Keeping up with societal development? The politics of paternity leave in Spain

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"Moving away from the mainstream understanding of work-life reconciliation as a way of harmonizing paid an unpaid work for mothers, this paper shifts the focus, following Saxonberg (2013), on the (de)genderization potential of reconciliation policies, focusing on paternity leave. Namely, degenderizing potential identifies the capability of deconstructing traditional gender roles.

While the discourse on easing work-life reconciliation for mothers, to increase – and remove obstacles to – female (maternal) participation in the labour market is to date well-established at European Union level, the consideration of paternal contribution in unpaid work started only recently to receive attention.

Directive 1158 of 2019 established for the first time a legally binding minimum of 10 days of paternity leave to be guaranteed by Member States to fathers. While some member states had to comply with the Directive, other pioneering countries already started introducing paternity leave (or father quota) reforms prior to the EU initiative.

The case of paternity leave in Spain is taken into consideration in order to analyze whether a shift has been at stake within the discourse and policy of paternity leave and fathers' responsibility. It classifies as an emblematic case study for several reasons, on top of which the occurrence of a path deviation from a familistic welfare model to one of the most advanced and equitable leave system worldwide.

Consequently, the first research question concerns the reconstruction of the policy trajectory of paternity leave, started with the introduction of a 13 days fully paid non-mandatory leave in 2007 introduced by the Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol), and culminated in 16 weeks of non-transferable leave for each parent, the first 6 of which mandatory. The aim is that of highlighting the fundamental steps, also considering the legislative framework preceding 2007.

The second research question is focused on the socio-political actors' constellation and (shifting) preferences of different actors, devoting particular attention to the interaction of socio-political demand and political supply.

Finally, the paper aims at shedding light on the underpinning factors which made possible the approval of a (potentially) degenderizing leave policy.

The research methodology is that of process tracing. Specifically, in order to evaluate the role and positioning of political supply actors, electoral programs of the main Spanish parties for every election since 1996 to 2023 have been analyzed. To complement parties' (shifting) positioning on the issue of paternity leave, declarations and public statements, law proposals and national legislation have been reviewed. Finally, newspaper articles complemented the reconstruction of the policy trajectory of paternity leave and helped

identifying the growing relevance of paternity leave and fathers' involvement in care domain as a broad societal issue.

The analysis showed how the topic of family policy remained marginal for a couple of decades after the Spanish transition to democracy, to then return central at the turn of the millennium through the Popular Party. The topic of paternity leave, instead, was firstly introduced by the Socialist Party, and then taken up by right parties which however brought about a different conception of the policy. After having lost centrality during the economic crisis years – due to economic and ideological reasons –, the issue was then reinserted in political programs starting from 2015. In this year, an important change occurred in the political landscape, with the affirmation of the political parties Ciudadanos and Podemos, which marked the end of the two-party system. This has been a driver of the introduction of paternity leave in the shape of RDL 6/2019.

To understand the relevance and positioning of social actors, public statements have been studied thoroughly. Among the different social actors, a relevant role in the process has been undertaken mostly by feminist movements (mainly PPiiNA), but also by trade unions (UGT, CCOO, USO), and egalitarian fathers' platforms.

This extensive qualitative analysis has led to three main conclusions. First, the presence of progressive parties in office explicitly and concretely supporting co-responsibility and deconstruction of traditional gender role appears to be a key factor for the approval of transformative paternity leave reforms. Secondly, the presence of women in power positions constitutes an additional feature determining more gender-egalitarian policy outcomes. Lastly, the important role of social demand, and specifically of feminist platforms, in raising (and maintaining) attention on the importance of fathers' involvement in unpaid work is highlighted.