# research article

# 'For me, it was a liberation, like being free again.' A qualitative approach to the care trajectories of divorced mothers in Spain

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This article deals with the causes and consequences of divorce in a group of women with minor children in Spain, a country in Southern Europe that presents a pre-eminently familistic character based on a marked division of gender roles. We detected an imbalance between qualitative and quantitative studies on this topic, of which the latter are more numerous in the recently published literature. For this reason, here we wish to show the people behind the data by conferring two questions making up the analysis axes of this research. First, we deal with the causes of couple breakups, which are related to inequality in the distribution of housework and care tasks in all cases. Second, we analyse their speeches about work and family conciliation after divorce, with particular importance given to the presence, or not, of a strong family network.

## Introduction

National and international research numerically show us different aspects of divorce since it is a multidimensional phenomenon (for instance, Kalmijn and Broese van Groenou, 2005; Ruppanner, 2012; Ruppanner et al, 2017a; Kessler, 2018; Leopold, 2018). One of the factors that have been considered in this study is that of care, which studies of feminist economics have specifically addressed. These centre on placing care work at the core of the analysis (Carrasco, 2014; Ezquerra, 2018; Agenjo-Calderón and Gálvez-Muñoz, 2019). Here, we understand care as 'the activities that daily and generationally regenerate people's physical and emotional well-being' (Pérez in Carrasco, 2014: 62).

One of the primary purposes of feminist economics has been to make care visible and to present the contradictions faced by women who enter the labour market and at the same time bear the burden of unpaid care work in their homes (Ezquerra, 2012). Institutional economics has traditionally considered care as part of private life. For that reason, care does not fall within the logic of capital and the economy does not need to value it (Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz, 2015). Pérez Orozco (2006; 2011) reports the need to deal with gender relations as the organising element of the economic system and, therefore, each country's socioeconomic structure. Feminist economics is committed to overturning the view that care is 'women's work' and should instead be considered as a public and political issue that must be addressed (Lombardo, 2016).

Following the feminist economics theories, our research tries to shed light on the divorce phenomenon from a qualitative perspective because knowing the causes and consequences of divorce from a qualitative methodology provides an in-depth vision of this phenomenon. Specifically, our objective is to understand how the lack of parity in family care and conciliation influences heterosexual women in their decision to divorce and in the subsequent family restructuring; both aspects have been studied chiefly through quantitative studies (Kalmijn and Broese van Groenou, 2005; Ruppanner et al, 2017a; Kessler, 2018; Leopold, 2018).

With this objective, we intend to contribute research results in favour of the democratisation of care (Comas-d'Argemir, 2019), which implies a worldwide recognition of the reproductive field and the search for equal opportunities for women traditionally dealt with in this area. According to Comas-d'Argemir (2019: 21), the democratisation of care is required; that is, 'a social organization of care based on democratic values, both for the people who receive them and for those who provide them'.

To do this, 16 Spanish heterosexual and divorced women between 37 and 44 years old participated in this qualitative study, which followed the communicative methodology. The variables used in the sample selection were the employment situation, the ages of the children, and the custody regime, which we delve into in the methodology section. All the women were working mothers who had custody of their children; therefore, in terms of upbringing, they were single-parent families. Through these daily-life stories, we analyse divorce among heterosexual couples, focusing on the causes of marital breakdown and the consequences on family and work conciliation from the women's point of view, all framed in the theories of feminist economics related to divorce and gender inequalities in care tasks. We focused on single-mother families because, although the transferability of the discussed issues could be helpful to other family structures, work and family conciliation are more complex in families where only one manages the primary family unit (Tobío, 2002; Almeda and Di Nella, 2011; Tercero, 2014; Fernández-Martinez and Avilés-Hernández, 2020).

In the literature review, we consider the territorial issue as there are very notable differences among countries. We highlight the significant differences among countries whose public policies aim to support families, in the data about the occupational presence of women and men and the reasons for them, and in the social nature of the care that exists in the collective imagination. However, we focus on the Spanish case since the informants live and are raising their children in this country. Moreover, as the academic literature affirms, Spain supports the double breadwinner/extended family model, in which solidarity is based on mutual help within the family network (Moreno Mínguez et al, 2017).

## Literature review

### Gender inequalities and conflicts in the care of children and households in Spain

Gender inequality in the distribution of care tasks between men and women, where the most significant weight of such tasks falls on women, can result in divorce (Ruppanner, 2012). It is this greater responsibility that entails the contradictions and conflicts in women's lives regarding family and work (Ortega Gaspar, 2013). It is essential to highlight that the presence of children under six years of age increases the perception of conflict in reconciling family and work (Ruppanner, 2012; Ortega Gaspar, 2013). As Frisco and Williams (2003) point out, the unequal division of labour is an element that is associated with the probability of divorce, mainly by women, because tensions arise from juggling tasks designated by their assigned gender roles, leading to feelings of conflict. They perceive injustice in the imbalance of the distribution of household tasks while men expect them to fulfil their 'traditional' gender roles, leading to relationship breakups. This article refers to gender inequalities and the perception of conflict, which is high in Spain (Moreno Mínguez et al, 2017).

Regarding childcare as part of these household tasks, we adopt the famous term 'intensive motherhood', coined by Hays (1998). It refers to work that focuses on children and where the mother, who puts their needs ahead of her own, is at the centre of everything (Weiss, 1978; Lupton, 2012; Wall, 2013). Society seems to have reached a consensus on motherhood linked to concepts like love and dedication. However, this idea denies other emotions, such as anxiety, hostility, insecurity and worry, which are considered taboo (Blázquez and Montes Muñoz, 2010). Brown (2019) explains in her research into depression and women that this is due to a series of narratives about what it means to be a 'good woman', and the focus on perfection and absolute availability to provide care.

Ruppanner (2012) compared quantitatively 25 European countries regarding how men and women perceive the household chores issue and their participation in the labour market. It quantitatively shows how economic income conflicts about housework increase in countries where more women are significantly present in the labour market. One explanation could be that women's feeling of injustice exposes them to this dissatisfaction, which generates conflicts. The author also highlights that in most traditional countries, in terms of gender roles related to household chores, these conflicts are more limited because an assumption of the division of care obligations according to gender exists. Hence it follows that those women who carry the care burden act in line with gender sociocultural parameters (Ruppanner et al, 2017a). In Spain, we find considerable conflict in the distribution of household chores (39.6 per cent from men's perceptions and 46.9 per cent from women's perceptions) (Ruppanner, 2012). The case of Spain could be included in countries where traditional ideas about the distribution of household tasks between men and women remain but move toward more egalitarian models (Caïs and Folguera, 2013; Moreno Mínguez et al, 2017). As Ortega Gaspar (2013) points out in a comparative study on the work–family conflict in Spain and Britain, gender or the presence of minor[1] children at home are variables that in Spain are directly related to the conflict in this area, unlike in Britain, in which there is no direct relationship. This would be explained by the permanence of some traditional ideas that are translated into the distribution of care based on a family model (Sánchez Vera and Bote Díaz, 2009). The perception of a moral obligation for families sustains the act of caring and the gender

culture that frames it (Moreno Mínguez et al, 2018). According to Eurostat (2016), 95 per cent of Spanish women, compared with 68 per cent of Spanish men between 25 and 49 years old, care for and/or educate their children daily. This situation, and its consequent inequality, are socially and culturally constructed based on the idea of the 'ideal' family. It is directly related to the gender roles that should exist in it (Pfau-Effinger et al, 2009).

As discussed in this section, these cultural ideas are supported in Spain by a welfare state that does not provide sufficient public services to outsource care (nurseries, nursing homes, daycare, free time and so on). Even though this model is undergoing transition due to profound family changes in Spain in recent decades, there are still marked contrasts with other countries like those in northern Europe (Alsarve, 2015). According to Caïs and Folguera (2013), the typical profile of a caregiver in Spain is a woman aged between 45 and 64 years who takes care of her older relatives and children. For women in this age group, the negative effects fall mainly in the labour sphere due to having to provide care either to dependent children or older people (Casado-Marín et al, 2011). In southern European countries, states consider caring should remain in families, while Scandinavians assume the social responsibility for caring for dependent people (Sarasa and Mestres, 2007). For this reason, the welfare state in Spain continues to be familial (Bettio and Plantenga, 2004; Martínez-Buján, 2014), and the intervention of public organisations remains limited (Setién and Acosta, 2010) because the state assumes the capacity of families and, more specifically, of women, to provide care.

## Consequences of divorce on work and family conciliation

As we have pointed out previously, the presence of children under six years of age considerably increases care tasks and the difficulties in reconciling work and family life. But, in the case of divorce where small children are involved, what happens in working life once the couple has broken up? What are the economic and labour consequences for women in this inequality scenario?

Leopold (2018), in his study on the different axes of analysis of the consequences of divorce for men and women in Germany, concludes that men suffer greater psychological tension in the first moments of separation, but it is temporary. However, women's economic problems become chronic. These are the most remarkable gender differences among the 20 axes studied and show us what the period of marriage, and that which happens after separation, means for women in work terms. Being the principal caregiver of the family during marriage implies less presence in the labour market, which entails economic difficulties from earning a low income. Kessler (2018), who analyses gender patterns in economic inequalities between men and women after being divorced in Switzerland, concludes that, despite the much more significant presence of women in the labour market in the last 20 years (a rise of 20 points), divorce still poses a substantial risk to women's economic wellbeing.

In the Spanish case, statistics show that most women work part time. In 2020 (INE, Spanish National Statistics Institute, 2020) we found that 3.6 per cent of men work part time compared with 25.8 per cent of women. The most frequent reason for this finding is caring for young children or older dependents, although the reduction in working hours is more balanced than for taking care of minors in

the latter case. Of the unemployed not looking for a job, 37.7 per cent of women find themselves in this situation because they cannot find adequate services to care for their children, compared with 13.3 per cent of men.

In this case, the territorial context is relevant because there are significant differences in work and family conciliation between some countries and others. Alsarve's (2015) research into the conciliation of lone mothers in Sweden points out mothers' better financial situations in those countries where the state guides conciliation policies. The comparative study of Pollmann-Schult (2017) comparing 24 European countries concludes that lone mothers who live in countries with higher gender equality levels, strong family policies, free childcare services and social tolerance towards different family types obtain similar satisfaction levels to those expressed by women in more traditional relationships. Therefore, these public policies become the most crucial indicator when analysing self-satisfaction levels and living standards for single-parent families (Fernández-Martínez and Avilés-Hernández, 2020).

As pointed out in the previous section, the gender culture in Spain is complemented by a welfare state that does not provide sufficient public services to outsource care (nurseries, nursing homes, daycare, free time and so on). Even though this model is undergoing transition due to profound family changes in Spain in recent decades, there are still marked contrasts with other countries like those in northern Europe (Alsarve, 2015). In Spain, we have a public childcare system that does not suffice and a private system that not all families can access or afford (Hernández et al, 2021). On single-parent families, Avilés (2015) highlights the lack of consideration by the Spanish state for these increasingly numerous family units, which entails neither state regulation nor specific measures, as it does for large families. In this way, families in Spain overcome conciliation with partial strategies for reconciling family and work life (Tobío, 2002), which means adjusting the day to the children's school hours. When this is impossible in economic terms because a full-time salary is necessary, informal support networks become crucial in reconciling work and family life (Méndez et al, 2015).

In this scenario, and with the family model we discussed in the previous section, informal solidarity in Spain is the key to solving single-parent families' day-to-day lives. This informal solidarity comes from the family or each person's circle of trust. As Tercero (2014) explains, these families experience finding jobs that are often precarious or involve long or irregular working hours, forcing them to leave their children in the care of others who usually form part of that circle of trust.

## Materials and method

### Sample

We must remember that we are dealing with a particular type of single-parent family since the diversity of families headed by only one adult is currently considered very varied (Yorks, 2021). Therefore, to define it more precisely, we based our study on three criteria and we limited the context to Spain:

1. The participants were heterosexual separated/divorced women with minor children living in single-parent households (with fathers living in separate accommodation). Specifically, the criterion for the children was that at least one of

them was under six years of age at the time of the divorce, on the understanding that this stage that requires more care because schooling is not compulsory until that age in Spain.

2. Women who had obtained legal custody of their children (and joint custody) after separation/divorce and had greater responsibility for their children's care.

3. Women who were currently working, both full time and part time, and who had to reconcile their work with their family responsibilities as heads of households.

Thus, we selected 16 women whom we interviewed between the beginning of 2018 and the beginning of 2020, all in a Spanish context. Their ages were between 37 and 44 years old, and they had between one and two children under 12 years old. All of them had legal custody of their children, and all of them were currently in paid work, both full time and part time.

We contacted these women after conducting a six-month observation of a group of separated and divorced women in Spain on Facebook.[2] First, we explained the project and asked if they would collaborate. Next, the participants' informed consent was collected and the interviews were conducted face-to-face for between 75 and 120 minutes. Finally, the interviews were transcribed and analysed according to communicative methodology. Table 1 contains the primary data of those interviewed.

## Collection and analysis techniques

In this research, we have followed the communicative methodology, which allows the creation of shared knowledge between the researcher and the participants (Gómez et al, 2011). We considered this to be the most appropriate methodology as it has been recognised as adequate to achieve social impact and empower participants, two

**Table 1: Primary data of interviewees: sample profile**

| Participant | Age | Marital status | Number of children and age | Months since separation | Current work |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| M1 | 37 | Separated | 1 (5 years old) | 50 months | Full time |
| M2 | 37 | Divorced | 1 (5 years old) | 48 months | Part time |
| M3 | 35 | Separated | 1 (5 years old) | 44 months | Part time |
| M4 | 43 | Separated | 1 (5 years old) | 48 months | Part time |
| M5 | 42 | Divorced | 2 (10 and 6 years old) | 55 months | Full time |
| M6 | 38 | Divorced | 1 (7 years old) | 54 months | Full time |
| M7 | 33 | Separated | 1 (6 years old) | 60 months | Full time |
| M8 | 36 | Separated | 1 (6 years old) | 54 months | Full time |
| M9 | 46 | Separated | 2 (8 and 16 years old) | 84 months | Part time |
| M10 | 32 | Divorced | 1 (5 years old) | 48 months | Full time |
| M11 | 37 | Divorced | 1 (11 years old) | 60 months | Full time |
| M12 | 38 | Divorced | 1 (6 years old) | 12 months | Part time |
| M13 | 37 | Separated | 1 (3 years old) | 36 months | Part time |
| M14 | 35 | Separated | 1 (4 years old) | 36 months | Part time |
| M15 | 37 | Separated | 1 (6 years old) | 60 months | Part time |
| M16 | 44 | Divorced | 1 (6 years old) | 12 months | Part time |

aspects that we consider fundamental when it comes to achieving our objective of contributing to the discussion on the need to democratise care (Gómez et al, 2011; 2019). Among the communicative techniques, we selected the communicative daily-life story, a process in which the interviewee reflects on her life and interprets it, while the researcher contributes with her scientific knowledge to the reflections; it is a dialogue on equal terms (Ruiz-Eugenio et al, 2020). In addition, the adequacy of this specific technique in the search for social impact had already been demonstrated, so we considered the approach and design appropriate for our case (Tellado et al, 2020).

Based on the same communicative methodology, the analysis identifies the inclusive and exclusive elements. The first are those elements identified in the discourses that have contributed to overcoming the barriers and exclusionary factors, which focus on those barriers that prevent people from developing or reaching certain milestones (Gómez et al, 2006).

Table 2 presents the pattern of coding performed for this study. Specifically, data were coded in two large categories: management of care and work and family conciliation.

Two analysis areas that have proved particularly relevant are those related to care management and the family-work balance. As we pointed out in the Introduction, these two aspects must be considered in light of those to which they are intrinsically related and have to do with their condition as separated/divorced mothers.

## Results

We establish two categories to analyse the results. First, we analyse the time before the separation, especially that which occurs after the arrival of the children, focusing on the reasons that led to the decision of these women to separate. Second, we will deal with the consequences of divorce concerning family and work conciliation and the necessity of informal support in a country like Spain.

### Causes of separation and inequality in the care sphere

'I lived an injustice all day. Why did I have to do everything myself?'(M4)

As discussed earlier, the inequality in the distribution of tasks is due to a conception of gender roles, whereby women must deal mainly with these issues. When children arrive, these tasks considerably increase, and women are expected to exercise intensive motherhood by focusing all their attention on the care of children. All the

**Table 2: Coding categories**

| | Management of care and work | | Family and work balance | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Reasons for separation/divorce Housework division Economic situation | Work and family conciliation before divorce | Divorce impacts Economic situation Informal and formal support | Work and family conciliation after divorce |
| Transformative dimensions | | | | |
| Exclusionary dimensions | | | | |

participants stated that these inequalities grew once their children were born, and they all spoke of general dissatisfaction with being the only ones in charge of caring for their children and the housework. The following quotation is an example, but all the women expressed similar sentiments:

> 'I felt doomed to live like my mother–in–law, a slave to my children and husband. I didn't like that situation at home; it wasn't what I wanted for my family. In my ideal family, everyone cleans, everyone picks things up. He does no housework, nothing at all.' (M6)

This inequality in care tasks while living in the same home caused constant conflict between this couple, which in the case of the interviewee only ended when they separated. In this way, gender inequality concerning the distribution of care tasks is a clear example of an exclusionary dimension and is one of the significant causes of breakups in couples with children, all mediated by the economic factor.

The economic factor grades the impact of the decision to separate and economic independence is decisive. Thus, we found differences among the women who had paid work before separation/divorce (12) and those who did not (four). Specifically, 50% of those women who didn't work decided postpone the divorce while this was not the case among working women.

We can see it in a fragment of one of the interviews with a mother who did not work from the time her daughter was born until she separated: "For five years or so, I have given everything to motherhood, and I have put my professional life aside. I have set myself aside as a woman and everything, and I have not taken care of myself. I have given everything to my girl" (M16).

This person currently works, but her job is not related to her professional training; she also alternates temporary, non–consecutive jobs with periods of inactivity. Her age (45 years) and lack of professional experience in recent years are exclusionary elements when it comes to finding a job, increasingly so if no specific public policies are in place.

This reality shows that the traditional vision of the family has not yet been overturned, as we saw in the literature and the official statistics of women who are economically inactive due to dependent care or working part time for the same reason. This fact produces inequality and a very clear labour gap, since it directly influences the economic resources available to these women, and consequently their independence.

Several of the interviewees, those who were not in paid work, expressed that they had no control over the money and did not feel that it belonged to the family: "I felt that he was paying for my things, and I did not feel that it was my money" (M7). "As he worked, all his expenses were covered. In the end, he bought whatever he wanted, and I had no right to anything" (M6).

Faced with these fundamental economic barriers, women have developed other strategies that allow them to achieve a certain degree of economic independence, such as going to live with close relatives, sharing a house, asking for money and so on. In the case of one of the interviewees, she currently shares a house with three other women, one of them also a separated mother with a child. In her story, she explained that between them they look for ways to pay the rent and help each other with their children: taking them to and from school, taking care of them during the other's shifts and so on. In addition, they makes arrangements according to whether one has more working hours:

'I told her "500 [euros] as a deposit, but you have to pay the flat, which is almost a lot for me, 200, 210, 220 [euros] … almost, with electricity and water", and then … I told her "500 is a lot for me," but well, since she also has two jobs, she tells me "You pay the 500 [euros] and I pay you the flat …"' (M12)

Finally, four of the women related how they received money from their parents in the first years to pay the rent and other basic expenses because their part-time jobs did not cover all their outgoings. Also, seven stated that they had requested urgent government funds has a different meaning in Spain. We propose 'occasional Government funds'. for the economically vulnerable population, such as help for rent, school expenses, food or the payment of electricity and water bills. This relates to formal and informal network support, which we discuss later.

## Consequences of divorce in family and work conciliation and the emotional sphere

'When you decide to take the step and leave home, you don't think about the next day.' (M8)

As we explained, there were a variety of situations concerning the current work environment of the women we interviewed. Specifically, those women already working full time before the separation and who continued with that job reported fewer difficulties in all areas. As with the other participants, they were in charge of nearly all the household tasks before separation, especially the care of the children and the cleaning of the home. In that sense, their home routines did not change:

'The organisational system hasn't changed much for me because I was doing everything anyway and alone [...] My family has helped me [...] I've always done everything myself. I am doing exactly the same.' (M5)

'After separating, I noticed nothing, I kept on organising things with my parents, and that was all.' (M10)

Those who did not work had to restructure their lives significantly. The job search itself was an enormous effort and full-time work was not available to secure economic independence: "I'm bad now because I can't sign up for a civil service exam because I have to look for work, now what I have to do is take any shitty job to be able to pay the bills" (M15).

The interviewees refer to endless days with continuous responsibilities in all spaces (work, home, parenting…) which causes them mental load. Most of the time, they worked double and triple shifts, care activities overlapped and unforeseen events were overcome thanks to their social networks. When we talked with the research participants about the daily difficulties they experienced with their children, they first mentioned fatigue and lack of support to perform all the day-to-day activities, especially in relation to work and family conciliation:

'I work a lot in the morning, and also in the afternoon if they call me in to work extra hours … I lack hours in the day for my house, my job and my daughter. I don't have time for anything. I have no one to help me.' (M11)

This work overload, together with the experience of living with separation, leads to consequences for mental health, as expressed by the interviewees. In light of the results, it is necessary to consider the strategies the women developed to overcome such situations in a transformative way. Eight of the interviewees needed psychological help due to their relationship breakups, to overcome the sense of having been forced into a situation they knew nothing about. They reported finding themselves again after separating and needing that therapeutic space to find the techniques to avoid anxiety, stress and so on. However, we must bear in mind that not all of them can pay visits to a psychologist. "Ever since I started going to therapy, and I keep going … it's okay because they teach you techniques to control stress, to control yourself and to stop too. And there's no mental overload. I have so many things on my mind" (M13).

Another important issue from this transformative dimension is that all the interviewees had a feeling of freedom when they let go of day-to-day conflicts, especially concerning care tasks. This fact relates to the liberation hypothesis (Kalmijn and Broese van Groenou, 2005), in which positive consequences are expressed because of divorce, and can be exemplified in these women's discourses at an emotional level: "Now I have the freedom to do what I want with my life. […] For me it has been liberation, how to be free again … I was furious because I understood that things had to be shared" (M4).

These transformative dimensions collide with the reality for families in Spain, where conciliation continues to be a pending task in public policies, specifically for single-parent families. As this is a preeminently family-oriented state, it is taken for granted that a large part of the conciliation must fall on the informal support of the family and the closest circle. From the interviews, the importance of having such a network came over both emotionally and logistically as a way of reconciling the work environment with the family one: "I can ask my two relatives to collect my daughter from school and such, then I'd feel supported, but nothing else. Economy is not the most important thing, but it also counts" (M11).

For those women with a family network, they did not hesitate to state how essential it was in their day-to-day lives: "My parents are the support I have had; without them, I would not have been able to continue" (M10); or "They help me a lot, they live in the neighbourhood" (M8). In two of the cases, the interviewees had to move to the neighbourhoods of their close relatives when they separated to facilitate this informal support.

We found that those women with no such support experienced considerably more difficulties to reconcile stress in parenting and other disorders deriving from this situation: "I have no support, and I need to leave my child for a few hours. It's full-time work with a child" (M8). In one of the cases, the interviewee pointed to mutual help with some friends, since she had no family to go to, and also to the neighbours, who were attentive to her daughter when she returned from school alone. This issue of solidarity and community support is a transformative element. The lack of informal support, on the other hand, is a clear exclusionary element because the state does not provide sufficient resources to these families.

## Discussion and conclusions

When dealing with the causes and consequences of divorce, it is essential to have a gender perspective. As we found in the literature review, women's work overload might cause conflicts that lead to couples' relationship breakdowns. This is a controversial issue, even more so when children arrive since it considerably increases the burden (Ortega Gaspar, 2013), which coincides with previous quantitative studies analysed (Kalmijn, 2007; Ruppanner, 2012; Ruppanner et al, 2017a; 2017b; Kessler, 2018).

On the other hand, the gender perspective must be considered when analysing the economic dependence of some of the interviewees on their partners. We have seen how, in many cases, they did not work because they had children, or they did so only partially. In this sense, we found that those women who worked full time while they were still in a relationship and decided to separate earlier had an easier transition than those who did not have a job or only worked part time; specifically, 10 of the 16 women interviewed (four without work and six part time). Furthermore, there is empirical evidence of the relationship between higher-paid female employment and the tendency to divorce (Kalmijn, 2007). Pre-separation employment and economic situation notably influenced the decision to separate and restructure after divorce, since for women, stopping work during maternity is a clear limiting factor when it comes to finding better jobs once the separation happens.

For this reason, we believe this issue should be addressed through public policies favouring co-responsibility and the democratisation of care, more specifically about single-parent families in a situation of exclusion or at risk of being so. As a result of this lack of aid, the women we interviewed developed strategies to overcome this barrier, especially those with lower incomes of their own at the time they decide to separate. For example, they shared the cost of a flat, moved closer to the closest family network to facilitate care or had several jobs.

Regarding care management, it is noteworthy that 100 per cent of the interviewees attribute the reason for their divorce to this factor. Although we cannot conclude that all women decide to divorce for this reason, it is undeniable that the burden acquired by the lack of equality in care is very high, especially for women who have no possibility of accessing public and private complementary help. During their stories, they expressed their experiences of such contradictory situations during their relationships, which led to constant conflicts and finally to breaking up. Authors such as Kalmijn (2007) and Kessler (2018) have already pointed out the inequality of care as a factor in divorce.

However, when talking with these women, we found that all of them felt calm when the conflicts within the same household ended and they had a sense of liberation and freedom, already pointed out by Kalmijn and Broese van Groenou (2005). In addition, all agreed that it was the only possible solution to that situation. This positive factor, the feeling of liberation, would be considered a transformative element within the scientific community since it supposes a positive discourse on an issue such as divorce, which is usually treated only from the weaknesses and not the strengths. Meanwhile, we find different feelings, such as worry or anguish, have been relieved following psychological therapy; however, given the economic difficulties, not all women can access this help. Thus, access to psychological services for separated mothers emerges as another transformative factor, one that needs embedding in public policy.

Other consequences studied have been the presence, or otherwise, of a close family that collaborates in the upbringing of children (grandparents, uncles, aunts, close friends and so on). Single-parent families' informal support networks are crucial to reconciling family life with work. In this way, the lack of a social network puts these women in a very complex situation due to the limited formal support for conciliation offered by public policies.

The authors know this study has its limitations, especially the number of informants and the restriction to the Spanish context. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, we delved into these women's discourses through a qualitative methodology, by returning prominence to them without taking them as only passive research subjects or just one more number in statistics. In addition, the very characterisation of divorce as a complex phenomenon is always a limitation, since it is impossible to address it in its entirety. In our case, it has been approached from the care aspect, but as stated in the introduction, it can be approached from other perspectives.

To conclude this article, and although it is not directly the subject of this text, we believe it is necessary to comment on what the COVID-19 pandemic has meant for the sphere of care, specifically in single-parent families headed by a woman. As Morero-Mínguez and Ortega-Gaspar (2022) point out, gender inequalities have become evident in Spain; furthermore, there has been a retraditionalisation of the roles surrounding care tasks. In addition, these authors specifically mention single-parent families (mainly those headed by a woman because they are more numerous in Spain), in which the burden of care has fallen solely on them because they have not had either another adult person in the home or the informal support so necessary for conciliation in this type of family. For these families, the phenomenon of retraditionalisation has been more evident than in families with two adults. Other studies (Hertz et al, 2021) have shown that single-parent households suffered a greater impact at the productive and reproductive levels, making clear the need for an informal network to be able to access paid work. In the recent report by the Federation of Single Mothers (2021), of 542 households, 67 per cent of women had networks and support groups to help them reconcile their personal and professional lives, but 33 per cent had been deprived of them during the various lockdown measures. This was largely due to having to forego the help of grandparents, who play an essential role in providing informal care (Tobío, 2012).

## Notes

[1] Under Spanish and British law anyone under the age of 18 is defined as a minor.

[2] Support Group: Spanish Association for Separated Mothers, www.facebook.com/groups/705909376139362.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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