{(1)} = 12.838$; $p = .000$) and have been able to learn new things (16.2% vs. 9.7%; $\chi^2_{(1)} = 3.463$; $p = .047$). Although in general these percentages are low, thus corroborating the obvious loss of freedom implied by the confinement, we have found interesting the link with other personal self-fulfillment activities.

Discussion and conclusion

Confinement has not affected all people equally due to the Spanish confinement measures, as other studies have been pointing out (Blundell et al., 2020). In our survey, we found, in general, two profiles

of people related to the experience of work-family balance during COVID-19. Those who are teleworkers or hybrid workers -normally highly educated civil servants with one child, who do not have financial problems-, and those who do work but their working hours have been reduced -who have less education, an older child, financial problems, and are younger (Corbera et al., 2020).

Respondents from the first group have valued their children's independence in following their schoolwork and were mainly concerned with the responsible use of the technology devices. In any case, they believe that this situation has not helped to improve intra-family relations, although they consider that empathy is a relevant value in this situation. Once again, the gender imbalance in the dynamics of couples who teleworked and had dependents in their care has become evident. Like Lyttelton et al. (2020) found, the gender gaps in housework and work time with children are greater among telecommuters than among workers in the workplace.

Caregiving responsibilities for working parents have increased. As a result, in general, women are still the ones who by mobilizing hidden and or/unexpected resources (Commim & Nussbaum, 2014) have overseen home chores, school duties and childcare activities (Collins et al., 2020; Boca et al., 2020). On this regard, the education of children might lead to problems of unprotection, both for those parents who must devote many hours to work, and for those who despite working fewer hours, have claimed not to devote more hours to the education of their children. Moving towards hybrid education models can have negative consequences if the family and work system is not transformed.

Respondents from the second group are concerned about the excessive use of technology by their children (cf. UNICEF, 2020, June 9th) and the difficulties they have in following their educational process. However, it is relevant how they perceive an improvement in their couple relationships. They consider that the most important value is respect. Those families that have had more time shared with their children have been aware of the importance of transmitting values and, fundamentally, the value of respect, which is basic for family coexistence. This group, although in objective conditions of the welfare or neoliberal state they are worse off, have taken advantage of the time to take care of themselves: to do sport, to improve the relationship with their partners and to dedicate more time to their children. It seems that this group's confinement has changed their way of life and their priorities in life.

Similarly, our analysis of work-life conciliation and the sudden prevalence of the virtual world suggests than some people more than others have resources to navigate it, while it must be borne in mind that the more technologically powerful the online world is, the more difficult it will be for some people and children with poor equipment and connections to navigate it as well (Alberich et al., 2020). Thus, concerned about the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on inequalities across several key domains of life, including employment and ability to balance work-family life, our results show how these new fissures interact with existing inequalities along various key dimensions, including socio-economic status, profession, education, age, gender and working hours per week. Certainly, most families that answered the questionnaire have felt the challenge of being able to integrate family life with work, taking care of their school-age children and contributing to their academic development as well as to their emotional and moral growth.

However, this study comes with limitations that need to be considered. First, while these results have allowed us to reach interesting conclusions, the use of the snowball sampling method results in a selection bias. Although the study began by selecting an initial group of participants who were asked to encourage a chain reaction of survey distribution, these results cannot be read as representative of the Spanish population. Furthermore, women were over-represented in the final sample since the questionnaire was answered more by them than men. Another limitation of this study is the use of a convenience sampling method which did not allow for a nuanced approach to family diversity. Finally, the data collected covered mainly the first months of the pandemic and the final sample is relatively small which may introduce regional bias, as participants may predominantly come from certain regions excluding those facing greater challenges to access to technology or have stable internet connections. Thus, while efforts were made to diversify the sample through snowball sampling, caution is advised when generalizing the findings beyond this specific group.

In any case, these results allow us to warn that women are again the ones assuming the main roles of caring for the children and those linked to domestic chores (Boz et al., 2015; Farré & González, 2020). The study by Boz et al. (2015) may be especially useful for comparing the Spanish situation before and after the pandemic.

Also, as reported by other studies, although every crisis brings opportunities, these opportunities have not affected all sectors in the same way (Johnson et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Rivero et al., 2020). The pandemic has altered the position of men within the home and in relation with the care of children, leading them to assume new tasks (Jurado, 2020), although the results show the changes have been related mostly with some instrumental issues, rather than with a fairer balance of responsibilities. Consequently, this panorama poses new questions about how the return to normality (or to certain normality) will allow the roles of men and women to fit in the 21st century, and about how public and private entities can promote work-family conciliation through new regulatory frameworks.

In this regard, an important advance in the European region is the Directive 1158 of the European Parliament on work-life balance for parents and careers. Approved in June 2019, and in force since August 2022, this legal instrument improves the rights related with flexible working arrangements, and with parental, paternity, and careers' leaves (European Commission, 2022; European Union, 2019). Although this is indeed good news, activists and researchers alike must stay vigilant.

On one hand, it must be kept in mind that the root problems addressed by these initiatives are extremely stubborn. Despite the general trends towards a reduction of the working week and teleworking, 'gender gaps in the labour market persist across the EU despite decades-long efforts to eradicate them' (Piasna & De Spiegelaere, 2021, p. 21). There is a risk, these same authors argue, that the observed working time redistributions brought upon by the 2008 financial crisis, could be repeated as consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. If the focus on social objectives is somehow blurred, the net effect of recessions and market forces will likely confirm rather than reduce the existing inequalities and imbalances. Once again, 'the risk is a growing social divide with the costs shouldered by the most vulnerable workers' (Piasna & De Spiegelaere, 2021, p. 22).

On the other hand, even the most noble or well-meant policies may have unintended consequences, and the initiatives to improve work family balance are no exception. According to Perrigino et al. (2018), fragmented but growing evidence suggests that work life balance policies are usually conceptualized in quite positive or 'rosy' ways, ignoring its 'dark side' or different types of 'backlash'. For instance, the ability to work remotely may not imply statistically significant improvements in the work life balance; some individuals who do not need childcare provisions may resent to their availability; and in some contexts, the use of maternity and paternity leaves may lead to extrinsic penalties, in terms of career consequences or stigmatization and ostracism.

All this underlines the complexity of this research area and the need of paying attention to the interplay of multiple variables, from the level of legal norms and public policies, all the way down to the level of individual perceptions, values, and emotions. Perhaps the notion of 'meaningfulness' (Bragger et al., 2019) will in the future be useful as an encompassing predictor of work-family balance. But there are of course many other lines of research worthy of attention. To highlight just a few, first, our results need to be complemented with other kind of research efforts, preferably with qualitative or mixed methods designs. This is the option we have seen as the most appropriate, from the outset of our approach (Buxarrais & Escudero, 2013), but it was simply impracticable at the time of data collection. Particularly promising would be the use of life stories or autobiographical approaches since the attenuation of the pandemic will hardly lead to its oblivion. On the contrary, while the passage of time may contribute to some of the anecdotal details of this historical episode being forgotten, in retrospect it may also contribute to highlight its moral lessons or significance.

On the other hand, it is clear that our approach can be enriched by comparison with related studies in a variety of cultural contexts (Abioui et al., 2020; Aman-Ullah et al., 2022; Dewi et al., 2023; Jones & Brady, 2022; UNESCO, 2020; You-Chuan, 2020). For instance, the addition of variables addressing different religious work ethics (Aman-Ullah & Mehmood, 2022) may be useful for a more encompassing understanding of work-life conciliation across the continents, but also inside an increasingly diverse Europe.

Finally, a broad framework for assessing the contributions of this study is the meta-narrative review of the impact of COVID-19 on education, by Bozkurt et al. (2022). A bibliometric literature review that, taking into account more than a thousand publications, identified seven main themes: 1) the great reset; 2) shifting educational landscape and emerging educational roles; 3) digital pedagogy; 4) emergency remote education; 5) pedagogy of care; 6) social equity, equality and injustice; and, 7) future of

education. As can be noted, although most of those themes are related with the challenges of the pandemic for formal education, there are two – numbers 5 & 6 – with clear affinities to our emphasis on non-formal ethical education at home, and on the value of co-responsibility. The pedagogy of care theme includes as main nodes: stress, anxiety, student wellbeing coping, care, crisis management, and depression. While the social equity theme includes support, equity, social justice, digital divide, inequality, and social support (Bozkurt et al., 2022). In other words, although most research in this area has been understandably devoted to the emergency management, or how to continue formal instruction in spite of lockdowns, the study of work-life conciliation as an intrinsically ethical and educational theme is also a valid and important option; especially, in order to gauge and reverse, as far as possible, the toll of the epidemic on families and new generations.

In the pursuit of advancing our understanding of work-family balance dynamics, we propose several avenues for future research and policy action. First, longitudinal studies should be embraced to comprehensively examine the lasting implications of work-family balance disruptions, extending beyond the immediate crisis phases and in societies increasingly relying on technology. Furthermore, researchers are encouraged to adopt an intersectional approach to unveil the intricate nuances in individuals' experiences during crisis events. Finally, the development of family-centered policies should remain a key priority for policymakers. These policies should encompass a wide spectrum of support measures, including childcare provisions, parental leave, and flexible work arrangements. An overarching goal should be the reduction of gender disparities in caregiving and household responsibilities.

This research offers significant implications for values education and educational practice, particularly emphasizing the integration of ethical and non-formal education within family and social contexts to enhance educational outcomes. Firstly, a caring pedagogy can be emphasized within educational settings to develop support systems focusing on well-being, stress, anxiety, and depression management, thus improving the overall educational experience. Secondly, the study underscores the importance of addressing equity, equality, and social injustice in educational settings, advocating for policies and practices that ensure equal access to resources and opportunities for all. Moreover, the active involvement of families in the democratization of family practices is crucial for achieving work-life balance, suggesting the need for environments that encourage family participation in learning and promote shared responsibilities at home. Additionally, integrating informal and recreational ways to foster values, such as storytelling and family leisure, into practices can enrich values education and promote co-responsibility. Furthermore, the study highlights the challenges associated with excessive use of technological devices by children at home, prompting education professionals to guide parents on setting appropriate rules for technology use and promoting digital literacy. By embracing these applications, professionals can foster holistic development and well-being among people, addressing the complexities of modern societies and the challenges posed by events like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Disclosure statement

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in this study (involving human participants) were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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