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Go the extra mile: a gender approach towards parenthood in early-career academics

Gender inequalities, especially with respect to working mothers, are still a reality in organisational contexts (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019), and are also present in academic and research centres (Pastor & Acosta, 2016; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017). Although significant advances have been made and European policies have been created to facilitate work-life balance in recent years (Vozemberg, 2015), it is still necessary to examine career barriers linked to parenthood to allow us to develop effective policies in the academic context.

In recent decades, criticism has been expressed in the literature of the transformation of universities into neoliberal institutions, where academics must accomplish high levels of productivity by publishing in the best scientific journals, qualifying for external grants, participating in international collaborations, taking part in several conferences per year, and achieving teaching excellence, among others (Acker & Wagner, 2017; Caretta, Drozdowski, Jokinen, & Falconer, 2018). This growth of neoliberal academic values has strong impacts on early-career academics (ECAs), who typically also have precarious labour conditions related to job insecurity, temporary research projects, and low incomes (Caretta et al., 2018; Herschberg, Benschop, & van den Brink, 2018). These circumstances lead to hyper-competition among ECAs for permanent positions, which has been linked to significant levels of stress, anxiety, guilt, and helplessness (Hollywood, McCarthy, Spencely, & Winstone, 2019).

In addition to being a period in which researchers are expected to be intensely productive, the ECA phase coincides with the years of early family formation, when the

decision to become a parent, including decisions about the number and timing of having children, is strongly related to professional development choices in women¹ (Mills, Rindfuss, McDonald, & te Velde, 2011). Women with higher education levels tend to have their first child at older ages, because they focus on investing in their education or career before becoming mothers and consider that job or training opportunities will be diminished with motherhood (Barbieri, Bozzo, Scherer, Grotti, & Lugo, 2015; Esping-Andersen et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2011). Moreover, when women are working in a position below the desired category, they prefer to postpone motherhood until they can secure a good professional career that guarantees greater job and financial security (Barbieri et al., 2015; Caretta et al., 2018). Likewise, ECA women also tend to wait until they have tenure to start a family (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017), fearing that they will be relegated if they have a child or that they will be unable to deal with the difficulties of motherhood and the neoliberal characteristics of academic work (Huopalainen & Satama, 2018). Accordingly, a high percentage of women consider that they have to make important family concessions if they want to reach the top in their profession, such as having fewer children than they desire, spending less time caring for them, or even giving up on motherhood altogether (Chinchilla, Jiménez, & Grau, 2017).

Although there is a strong presence of qualified ECA women, these findings highlight the existence of a glass ceiling that hinders the promotion of women, which increases with motherhood (Abendroth, Huffman, & Treas, 2014; Hermann, Ziomek-Daigle, & Dockery, 2014; Linková, 2017; Monroe & Chiu, 2010). Indeed, women are underrepresented in tenure positions and earn less compared to men holding the same

¹ The terms “women” and “men” are used throughout this paper to refer to people who identify as women and men, to facilitate understanding of the text. Under no circumstances is the use of these terms intended to be exclusionary of non-binary gender individuals.

positions (Kulp, 2016; Monroe & Chiu, 2010). In this sense, the literature has indicated that gender stereotypes related to motherhood lead women to be perceived as having less predisposition, flexibility, and commitment to work (Correll, Bernard, & Paik, 2007; King, 2008), as well as a lack of energy and time to dedicate to leadership positions (Linková, 2017). Under this perspective, academic women are assigned more teaching, administrative, and service responsibilities, which reduces their time to focus on research tasks (Hermann et al., 2014; Huopainen & Satama, 2018).

These gender-based biases and disparities experienced by women who are mothers in their careers are known as the “maternal wall” (Crosby, Williams, & Biernat, 2004). This seems to explain why these women tend to feel professionally limited by presumptions of their family responsibilities (King, 2008). Some studies have shown that working mothers experience discriminatory behaviours, such as receiving fewer invitations to participate in professional activities like conferences and receiving less paid overload work compared with their colleagues who are men (Hermann et al., 2014; Pastor & Acosta, 2016). In addition, some scholars suggest that neoliberal norms and structural culture lead to negative perceptions of those who make use of such policies, limiting their freedom and agency to choose (Abendroth et al., 2014; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017). For instance, some studies have found that ECAs reported colleagues’ and supervisors’ negative views on parental leave (Hermann et al., 2014).

Working mothers and intimate partners

According to the gender-role theory, society holds stereotyped expectations for the appropriate behaviours for women and men. While men are expected to adopt the primary role of breadwinner, women are given the role of caretaker and are responsible

for the nurturance of children (Moya, Expósito, & Ruiz, 2000). These traditional gender roles lead to an unequal distribution of household tasks and childcare (Campillo, 2010; Huopainen & Satama, 2018) that makes women experience a double workday: in addition to paid work responsibilities, they also take care of unpaid household-family tasks (Egoscozabal, 2015; Hermann et al., 2014). Although men today are more involved in these activities than previous generations, research suggests that this distribution continues to be unequal and may be insufficient (Bateson, Darwin, Galdas, & Rosan, 2017; Egoscozabal, 2015). In fact, academic women perceive that their partners support them in their professional work, but that this endorsement is scarce at home and in care (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004).

Difficulties balancing work and life are especially notable in academic women, with the ECA period being the most vulnerable time for them (Caretta et al., 2018; Huopainen & Satama, 2018). The integration of professional and maternal roles can force many women into difficult choices, as they find themselves at the crossroads of wanting both to prosper professionally and to be able to take care of their children, assuming total dedication to both work and family (Greenberg, Ladge, & Clair, 2009; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017). Therefore, parenthood is clearly gendered, as ECA men do not manifest barriers related to job promotion when they combine the two roles (Pastor & Acosta, 2016). In fact, few men reduce their working hours after the birth of a child, even when their organisation has a flexible working policy and promotes paternity leave (Ewald, Gilbert, & Huppertz, 2020). In this sense, some scholars have suggested that academic men do not spend time thinking about work-life balance issues because having a child does not negatively affect their professional career (Huopainen & Satama, 2018; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017). However, recent literature notes that

traditional gender norms and ideals also affect expectations of career progression and fathering involvement in men (Ewald et al., 2020). Accordingly, research indicates that working fathers also have to address personal, organisational, and societal barriers related to dominant masculine norms (Bateson et al., 2017; Petts, Shafer, & Essig, 2018). These contradictory findings emphasise the need for further studies to better understand the career barriers linked to fatherhood that ECA men perceive.

Besides putting the security of an academic career ahead of having a child, there are other life goals that lead to delayed parenthood. The current values of society, in which personal fulfilment and financial independence prevail, are determinants that promote postponement of motherhood (Mills et al., 2011). Specifically, an unstable economic position or difficulty obtaining a mortgage can complicate women's economic self-sufficiency, leading them to postpone the formation of a family (Daniluk & Koert, 2017; Mills et al., 2011). Indeed, the ability to financially support a child has been identified as the strongest factor in the decision to become a mother (Daniluk & Koert, 2017). Other variables have also been significantly linked to the timing of childbearing, such as being in a stable romantic relationship, the degree of involvement in the upbringing of children by the couple, and being healthy (Daniluk & Koert, 2017).

The current study

Neoliberal universities consider as ideal candidates those who make work a priority, without other interests and responsibilities (Herschberg et al., 2018). In this way, although women who are mothers experience the maternal wall bias, childfree ECA women are also subject to gender and motherhood-based barriers and disadvantages (Verniers, 2020). Under this perspective, research excellence and

motherhood are perceived as mutually exclusive, and this is supported by gender stereotypes, such as the idea that working mothers are less competent and dedicated than other colleagues (Linková, 2017). Given that women are aware of these links between motherhood-related barriers and the high work demand in academia (Caretta et al., 2018; Huopalainen & Satama, 2018; Linková, 2017; Verniers, 2020), their decisions to have a child might be affected by these approaches.

Research indicates that women are often the most affected in terms of work-family balance after the birth of a child. Still, the scarce and contradictory literature with samples of men suggests that men who wish to be actively involved in raising their children might feel fear and discomfort when thinking about how to balance work and parenthood. This may be a consequence of the gendered social pressure that negatively judges them for caring for and raising their children (Cao & Li, 2019; Ewald et al., 2020). However, it is also predictable that men experience these emotions to a lesser extent than women.

Although the literature on ECAs and work-life balance has grown in recent years, published articles are mostly theoretical works (Linková, 2017; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017), diagnostic polls (Abendroth et al., 2014; Monroe & Chiu, 2010; Whittington, 2011), autobiographical narratives (Caretta et al., 2018; Huopalainen & Satama, 2018), or qualitative research (Acker & Wagner, 2017). To our knowledge, there are no quantitative studies that examine attitudes of both ECA women and men toward parenthood in Spain. Furthermore, most findings are based on studies of samples of women only (Chinchilla et al., 2017; Daniluk & Koert, 2017; Mills et al., 2011), which does not allow us to identify which factors influence women's and men's

decisions about the timing of having children or compare perceived career barriers in the two genders.

The current research was aimed at analysing commonalities and differences between people who identify as women and men in career barriers related to parenthood experienced by a Spanish ECA sample. A better understanding of these barriers would help to optimise policies focused on work-life balance from a gender perspective. Moreover, further analyses are needed to shed light on gendered factors influencing decision-making about the timing of parenthood.

In particular, we examined those elements involved in decisions on when to have children, in attitudes toward parenthood and its link to an academic career, and in the time spent thinking about parenthood and the discomfort experienced as a consequence. Specifically, we expected more fears and perceptions of career barriers related to parenthood in ECA women than in ECA men (Hypothesis 1). Moreover, we predicted that women would think more about these professional barriers than men (Hypothesis 2) and that these thoughts would be linked to higher levels of concern and discomfort (Hypothesis 3).

Methods

Participants and procedure

A search was conducted on the website of the authors' university to create a database with the full names and email accounts of all the early-career academics and researchers at the institution (pre-doc and post-doc). Data were collected via an online survey, hosted by Qualtrics, that was sent to 245 ECAs through institutional email. A total of 80 individuals completed the survey, but those participants that stated a lack of

desire to ever have children were excluded from the study. A total of 75 participants (57.3% identified as women) formed the final study sample. The mean age was 36.22 ($SD = 7.86$) for participants identified as men and 31.67 ($SD = 5.60$) for the participants identified as women. Most participants had no children (74.7%) and the average duration of their employment contract was 4.11 years ($SD = 1.79$). A total of 49.3% of participants spent from six to nine hours per day at work, and 42.6% spent more than nine hours per day at work.

Anonymity of the responses and confidentiality of data was assured. All participants were treated in accordance with APA ethical guidelines and informed consent was obtained from all individuals prior to their participation.

Instruments

Factors influencing decisions about the timing of having children. Based on the factors described by Daniluk and Koert (2017) that influence the decision to have children, a 10-item self-report scale was used. Participants indicated the extent to which (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *totally*) these factors were related to their decision to have children (e.g., ‘Being with a partner who would be an involved and loving parent’, ‘Being established in my career’, ‘Being able to financially support a child’). Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .82.

Effect of parenthood on academic career. A 6-item scale was developed based on the results of Chinchilla et al. (2017). This instrument measures the perceived barriers and feelings of fear about one’s professional career as a consequence of having children (e.g., ‘Having children would limit my professional career’, ‘If I had children, I would have to work harder to prove my worth compared with my colleagues’). The response

scale ranged from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). The internal consistency was adequate ($\alpha = .84$).

Ideal work situations for having children. On a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *disagree strongly*; 5 = *agree strongly*), participants rated their agreement about what working situation is the most suitable for having children through four statements (e.g., 'It is necessary to develop career and professional aspirations before having children', 'It is convenient not to have children and to focus only on work').

Time and concern. Participants were asked about their concern about how to integrate professional and parental roles ('To what extent are you concerned and uncomfortable thinking about how to combine professional development and having children?'), as well as the time spent thinking about it ('How much time do you spend thinking about the balance between professional development and having children?'). Both questions were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *totally*).

Professional and personal variables. Participants completed a professional and socio-demographic information section that included questions on gender, age, number of children, length of job contract and working hours per day.

Results

Factors influencing decisions about the timing of having children

First, the factors influencing decisions about the timing of having children for the total sample, as well as for women and men, were calculated separately (see Table 1). The most strongly endorsed factor was 'Being able to financially support a child', followed by 'Being established in my job/career', and 'Being able to balance work and family time' in the third place. 'Being able to stay home and raise a child' was the factor with the lowest score.

<Insert Table 1 about here>

T-test comparisons were conducted between scores for men and women.

Overall, there were no statistically significant differences between the groups, except in one item: 'Being able to stay home and raise a child'. Specifically, men considered that this factor was more relevant than women ($t(72) = 2.29; p < .05$).

Ideal work situations for having children

The analysis of the ideal work situation for having children showed that there were no statistically significant differences between genders. Both men and women exhibited greater agreement with the statement 'There is no ideal moment in one's career to have children' ($M = 3.74; SD = 1.27$ for women and $M = 3.90; SD = 1.25$ for men, $p > .05$).

Effect of parenthood on academic career

Regarding the perceived professional career barriers to balancing family and professional life, the highest scores were obtained for the effect on the rhythm of their work, followed by the need to make family-related concessions to reach the top in their academic career, and the thought that having children has limited or would limit their academic career. The lowest score was obtained for the belief that parenthood leads them to work harder than their colleagues to demonstrate their professional worth.

A score of perceived barriers was calculated with the mean of the six items including in the scale. T-test comparisons by sex revealed statistically significant differences between men and women in the perceived barriers in the academic career to balancing family and professional life, with higher scores for women than for men ($t(71) = -3.62; p = .001$).

<Insert Table 2 about here>

Concern about how to integrate professional and parental roles

Participants with children, or with a desire to have them, were asked to what extent they were concerned or uncomfortable about thinking how to combine professional development and having children, and the time they spent thinking about this issue. The responses showed that women experienced greater levels of discomfort ($M = 4$; $SD = 1.18$) than men ($M = 3.16$; $SD = 0.85$; $t(56) = -3.13$; $p < .05$). Furthermore, women spent significantly more time ($M = 3.21$; $SD = 1.24$) than men ($M = 2.48$; $SD = 0.83$) thinking about these questions ($t(56) = -2.54$; $p < .05$).

Correlational analysis

Finally, the relationship between the perceived barriers towards parenthood in the academic career and the degree of concern and the time spent thinking about these issues was analysed. The results of the correlational analyses are presented in Table 3.

<Insert Table 3 about here>

For women, the concern and discomfort caused by thinking about how to combine motherhood and their professional career had a statistically significant correlation with the time they spend thinking about it. Both Concern and Time thinking about their academic career and motherhood were highly correlated with the perception of childbearing as a Limit on their career, as a Brake on the academic profession, and with Family concessions. Besides, Time thinking about these issues significantly correlated with the belief that Participation in projects is affected by motherhood.

For men, concern and discomfort associated with thinking about parenthood and their academic career correlates significantly with the time they spend thinking about it. However, these two measures were unrelated with any of the items that form the perception of barriers associated with parenthood.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the fears and barriers toward parenthood experienced by a Spanish ECA sample. Specifically, gender differences were analysed in attitudes toward parenthood and its link to an academic career, as well as in the time spent thinking about having children and the discomfort experienced as a consequence. Moreover, commonalities and differences between women and men in factors influencing decisions about the timing of having children were examined.

Given the difficulties faced by women to balance work and life, ECA women tend to postpone starting a family until their 30s and 40s, waiting for the best timing and circumstances to be a mother (Daniluk & Koert, 2017). Although participants indicated that there is no ideal moment in one's career to have children, consistent with previous studies (Daniluk & Koert, 2017), the factor that most influenced the decision to become a parent was the financial solvency to support a child, followed by professional stability and being able to balance work and family time. These three elements are especially difficult to achieve for ECAs, who often experience precarious labour conditions associated with job insecurity, temporary research projects, and low incomes (Caretta et al., 2018; Herschberg et al., 2018). Furthermore, these circumstances might be especially worrying among those ECAs who wish to have children, because of the assumption that they should be completely dedicated to both work and family (Greenberg et al., 2009; Verniers, 2020; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017).

Interestingly, there were no statistically significant gender differences in factors influencing decisions about the timing of having children. This lack of gender difference may be explained by two interrelated factors. On the one hand, the early career period is intensely demanding and hyper-competitive for both men and women

academics (Acker & Wagner, 2017; Caretta et al., 2018). On the other hand, there are cultural values related to parenthood, such as parenting style, childcare involvement, and socioeconomic status (SES henceforth), that define ideal mothers and fathers (Ishizuka, 2018). These social norms seem to reinforce the link between SES and parenting practices (Roubinov & Boyce, 2017), guiding expectations of having a child both in women and men. As an exception, being able to stay home and raise a child was more decisive for men than for women, suggesting that traditional roles linked to fatherhood are changing and men today are more involved in childcare than previous generations (Bateson et al., 2017; Petts et al., 2018).

Likewise, these findings do not mean that perceptions of work-life balance are similar for women and men. Whereas the reasons for delaying parenthood seem to be shared by both, fears of the effect of parenthood on their academic career were completely gender biased. As stated in Hypothesis 1, ECA women perceived more barriers to their academic career after having children than ECA men. In particular, they indicated that motherhood would especially lead to a reduction of their work rhythm and would constitute a brake on their academic career, besides the family concessions that would have to be made to reach the top in their professional career. These findings are consistent with the perceived barriers described by Chinchilla et al. (2017), suggesting that the integration of professional and maternal roles can lead to difficult choices for many women who find themselves at the crossroads of wanting to prosper professionally and be able to take care of their children (Abendroth et al., 2014; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017).

Research has shown strong gender inequalities in the academic context (Kulp, 2016; Monroe & Chiu, 2010; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017). Both childfree women and

women who are also mothers experience a maternal wall, suffering more discriminatory behaviours based on traditional gender stereotypes than men holding the same positions (Correll et al., 2007; Hermann et al., 2014; Linková, 2017; Verniers, 2020). As expected (Hypothesis 2), women indicated that they spend more time thinking about how to integrate professional development and motherhood than men, and this led to higher levels of concern in the former than in the latter (Hypothesis 3). Specifically, although the more time men spent thinking of work-life balance, the more concern they displayed, both factors were significantly lower than in women. Moreover, while in men these thoughts were unrelated to perceived career barriers as a consequence of parenthood, this relation was observed in women. This is consistent with previous literature that suggests that academic men do not spend time thinking of work-life balance issues, because the fact of being a father does not have a negative effect on their academic career (Huopalaainen & Satama, 2018; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017). However, given that non-traditional gender fathering tends to be socially devalued (Cao & Li, 2019), it is likely that men who wish to be actively involved in raising their children might feel fear and discomfort when thinking about how to balance work and parenthood. Future studies could help to better understand these links, since it is also predictable that men experience these emotions to a lesser extent than women.

The thoughts that worried only ECA women and about which they spent time thinking were related to the effect of childbearing on their work rhythm, to motherhood serving as a brake on their professional career, and to the family-related concessions that would need to be made to advance in academia. This reveals that women are aware of the existence of a glass ceiling and a maternal wall in the academic context that hinders their promotion, especially after childbearing. These findings are relevant

because they suggest that academic women may experience persistent thoughts about work-life balance, which have been identified in several disorders, such as depression (Perestelo-Perez, Barraca, Peñate, Rivero-Santana, & Alvarez-Perez, 2017). Given the mental health consequences, future research should examine the presence of ruminant thoughts in academics, as well as their role in personal decision-making processes.

The current study emphasises that motherhood can be a source of stress and anxiety for ECA women who have not yet consolidated their academic career (Caretta et al., 2018; Huopalainen & Satama, 2018). These concerns and perceptions of professional barriers linked to childbearing, taken in conjunction with the neoliberal structural culture at universities, may subtly limit academic women's agency and freedom to choose (Abendroth et al., 2014; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017). In particular, these self-imposed barriers are known as a cement roof (Chinchilla et al., 2017) and may increase their intentions to abandon their academic career, leading to a loss of highly qualified ECAs, or even give up altogether on the idea of having a family, causing high personal suffering as well as lowering the birth rate in aging countries. It is important to consider to what extent perceived barriers could have an impact on the choices that women make in their careers and personal lives, since choices are not always free and rational alternatives, given institutional, academic, and discursive restrictions on working mothers (Linková, 2017; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017). Furthermore, the impact of perceived barriers to motherhood and opportunities to balance family and work in academia could be extremely implicit and subtle for women. Future research should explore the consequences of fears, perceived barriers, and lack of overt support for parenthood on these academics' personal wellbeing and decision-making.

Given that the lack of work-life balance has a perverse effect not only on women, but also on society, European policies have been created to facilitate this balance. As a result, in those European countries where social policies aimed at promoting work, family, and personal balance have been implemented, women become mothers at younger ages compared to countries where these policies have not yet been implemented (Chinchilla et al., 2017). An example is the Nordic countries, where even though the participation rate of women in the workforce is higher than that of Spain, the birth rate is also higher (Chinchilla et al., 2017), which suggests that working women feel supported and protected, both professionally and socially. Although these policies have also been developed focusing on the academic context to address glass ceilings encountered by academic women (Vozemberg, 2015), the structures and networks required for the implementation of equality policies are currently not sufficiently developed in Spanish universities (Abendroth et al., 2014; Pastor & Acosta, 2016). The current work-life balance policies have not been adequately planned, since they have been established to incorporate women into the workforce, disregarding the unequal gender distribution of household tasks and childcare (Campillo, 2010; Egoscobabal, 2017; Huopalainen & Satama, 2018) that makes women experience a double workday (Egoscobabal, 2015; Hermann et al., 2014). Therefore, further measures must be adopted to ensure real gender equality in both private and professional contexts.

This study has some limitations that need to be considered. One concerns the sample, given that all participants were employed at just one university in Spain and we cannot know if there is any context effect. Second, most participants had no children, hindering the comparison between non-parents' expectations and the experience of those academics who are also parents. In this regard, future research could explore

whether the professional barriers related to parenthood that are perceived by ECAs are transformed into real experiences in the national and international academic context.

Third, information on the participants' personal situation was incomplete, as it was not established whether they were in a relationship or had a social network to help them with childcare. This contextual information could help to investigate the distribution of household-family tasks by gender and how it may influence career barriers related to parenthood in future studies.

Despite these limitations, the current research provides empirical evidence for a better understanding of work-life balance expectations in ECA women and men. Furthermore, to our knowledge, this is the first quantitative study that examines ECA men's perceptions of career barriers related to fatherhood, providing a gender comparative analysis. This article contributes to the literature showing that both women and men are affected by gender-based biases that maintain them in traditional gender roles, complicating men's integration into childcare practices and upholding the maternal wall in working women. However, as the interpretations of fatherhood seem to be changing, further research is needed to determine if there are differences in the perception of academic career barriers between men who wish to be actively involved in fathering and men who do not. Additionally, our findings suggest that there is a persistent gender inequality in academy; therefore policies should be addressed from a gender perspective to reduce barriers and discriminatory behaviours toward working mothers and promote childcare co-responsibility in men and women.

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