Monographic / Monográfico

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on society in southern Europe: the case of social innovation in the care of early childhood in Barcelona

El impacto de la pandemia COVID-19 en la sociedad en el sur de Europa: el caso de la innovación social en el cuidado de la primera infancia en Barcelona

Lara Maestripieri*
Departamento de Ciencia Política y Derecho Público e Instituto de Gobierno y Políticas Públicas de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, España.
lara.maestripieri@uab.cat

Raquel Gallego
Departamento de Ciencia Política y Derecho Público e Instituto de Gobierno y Políticas Públicas de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, España.
raquel.gallego@uab.cat

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ABSTRACT

A distinctive role of family care defines the southern European welfare models. Several studies have highlighted the functional overload for families with children under three years old, in which unpaid work is mainly provided by women (even when they work full time), in a context in which the public and private childcare provision is insufficient to meet families' needs. In Barcelona, the emergence of socially innovative projects has partially covered the demand for 0-3 childcare. These projects are based on communities of care made up of parents and educators. However, COVID-19 has severely impacted the participants in social innovations such as childminders, free-education nurseries, and community care groups. Educators working in these projects struggled to survive economically when the 2020 spring lockdown forced them to close, while the closures obliged mothers to juggle work with care. This article presents the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mothers and educators involved in socially innovative 0-3 childcare projects in Barcelona. The paper uses qualitative and quantitative empirical material gathered between May 2020 and June 2021: interviews with representatives of childcare associations, educators and mothers (before and after the outbreak of COVID-19 in Spain), and a survey with mothers with children under three (after the lockdown). The results of our investigation show that the communities behind the projects constituted a crucial resource. Parents and educators helped each other, sharing care and financial resources to keep the projects going and find new solutions to the work-family balance.

Keywords: Social innovation, COVID-19 pandemic, Southern Europe, early childhood care.

***Corresponding author / *Autor para correspondencia:* Lara Maestripieri,** lara.maestripieri@uab.cat

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RESUMEN

El modelo de Estado de Bienestar del sur de Europa se caracteriza por el importante papel del cuidado proporcionado por la familia. Numerosos estudios muestran la sobrecarga funcional de las familias con menores de tres años, en que el trabajo no remunerado es realizado principalmente por las mujeres (incluso si trabajan a tiempo completo), en un contexto en que la provisión pública y privada de cuidado infantil es insuficiente para cubrir las necesidades familiares. En Barcelona, la aparición de proyectos socialmente innovadores ha cubierto parcialmente la demanda de cuidados a la infancia de 0 a 3 años. Estos proyectos se basan en comunidades de cuidados formadas por madres, padres y educadoras. Sin embargo, el COVID-19 ha tenido un fuerte impacto en los participantes en innovaciones sociales como madres de día o hogares de crianza, espacios de crianza y grupos de crianza. Las educadoras que trabajan en estos proyectos tuvieron dificultades para sobrevivir económicamente cuando el confinamiento de la primavera de 2020 les obligó a cerrar, lo que a su vez obligó a las madres a compatibilizar con mayor dificultad trabajo y cuidados.
Este artículo presenta los efectos de la pandemia del COVID-19 en las madres y las educadoras implicadas en proyectos de cuidados del 0-3 socialmente innovadores en Barcelona. El *paper* utiliza material empírico cuantitativo y cualitativo recogido entre mayo de 2020 y junio de 2021: entrevistas a representantes de asociaciones de cuidados a la primera infancia, educadoras y madres (antes y después del inicio del COVID-19 en España), y una encuesta a madres con menores de entre 0 y 3 años (después del confinamiento). Los resultados de nuestra investigación muestran que las comunidades que están detrás de estos proyectos constituyen un recurso crucial. Madres, padres y educadoras se ayudaron mutuamente, compartiendo cuidados y recursos económicos para mantener funcionando los proyectos y encontrar nuevas soluciones para el equilibrio entre trabajo y familia

Palabras clave: innovación social, pandemia COVID-19, sur de Europa, cuidado 0-3, primera infancia.

INTRODUCTION

A distinctive role of family care defines the Southern European welfare models. Several studies have highlighted the functional overload for families with children under three years old, in which unpaid work is mainly provided by women (even when they work full time), in a context in which the public and private childcare provision is insufficient to meet families' needs. In addition, the impact of the so-called *new social risks* (Taylor-Gooby, 2004; Bonoli, 2007) has hit these societies particularly hard because of the characteristics of their welfare models (Marí-Klose and Moreno-Fuentes, 2013), which also expose the middle classes to difficulties in ensuring economic security (Ranci et al., 2021). In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic in southern Europe magnified existing inequalities in care, exacerbating the gendered differences in the provision of unpaid work within families. For mothers with young children, the school and nursery closures due to the first lockdown implied a further effort in care, usually compensated with leaves or a reduction in working hours (Maestripieri, 2021).

A few years ago, demand for 0-3 childcare in Barcelona began to be partially covered by the emergence of grassroots initiatives that created communities of care made up of parents and educators. Communities of care are informal communities made of parents and educators that gather around socially innovative projects of early childhood education and care; parents and educators are involved personally in the functioning of these initiatives, which propose educational projects based on free education. These projects, working at the boundaries between the loving environment offered by families and the institutionalised care provided by nurseries, are particularly valued by both the participating families and the public institutions for their capacity to propose alternative solutions to the market and the public sector and to act as agents that promote alternative pedagogies (e.g., Montessori,

Waldorf, and Pikler). In addition, they offer an environment open to the participation of parents in the care of their young children, reducing the distance between care in the home and caring institutions thanks to the capacity of care offered by the communities that sustain these projects, made up of both parents and educators.

This article aims to investigate to what extent participation in social innovation was a resource used by families during the first COVID-19 outbreak in March-June 2020 in Barcelona when nurseries and schools closed. We argue that social innovation could constitute a valuable resource, offering community support in times of need to working mothers when lockdown suddenly deprived them of the help of their primary networks (because of social distancing) and public services (because of school closures). At the same time, however, the economic precariousness suffered by these projects and the lack of institutional acknowledgement have exposed these projects to the harshest consequences of the pandemic, putting their survival seriously at risk. But the same community worked to help them survive, thanks to solidarity mechanisms established between families and educators. The research questions addressed in this study are the following: what were the consequences of COVID-19 on the work-life balance of the mothers who participated in social innovation? What was the impact of the school lockdown on socially innovative projects? Could the communities of care established around socially innovative projects constitute a resource to cope with the social isolation and economic turmoil caused by the pandemic?

Stemming from the Primera Infància research project (2018-2021), this article presents a follow-up investigation on the social innovation projects and their families: it analyses what happened between March and June 2020 when schools were closed in Barcelona.[1] It considers three types of projects that we define as socially innovative because of their community organisation, because they stem from citizen initiatives, and because they apply free-education pedagogical principles. These projects are *llars de criança* (childminders), *espais de criança* (free-education nurseries) and *grups de criança* (community care groups) (see section 4 for further explanation). This article applies a mixed-method approach and uses different qualitative and quantitative data collected between June 2020 and May 2021. It analyses qualitative interviews with mothers (June 2020), representatives from the associations that bring together these projects (June 2021), online structured interviews with educators working in these projects (June 2020), and a live survey conducted with mothers of children from 0 to 3 years old in Barcelona (July-October 2020). Results demonstrate the resilience of these projects and the support given by the community around them during the worst phase of the pandemic in Spain.

The article is structured as follows. The next section presents the main characteristics of the southern European welfare model in terms of the gendered distribution of paid and unpaid work. We also review the main consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on gender equality in southern Europe. Section 3 presents the mixed-method approach applied, while the subsequent sections show the main results, focusing respectively on the pre-COVID-19 childcare situation in Barcelona (§ 4), the consequences of COVID-19 on families (§ 5), and its repercussions on socially innovative childcare projects (§ 6). The last section discusses the empirical evidence in light of the debate on the southern European welfare model and draws the preliminary conclusions on the role that social innovation can play as a resilience agent.

THE SOUTHERN EUROPEAN MODEL AND ITS RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The development of southern European countries' welfare regimes (SEC) –namely, those in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain– was inextricably linked to transitions to

1 Contrary to other European countries, Spain (and within it, Catalonia) succeeded in not having further national or regional school closures, neither during the second wave (autumn 2020) nor during the third (spring 2021) and fourth waves (winter 2021). The period covered in this article was the only one, up to the moment of writing (summer 2022), in which mothers and educators had no recourse to school services.

democracy starting in the 1970s and Europe-led welfare policy diffusion processes. In contrast to other European welfare states, the SEC models emerged and consolidated over the 1980s in a context of profound, ongoing structural changes that have led to welfare state retrenchment and recalibration from the 1990s to the present day (Gallego et al. 2005, Gallego and Subirats 2011, 2012).

The initial characterisation of the SEC welfare model in the mid-1990s presented an analytical challenge to the mainstream theory of Esping-Andersen (1990), who included SECs in the conservative cluster because of their work-based protections. However, authors such as Ferrera (1996) contested this categorization. According to him, the welfare states of SECs included features similar to the conservative model of social protection and employment, although less advanced. They were defined by relatively high unemployment rates and relatively low female participation in the labour market, and a clear insider/outsider division based on their relationship with an employment regime that developed slowly but eventually became rigid and highly protective. While work-related income maintenance schemes are at the core of public welfare, non-contributory programmes and services for beneficiaries such as orphans, widows, or the disabled are weak and poorly coordinated.

In fact, SEC social protection system foresees a labour policy approach that protects the work of the male breadwinner as much as possible, to the detriment of more marginal groups in the labour market. This model of social policy considers women as the main ones responsible for the unpaid work within families. In contrast, women's labour market participation is regarded as an additional (and thus expendable) income to the main income of their male partner (Vesan, 2015). In this context, economic slowdowns and labour deregulation reforms have had a particularly negative impact on layers of the population with weak connections to the labour market – temporary contracts, seasonal employment, freelance work, and work in the underground economy. All these situations are suffered more frequently by women than by men (Marí-Klose and Moreno-Fuentes 2013).

Thus, this welfare model is marked by its low levels of social spending –corresponding to late industrialisation and modernisation– and by the relevance of the traditional family model, based on the figure of the male breadwinner and the gender roles that this entails (Castles 1995; Esping-Andersen 1999). Some studies highlight the importance of religion and culture in explaining the survival of traditional family values (Castles 1994; van Kersbergen and Manow 2009). Despite the emphasis placed on the role of the family, social policies do not reinforce the family's capacity as a provider of well-being in the absence of institutional help. The familialist scheme has continued to compensate for the weakness and fragmentation of social assistance and social care policies and the social exclusion derived from the lack of policies to support young people leaving the parental home, care for dependents or the transformations of the labour market.

Given this context, the emergence and impact of *new social risks* (NSR) have been particularly disruptive in southern European societies. NSR refer to difficult situations people may face due to the transition to a post-industrial society (Bonoli, 2007). They include inadequate welfare protection stemming from labour market precarity in numerous situations: low-paid work either for unskilled or over-qualified workers; long-term unemployment because of obsolete skills; unstable jobs or careers; elderly or child dependents; difficulties in making paid and unpaid family work compatible, etc. Although some policy schemes to combat NSR follow EU regulations, they differ considerably across southern European welfare regimes and regions with devolved powers, which have each developed different welfare regimes since the 1980s (Gallego et al., 2003). Leftist governments and expansive economic periods lead to a higher investment in policies that supports citizens against NSRs, but, especially in SEC countries, these types of policies remain unstable, intermittent, and often reversible (Bonoli, 2005). NSR have placed the family "pillar" of the Mediterranean welfare model under unsustainable stress and pressure: the family can no longer perform its traditional "shock absorber" role. Middle-class households have been increasingly exposed to financial insecurity and vulnerability in southern Europe, putting into question the capacity of the welfare model in this area to protect against risks (Ranci et al., 2021). Studies have shown

how citizens have been forced to resort to new care strategies outside the traditional family provider model (Caïs and Folguera 2013).

Further analyses point at profound transformations since the 2000s in these countries, prompted by several factors shaking up the SEC welfare model. First, European integration and the 2008 global crisis forced fiscal austerity and cost-containment policies, together with the retrenchment and calibration of income-maintenance and service provision policies to counteract population ageing. Second, the sharp transition to a post-industrial society, with a service-based economy and family and gender relations much closer to the neighbouring northern European countries, has sparked unprecedented challenges for SEC welfare regimes (Marí-Klose and Moreno-Fuentes 2013). The rise of female employment, on the one hand, and the expansion of job precariousness, on the other hand, have accentuated the impact of the institutional weaknesses of the southern welfare model. In fact, in recent years, thanks to the promotion of European cohesion policies, investment in early childhood policies has also grown in southern European countries and is considered key for obtaining more female participation in the labour market (Guillén and León, 2011). Nevertheless, women are still those mainly responsible for unpaid work. Quite frequently, the birth of a child implies that women leave the labour market or permanently reduce their working hours (Maestripieri, 2015).

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has put further stress on the social protection weaknesses of the southern European welfare regimes. The closure of essential services, the 2020 spring lockdown, and job losses or furloughs deepened traditional class and gender inequality cleavages and exacerbated the insider/outsider divide. They also strongly highlighted the debate over NSR. The pandemic exposed just how much the economic security of the middle class has been at risk over the last decades (Ranci et al., 2021; Bertogg and Koos, 2021). The outbreak increased the need for care provision suddenly and unprecedentedly, both inside and outside the home (Craig, 2020). Since women have traditionally assumed a disproportionately high share of this unpaid work, projections pointed to the risk that they would take on most of these increased responsibilities. Empirical evidence shows that consequences were particularly severe for vulnerable groups, such as single-parent families or those at risk of social exclusion. Women with caregiving responsibilities saw their well-being and career prospects greatly affected (Blaskó et al., 2020; Maestripieri, 2021). The most recent research on the impact of the lockdown on gendered roles shows that inequalities persisted in temporal and spatial workplace constraints (Craig, 2020). The present pattern of job losses and furloughing from the pandemic appears to be gender-neutral (Hupkau and Petrongolo 2020). However, women have suffered more significant pressure than men to reduce their working hours or stop working temporarily, causing an increase in the paid working hours gender gap (Collins et al., 2020, Craig and Churchill, 2021; Dias et al., 2020).

The gendered effects of the pandemic are stronger in institutional contexts – such as southern European countries – where the proportion of the population exposed to the new social risks is higher, and there is a weaker institutional environment (Maestripieri, 2021). In the case of Spain, the spring 2020 lockdown was one of the strictest in Europe. It substantially impacted the labour market, causing many job losses, especially in non-essential sectors where teleworking was not an option. Job losses mainly regarded temporary jobs and struck low-skilled workers. The probability of losing a job was slightly higher for women than for men. The increased need for childcare and housework derived from lockdown, school closures and the impossibility of outsourcing was taken on mainly by women. In this context, the government did not put forward any emergency benefits to help families face the widespread school lockdown (Koslowski et al., 2020). Consequently, the burden of parental care mainly was taken on by women. The pandemic, therefore, increased gender inequality in both paid and unpaid work (Farré et al., 2020). However, men slightly increased their participation in these tasks. Some studies have detected changes in the distribution of household and caring tasks compared with the pre-pandemic situation (Sevilla and Smith 2020). These changes vary from country to country, but also according to existing axes of inequality – gender, educational and socio-economic levels, ethnicity – and other emerging ones, such as the mothers' or fathers' possibility of teleworking or not.

Most research up to now has focused on the difficulties of the state, the market and the family spheres to provide their share of welfare responsibilities since the onset of the pandemic. However, a fourth sphere or pillar also contributes to the configuration of a welfare regime, with responsibilities and functions regarding individual and collective well-being: the community formed by social and associative networks in local contexts (Gallego et al., 2003, 2005; Gallego and Subirats 2011, 2012). This community sphere includes a diverse and complex configuration of civil society initiatives of variable degrees of formalisation, from ad hoc neighbourhood networks to well-established non-governmental organisations. These experiences, sometimes called non-profits or third sector, emphasise that they do not belong either to the public or the market sectors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, and particularly during the lockdown periods, some social groups heavily depended on the actions of both informal and formal community networks. This study will focus on socially innovative projects in early childhood education and care in the city of Barcelona during the pandemic.

METHODS

The empirical evidence stems from the Primera Infància research project (2018-2021), financed by the private RecerCaixa foundation. The project's scope was to investigate to what extent the choice of a particular model of 0-3 care influences mothers' participation in the labour market, partly focusing on the socially innovative projects based on collaborative practices between parents and educators. Specifically, the research objects in this article are the mothers involved in socially innovative early childhood education and care projects. We investigated the constraints mothers must face when making employment decisions; therefore, the study does not involve fathers. The project uses a mixed-method design, in which the qualitative data collection preceded and informed the quantitative data collection. The questions proposed in the survey were developed out of the analysis previously done on the qualitative interviews, constituting a sequential and equivalent mixed-method design as defined by Leech (2009).

The complexity of social innovation poses a challenge to the operationalisation of this concept in our research on early childhood education and care. We selected projects that respected the following criteria for this research work: initiatives that i. were led by citizens; ii. foster cooperative and horizontal relationships among the participants; iii. generate alternatives to childcare services offered by public institutions or the market, following the definitions of social innovation previously mentioned (Blanco and León, 2017). Under these conditions, we identified three types of projects: childminders (*llars de criança* or *mares de dia*), care groups (*grups de criança*), and free-education nurseries (*espais de criança*) (see the next section for more details on the projects involved).

The COVID-19 pandemic broke out during the data collection phase, notably after the semi-structured interviews with mothers and educators of the socially innovative projects and before the survey with mothers of children under three in Barcelona, scheduled for April-June 2020. The outbreak of the pandemic disrupted our planned schedule. Still, at the same time, it offered us the opportunity to investigate lively what the consequences of closing schools were on social innovation in 0-3 childcare. To gather empirical evidence on the impacts of the first lockdown, in June 2020 we contacted again the 15 educators and 18 mothers we had interviewed before the pandemic (May 2019-January 2020). Of the 15 educators, we collected ten structured interviews through a Microsoft Forms questionnaire, one WhatsApp voice message and one telephonic follow-up (reaching 12/15 of the pre-Covid interviewees). These sources allowed us to collect information regarding the economic impact of the pandemic on the projects and the strategies that educators put in place to cope with the worst consequences of the spring 2020 lockdown. Of the 18 mothers, we collected one follow-up by Skype and nine follow-ups by WhatsApp voice message. Two more mothers answered by email (reaching 12/18 of the pre-Covid interviewees). In the case of the mothers, the main interest of the follow-up regarded the strategies they put in place to cope with the

closure of the childcare services, including the distribution of unpaid work with their partners and their commitment to paid work during the months in which schools were closed. Mothers could not rely on primary networks nor on private childcare help because of social distancing measures (March-June 2020). In May 2021, at the end of the first year of living with the pandemic, we conducted three interviews with representatives from the main associations of socially innovative projects in Barcelona to complete the picture of what had happened over the previous school year. Interviews and voice messages have been transcribed verbatim and analysed with Atlas-ti, except for one educator who refused recording during the telephonic follow-up. We coded qualitative materials for detailed content analysis, and the following sections will present selected extracts to sustain the results of our analysis empirically.

Regarding the quantitative data, we organised an online live survey which was open for answers from June 2020 to November 2020. We collected 520 responses from mothers with children born between 2016 and 2019 residing in Barcelona at the moment of the survey. The questionnaire collected information related to each mother's career and childcare choices. Although it was not a longitudinal survey, the questionnaire structure included retrospective questions that allowed us to reconstruct information on work and childcare from the child's birth up to the present. It also reported information on the partner's job (if present), the socio-economic condition of the household, and attitudes towards social innovation.

Given that we conducted the live survey after the first COVID-19 lockdown, we also could ask what impact COVID-19 was having on the households' economic security and mothers' work. That said, we did not design the survey to be representative of mothers with children under three in Barcelona, since there was no random sampling conducted for participating in the survey. We circulated the survey primarily via schools, social networks (Facebook and Twitter), and the primary networks of the researchers. To collect as many social innovation cases as possible, we asked the previously interviewed mothers and educators to circulate the survey within the analysed projects. We also asked the main associations of social innovation projects to distribute it among their members. In September-October 2020, to recalibrate the sample to better cover families from lower socio-economic backgrounds and who had been under-represented in the first wave of data collection (June-July 2020), we performed 75 phone surveys using contacts that primary schools gave us. Data includes 89 participants that had participated – at least occasionally – in a socially innovative project. Survey data have been primarily analysed at a descriptive level and compared with the findings emerging from the analysis of the content of the previously mentioned interviews.

The empirical material collected was analysed by using a mixed-method approach. We integrated the qualitative and quantitative data from different sources to comprehensively understand the empirical case under investigation (Bryman, 2009). The extracts we collected from the various types of follow-up interviews were analysed under a content analysis and compared with the information emerging from the survey. Many of the interviewed mothers also answered our survey. This fact facilitated the integration of data from different sources in a nested design (Small, 2011); however, we could not match qualitative and quantitative responses as the answers in the survey were fully anonymous. Part of the content of the structured interviews was categorised and analysed quantitatively. Given the reduced numbers we had in our samples, we do not have the ambition of reaching a statistical representativity.

We rely on different data to answer the research questions we presented in the introduction: we used the empirical material collected from mothers involved in the projects (including interviews, WhatsApp, email and the survey) to analyse the consequences of COVID-19 on the work-life balance of the mothers who participated in social innovation; we used the empirical material collected with the educators working in the projects (the structured interviews, WhatsApp message, the phone interviews and the semi-structured interviews with the three key informants) to investigate the impact of the school lockdown on socially innovative projects. We used the joint analysis of the two corpora of empirical materials to analyse the role of the communities of care (composed of the mothers and the educators who participate in the social innovation projects). All materials thus concurred

to answer our third research question: could the communities of care established around socially innovative projects constitute a resource to cope with the social isolation and economic turmoil caused by the pandemic?

The following findings section was organised by focusing on two different units of analysis: the mothers of children who attended socially innovative projects (section 5) and the socially innovative projects themselves (section 6). Section 4 presents the three cases that we studied in our project.

SOCIALLY INNOVATIVE 0-3 CARE IN PRE-COVID-19 BARCELONA

Over the last two decades, Barcelona has experienced a robust growth in the institutionalised 0-3 childcare services. The "escola bressol" model (EBM) is solid and based on the construction of municipal public nurseries, which have consolidated their reputation for offering high-quality services over the years. Currently, there are 102 EBMs distributed evenly around the city, with a capacity to school 8,500 children. Despite their growth, there are only enough public places (around 14,000) to serve a fraction of those who apply for the service; these places serve about the 21% of the children under three who are residents in the city (38,377 children in 2020), while around 24% attend private nurseries. However, in its latest strategic plan for early childhood education and care (dated April 2021), the municipality itself recognises that an institutionalised care model can only partially cover the increasing multiculturality and diversity of the families applying for the service and its growing differentiation of needs (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021).

Socially innovative projects have stemmed from citizens' initiatives to cope with these increasingly diverse needs. On the one side, families and educators were unsatisfied with public and private institutionalised services' high ratios (one educator per every 8 children under one year old, one educator per every 13 children under two, and one educator per every 20 children under three; art. 12.1, DECRET 282/2006, Generalitat de Catalunya). On the other side, social innovators criticised the institutionalisation of such young children. They wished to create an environment more akin to being cared for in the home (*llars de criança*) or playgroups (*espais/grups de criança*).

> "The attention given in traditional nurseries is not the same quality as in care groups. Already assuming that the ratio is much lower. In traditional kindergartens, the ratio for a class of under-ones is 12 children per adult. And there's a second adult that rotates between several classes. But, during the day, there are 12 or 13 children who are alone with one person. One person on their own will not attend to their needs in the same way, emotionally and practically, and manage the children's conflicts as to when there's an adult per 4 or 5 children. So, in the care groups, the ratio is very low, 4 or 5 children per adult." [Mother, free-education nursery]

> "And so, what kind of differences are there...? Well, what we talked about a little earlier about it not being an institution but a home. And that's the difference for families and for the children. When things change, they're tiny, right? Going from their mothers into the world should be taken little by little. Maybe they've been with a babysitter or their grandmothers for one day. So before arriving at a kindergarten with 25 children, an educator and a structure, an institution, so, they come through here, it's a familiar world where there's free play, and where someone other than your mother or father takes care of them, in another environment, with other children. They still need to adapt, and, here too, we adapt things slowly, it's different. I believe that for babies so young, this step is huge. So, going straight from your mother's house to the kindergarten, well, I think that's a huge shock." [Educator, childminder]

Three main types of projects emerged as alternatives to the EBMs and the private nurseries. Although different in their functioning, the projects we have included all have

things in common: small ratios (three to five children per adult), small groups (maximum 20 children) and a community organisation with the parents' direct involvement in their everyday functioning. The first model studied in this article is the *llars de criança* or *mares de dia*, in which an educator (or two) opens their houses to welcome the youngest children in a home-like environment. Although public institutions have not formally recognised them as an alternative 0-3 care service, they have established an association (Llars de Criança, in 2010) and a cooperative (Cooperativa de Mares de Dia, in 2017), which constitute a point of reference for educators, offering training and counselling. The projects are usually relatively small since the maximum ratio per educator is three to four children, and one or two educators typically manage them. In this model, the educators run the pedagogical project, while community involvement is limited to food preparation and social activities with other families.

The other two types of projects (*espais* and *grups de criança)* have a more substantial communitarian nature. They are bigger (around 15-20 children) and involve slighter older children (one to six years old). In these cases, parents and educators collaborate in the project's management and the definition of its goals, usually renting a private space or, less frequently, occupying an abandoned building or being assigned a space by the municipality. Families share running costs, and the management is self-organised through assemblies, where participants contribute according to their abilities. The main difference between these two projects regards educational projects: in the case of *espais*, the educators take the lead and decide how to organise learning activities with the children; in the case of *grups*, parents take the lead and usually participate directly in the care by supporting one or two educators, hired by the association, in their work. Both types of projects have *Xell* as their reference association. This association was founded in 2003, and promotes free-education practices, supports home-schooling and offers training and counselling to projects and families. However, there is no specific requirement in formal education to participate in these projects: many educators joined the free-education movement when they became parents and ended up running a project after their children grew up and started primary school. As in the case of *llars de criança*, public institutions do not formally acknowledge these projects as alternative services for the care of the under-threes. But, unlike the *llars de criança,* their association is not eager to receive formal acknowledgement of their educational activities, since regulation could impede the freedom of education and management that characterise these projects.

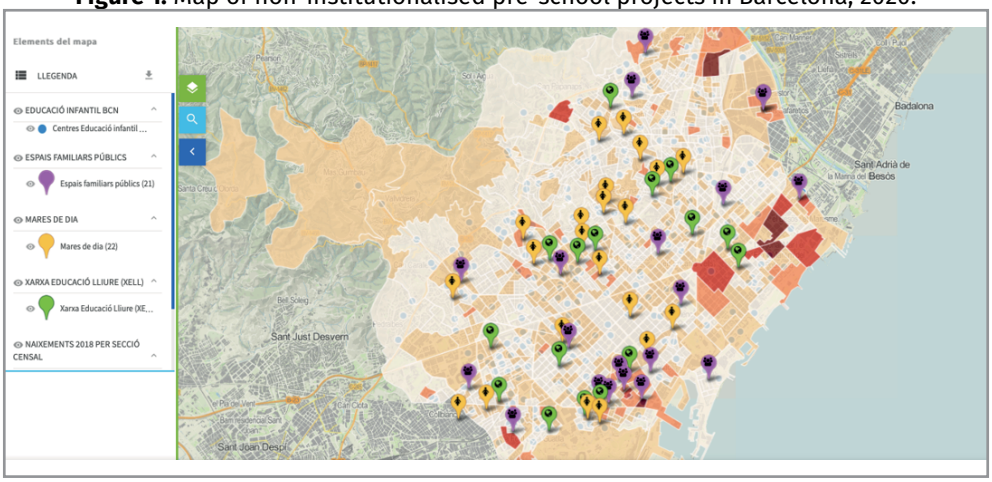
In 2021, there are 29 *llars de criança* and 19 *espais* and *grups de criança* in total in Barcelona. Given the reduced ratios that characterise these projects and the consequent higher costs, it is not surprising that only a few hundred children across the city can access these types of childcare services. Furthermore, they are not evenly distributed across the city. Still, they tend to concentrate in currently gentrifying and affluent neighbourhoods such as Gràcia or Poble-Sec, areas where professionals tend to live and where a lively civil society favours the emergence of citizen-led initiatives (Cruz et al., 2017).

In the survey conducted within the project, about 17.1% of our sample (corresponding to 89 cases) was involved at least once in a social innovation project. Only around 6% of the sample used social innovation regularly in each of the three age spans we analysed in our survey (see Table 1). About 77% of the sample heard of such projects, but only 21.7% of people who were never involved in the social innovation would like to try these services.

Self-selection thus characterises the families that participate: they usually belong to the most socially active and well-off strata of the intellectual middle-class, as shown in Table 2. Socially innovative projects tend to be chosen more often by professionals, high-level public sector staff and the self-employed. Still, manual workers rarely choose this option – at least in our survey. Most manual workers do not even know these social innovation projects exist, confirming previous results that point to social innovation as mainly a middle-class phenomenon (Cruz et al., 2017; Maestripieri, 2017). In our survey, 38 of the 89 cases with contacts with the innovative projects did not apply for the EBMs. This finding confirms that social innovation is not exclusively a second-best choice for those

families who do not enter the public system, but an explicit preference for those against the institutionalisation of their children.

Figure 1. Map of non-institutionalised pre-school projects in Barcelona, 2020.



Source: Primera infància project, https://blogs.uab.cat/primerainfancia/

Table 1. The use of socially innovative care

Type of care	**Between 4 and 12 months**	**Between 12 and 24 months**	**Between 24 and 36 months**
Family care (mother/partner)	45%	21.9%	27.5%
Other relatives/friends	11.6%	9.5%	10.4%
Social innovation (including llars de criança, grups de criança & espais de criança)	5.8%	7.3%	6.5%
Public nurseries	18.3%	34%	28.3%
Private care (including childminders)	19.4%	27.3%	27.3%
Absolute values	520	465	385

Source: Primera Infancia survey 2020, Barcelona https://blogs.uab.cat/primerainfancia/

Table 2. The use of socially innovative care by the occupational position of the mother

Type of care	**Experience of SI**	**Would use it**	**Would not use it**	**Do not know SI**
Professional	15.1%	30.3%	38.6%	15.9%
High-level public sector staff	14.6%	22.9%	46.9%	15.6%
Self-employed worker	15%	20%	25%	40%
Manual work	12%	16%	32%	40%
Out of work mother	19.3%	16.7%	38.9%	25.2%
Absolute values	89	113	203	115

Source: Primera Infancia survey 2020, Barcelona https://blogs.uab.cat/primerainfancia/

A second important element to consider is the lack of institutional acknowledgement. This situation makes it impossible to receive funding from public institutions for the projects' running costs, causing a certain economic precariousness that endangered the survival of these projects even before the pandemic. The precariousness is only partially compensated for by funding received by the projects for specific ventures. This situation does not guarantee long-term financial sustainability for projects which depend entirely on the fees paid by the participants.

> "The current financial aid for public nurseries is for regulated schools. Eh... or the private nurseries that are approved by the education department. A free-education nursery is not... it's an association... it's something else. And you can't get help to pay for it, no. Economically it's very tough." [Mother, free-education nursery]

> "I don't know, it's work, sometimes I work till late, you need to. And my colleagues... they too have extra jobs to pay the bills. So I think it's a little precarious or quite precarious. And that, if there were a public will to finance this type of education, with less money than gets allocated to a public school, we could provide an education with a better ratio and with lots of innovation. So it's disappointing." [Educator, community care group]

The situation before the pandemic had already revealed severe vulnerabilities in the projects. The small number of children involved in the projects and the educators' working conditions led to extreme precariousness. The financial sustainability of the projects is precarious since they need to find a delicate equilibrium between very high fixed costs (determined by the private rental market in a city like Barcelona) and the need to go beyond a pure non-profit activity for those educators involved. The results are fees comparable to private nurseries but, in any case, are pretty expensive for those families that can access public nurseries at lower sliding-scale prices. Although they constitute interesting experiments in terms of community practices and pedagogical innovations, an unavoidable elitism marks these socially innovative 0-3 childcare projects. This elitism stems from a lack of public funding since public institutions cannot support financially projects that are not recognised as childcare services by the regulation. The main consequence is that part of the population is excluded for economic reasons, and these projects are not recognised as alternatives to EBM among working-class families (as shown in Table 2). The financial shock caused by the 2020 lockdown drastically affected these projects and magnified a situation of precariousness that was already in place, as we will see in the following section.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FAMILIES

The COVID-19 outbreak generated various needs among social groups that are usually not included as needing public and community support (Bertogg and Koos, 2021). If we focus on families with small children, the closure of nurseries and the need to maintain social bubbles to protect older people meant that parents were suddenly left alone to navigate the challenges of juggling work and family within their homes (Maestripieri, 2021).

Nevertheless, the mothers who participate in these projects usually belong to the educated middle class. Consistent with the literature on the social consequences of COVID-19 (Maestripieri, 2021), they have coped better with the consequences of the pandemic. As shown in Table 3, the mothers involved in social innovation projects are usually medium- and high-skilled. The majority of mothers participating in social innovation are employed part-time since participating in these projects requires the constant involvement of parents, a requirement usually covered by the mothers (64% of cases), confirming that even in these families, care is still highly gendered. If we focus on the consequences of the pandemic on the economic insecurity of their households, however, families that opted for socially innovative projects demonstrated resilience to the COVID-19 crisis. They are the only category that showed an increase in economic security after the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak (from

84% to 88% of households received unexpected aid of 700 euros monthly). The vast majority of them also do not have experience in late payment of utility bills, with only 8% of families first experiencing this after COVID-19 compared to 15% of those who opt for family care, other relatives or public care.

Table 3. Type of care by socio-economic conditions

	Family care	Other relatives	SI.	Public care	Private care
Education					
Low skilled	40.6%	12.5%	3.1%	40.6%	3.1%
Medium skilled	41.5%	12.2%	6.1%	24.4%	15.8%
High skilled	29.3%	11.8%	4.7%	26.6%	27.6%
Working activity					
Inactive	67.4%	6.3%	1%	16.8%	8.4%
Part-Time worker	34.8%	9.1%	9.1%	25%	21.9%
Full-Time worker	18%	15.7%	3.4%	31.4%	31.4%
Economic insecurity					
Received 700€	73.8%	82.3%	84%	76.3%	87.3%
After COVID-19	64.3%	74.2%	88%	66.9%	78.6%
No delay in bills	81.5%	83.9%	92%	82.7%	92.9%
Delay due to COVID-19	14.9%	14.5%	8%	14.4%	6.3%

Source: Primera Infancia survey 2020, Barcelona https://blogs.uab.cat/primerainfancia/

Despite faring better in the economic crisis, the interviews confirm the struggles of families participating in socially innovative projects in terms of work-family balance. In particular, mothers had to juggle the re-domestication of care during the spring lockdown, which in the case of our interviewees implied the necessity of finding a new balance between home care and working from home. Despite the advantages of teleworking, mothers struggled because of the sudden lack of external support, which included childcare and an increased load of housework once it was no longer possible to hire external help. The unpaid workload increased suddenly, and couples had to find new solutions. Women struggled to cope with remote work, care and the impossibility of obtaining help from nannies or grandparents. The government did not put any specific economic measures to support families in this challenge. In contrast with the case of other southern European countries (such as Italy, for example), in Spain, there was no change in the usual provision of benefits (Koslowski et al., 2020).

> "Well, in the lockdown, we both started to work, both my partner and me. So... of course, our child was here, at home, with us, and it's true that we noticed that there was more housework, because of course, we had to cook more meals and go shopping more, the truth is that we also spent more time on that because of the queues and that it was more difficult." [Mother, childminder group]

However, we noticed evolving dynamics between mothers and fathers. In fact, in families where both parents could work from home, the lockdown had an equalising effect, with care provision balanced between mothers and fathers – confirming what the preliminary investigations on COVID-19 published throughout 2020 ascertained (Maestripieri, 2021). For the first time, many fathers experienced the possibility of enjoying more time with their

children: the reduction in working hours and the possibility of working from home meant more time to care for their children, usually a privilege culturally reserved for mothers. This situation aligns with recent research about fathers' changing roles in younger generations, with men's contribution to housework and childcare increasing significantly among the most highly-educated profiles (Ruspini, 2019). But even within this privileged layer of the population, the care was rebalanced only when fathers were forced to be at home. If they kept working in person, the effect of the COVID-19 emergency was to magnify the gender imbalance in unpaid work, not to reduce it.

> "I think *father* is enjoying it more because he can spend much longer with her than he usually could. He's delighted. And he says so. Me too, eh! But it's true that I've had the chance of spending more time with her than *father*." [Mother, free-education nursery]

> "Well, the first two weeks of the State of Alarm, both my partner and I worked from home. It was great (I suppose because it was also at the beginning); we took turns teleworking, and we were with the children more than ever, especially *partner*, who in "normal life" on weekdays was only with the children for a quick breakfast before work/school and when he arrived at 8 in the evening, just to have dinner and go to bed. But after those first two weeks that were wonderful, *partner* had to return to work in person, at first only in the mornings. Still, after a week, he was already doing "normal working hours", and I stayed (and I still am) at home with the children and telework, and it is horrible. Before, since *partner* was always away from home, he "did what he could", dinner, filling the dishwasher, and little else, so I "did the rest", a lot or a little depending on what needed to be done. We had a girl who came to clean the house once a week, but with Coronavirus, obviously, we asked her not to come, and of course, I did ALL her tasks, plus specific things like buying clothes, kindergarten registration, etc. Before, I had a specific time for each thing: work, home, children. Now everything's mixed together, and being at home all day, it gets dirtier, now we not only have breakfast and dinner. We have breakfast, morning snack, lunch, afternoon snack and dinner at home, so these dirty dishes are "extras". Although the dishwasher is my partner's job, since he's out all day, it has become "one of my tasks". He still puts one load on, but I do the extra one." [Mother, free-education nursery]

The situation was very different for unemployed mothers when the lockdown started. In those cases, they reverted to a situation where their role was to be a mother 100% of the time, impacting other facets of their identities. So, the pandemic was not a mechanism favouring gender equality: the gender rebalance takes place when women and men have the same working conditions. When women are economically dependent on their partners, families tend to revert to traditional gendered models of care, even though we are usually talking about highly educated and empowered women.

> "Lockdown at the beginning was a bit... quite hard because ehm... my partner worked from home, but he would shut himself in, he still shuts himself in his room and so... and so, it's not that he can help me much and so it was me and *child* 24 hours, eh... [...] this was our lockdown, *child* 24 hours, *partner* when he finished work, around six, seven PM. So he spent an hour with him, the time that I was making dinner, eh... that's all." [Mother, community care group]

In conclusion, the COVID-19 emergency has exacerbated inequalities already present before the outbreak. What emerges from our data is that affluent families, in which both working members could work remotely, could find a new equilibrium in which gendered roles could be questioned. In the cases in which either the partner went out to work as usual or in which mothers were not employed, school closures were covered entirely by the provision of women's work. In any case, in all households, the pandemic had constituted a stress test for the management of unpaid work when families were suddenly deprived of the external help they usually received from other women in the form of nannies and cleaners.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SOCIAL INNOVATION

As far as educators in these projects are concerned, they have struggled to survive financially during closures. Although these projects are not formally recognised as schooling activities, their representative associations recommended following the same rules applied to schools and nurseries. So, they also closed for the entire spring lockdown. When schools re-opened in September, they followed the same recommendations for social distancing applied in public and private nurseries. It has been a challenging year for the educators involved in the projects. The higher costs compared to public nurseries and the uncertainty with which the school year began led to a fall in demand for socially innovative childcare services in the city of Barcelona. This situation arose since families were still working reduced schedules or living on public emergency help and could not afford the higher costs of these types of childcare services.

As noted in the previous section, the projects were already struggling to make ends meet before the COVID-19 emergency. Only families' fees and the projects' emergency funds could pay the project's fixed costs. Of the ten educators that answered our structured interview, only in five projects it was possible to cover fixed costs thanks to emergency funds saved before the pandemic; in the other cases, the continuous support of families during the pandemic was crucial. When the emergency broke out, the families' fees made the difference between the project surviving or having to close, but families stopped paying their fees in only two cases out of ten. In six cases, educators reported that at least a part of the families kept paying their fees even if they could not access the services because of the restrictions imposed by the first lockdown. In one case, the lockdown led to a project closing. The fact that most of the workers in these projects were women shows that, again, women were those who paid the higher price for the COVID-19 crisis, losing their jobs more frequently (or their individual incomes in this case) (Maestripieri, 2021).

> "Lockdown happened halfway through the project moving, which benefitted us since we paid the rent for the old premises with our deposit. We established a continuity fee, lower than normal, to meet the expenses that almost all families paid since they wanted to contribute. At the moment, we have only been able to negotiate a temporary discount on the new rent until November. Another lockdown could endanger our fragile economy." [Educator, group of criança]

Furthermore, only five out of the ten projects we talked with directly had the possibility of accessing the special funds made available by the government for dependent workers. Educators partially compensated for the loss of their incomes thanks to the emergency transfers offered by the government to workers, but public support was only available to those who had a contract or were officially self-employed. Many projects had only been able to stay afloat pre-pandemic by offering unregulated agreements to their workers, so those workers were not eligible for benefits.

Thus, accessing public help was only possible for better funded, more established projects with sufficient resources to employ their workers with regular contracts. Although it is impossible to say how many of the current projects need to use informal arrangements to make ends meet, it nevertheless meant that the more precarious, new, or less profitable projects found it impossible to apply for government aid. The unstable situation has hindered the possible consolidation of new initiatives in the near future, leading to a reduction in the diversity of 0-3 childcare offered in the city and the potential loss of spaces for citizen-led initiatives. Fortunately, the projects dismissed their workers just in one case.

> "Then, they closed for these five days and then well... during the entire state of alarm until June, the projects were closed. The problem was that the people who were registered as self-employed, those people received government aid, right? But well, as we always talk about the precariousness of our projects well, many people were working under the table without being registered, so these people, well, received collaborative quotas from some of the families, which helped to

support that person a little. Still, some of them went through a pretty rough time." [Association representative]

The communities behind the projects, however, were a fundamental resource. The help was two-fold: on the one hand, the educators had the flexibility to help those families that were forced to keep working in person, and they provided the care required directly in the families' homes, sometimes even breaking the rules and risking fines. In addition, families helped each other share childcare: the flexibility of teleworking allowed them to take turns caring for their children by creating bubbles in which they could find the external help they needed. Instead of resorting to the market (nannies) or the family (grandparents), the main welfare actor became the community behind the social innovation projects.

"And then many families found themselves needing someone to take care of their children. Right? Because although there was a state of alarm and you were supposed to stay at home, there were people who went out to work. And some childminders went to families' homes, like babysitters. Those families with essential jobs could have been covered. Well, I suppose this happened with all families that took their children to the public nurseries or the private ones too. They didn't have that service and didn't know who to leave those tiny children with, and they had essential jobs. Some childminders did this." [Association representative]

On the other hand, families kept paying their fees, and this money was fundamental to avoid closing down the projects in which their children participated. The trust and bond established in the community of care before the pandemic became the social resource that could overcome – at least, in part – the worst consequences of the crisis for the projects. However, solidarity in the community of care did not always occur. In some cases, the COVID-19 emergency also severely impacted household incomes, with many fathers and mothers on furlough or left without clients (in the case of self-employed workers). In other cases, some of the participants in the projects broke the mutual aid rule that sustained the community and reverted to individualistic solutions.

"We've kept paying, right? But less. [...] Well, there were people who didn't want to pay. Well, there were families who understood it more as a collective project, and there were families who did not. And well, because I don't know, we, for example, thought that beyond the circumstances... That the idea is, maybe, if there is a family that can afford to pay more if there is one that cannot ... That is, let's collectivise the problem a bit because it's a project that we understand to be like that, it's collective. But no. Many people were more like, on their own. "I can't pay, so that I won't pay." More one-sided, instead of thinking "I can pay your share and then you will return it to me." I don't know. So well, there's been quite a bit of conflict. [...] Now there are thirteen families. There were fifteen of us and two left. And we'll lose more." [Mother, free-education nursery]

In conclusion, our research findings show that COVID-19 hardly hit the participants in social innovations. Still, at the same time, they show that the community became a fundamental resource for coping with the emergency caused by the pandemic. Parents and educators helped each other, sharing care and financial resources to keep the projects going and finding new work-family balance even when projects were still officially closed.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The empirical evidence showed how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the strain felt by families and social innovation projects. Consistently with previously published results (Maestripieri, 2021), our fieldwork has confirmed that women primarily bore the cost of the emergency caused by the pandemic. First, mothers already managed the increasingly demanding juggling between paid and unpaid work. Second, women made up the majority

of workers in these social innovation projects. Furthermore, the stress caused by the pandemic was exceptionally high in the city of Barcelona. There was a greater transmission of the virus in the area and more prolonged school closures during the first wave. But the higher stress also depended on the specific characteristics of the southern European model. The impossibility of calling on their primary network and the lack of measures for supporting the work-life balance of families worsened the situation of families and, in particular, of women.

However, the consequences suffered by women participating in social innovation were mixed. The social composition of the participants in these projects protected them from the worst impacts of the crisis, at least partially. These mothers are prevalently self-employed workers, professionals or high-level public sector workers: they could easily work remotely and were not forced to work outside the home. This situation partly softened the hardship of the crisis. Among our sample of mothers, we have no furlough or dismissal cases that occurred because of the pandemic. The evidence offered by the survey also demonstrates that those accessing social innovation were less affected by the economic insecurity provoked by the pandemic (see Table 3). Despite being protected from financial strain, however, our interviewees had to work hard to juggle paid and unpaid work at home, with interesting dynamics at play within genders. Fathers became more active caregivers: when both parents worked from home, the fathers' contribution to the unpaid work was substantial, diminishing the previous gap – at least partially and hopefully not temporarily – in the gendered distribution of care within families. Plus, many fathers could enjoy more free time with their children for the first time: a privilege usually offered only to mothers (thanks to the maternity leave) also became a generalised experience available to teleworking or furloughed fathers. However, when mothers were unemployed or fathers kept working outside the home, the COVID-19 pandemics magnified the differences between genders.

These results provide evidence that the pandemic has exacerbated the effect of the extensively analysed weaknesses of the southern European welfare model. Families were required to act as "shock absorbers", as usually. Still, the stress imposed by COVID-19 has not been compensated for even on this occasion by specific support policies to ensure well-being. In addition, the results of this study are in line with recent comparative research on the impact of school closures and the lockdown on gender inequalities within families across the different welfare regime models reviewed in section 2. In the case we analyse, gender inequality in the distribution of increased childcare and housework responsibilities derived from COVID-19 diminishes as socio-economic and education levels increase. The relationship between gender and class is pervasive across welfare models.

From another perspective, the specific conditions that characterise social innovation in 0-3 childcare also magnified the projects' vulnerabilities to the economic shock caused by the pandemic. Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, the lack of public acknowledgement and regulation particularly exposed the social innovation in 0-3 childcare to economic instability, precarious working conditions, and uncertainty in the financial balance. The impact of the prolonged lockdown led to a stressful situation that sometimes forced projects to close, especially in situations that were already very precarious or just starting. Workers could access government aid only in cases where they were officially employed as dependent workers or registered freelancers. Still, no public support was given to the projects as direct transfers to ensure their survival as they lack public acknowledgement of their activities. In addition, a percentage of workers in this sector usually works with informal contracts, and those workers were suddenly exposed to poverty and extreme insecurity. The COVID-19 shockwave affected all the projects, putting their survival seriously at risk and silencing their voices.

Our empirical evidence also demonstrated the resilience displayed by the community that sustains these projects. The majority of families we interviewed kept paying fees even when they were not accessing the services, which allowed the projects to cover fixed costs and provide some income to workers who were suddenly left without any possibility of

working. At the same time, the educators helped the families, looking after children in their own homes, and breaking social distancing rules. Nevertheless, the most interesting dynamic in place was the mutual help that parents offered each other, not only in terms of moral support and assistance in this stressful situation for families but also in self-organising to provide care to one another's children. Therefore, social innovation not only became a resource that could at least partially compensate for the loss of the primary network's help and increase the resilience of the families, but it also allowed many projects to survive despite being not considered for public aid. Theorists define social innovation as the satisfaction of social needs through citizen-led collective action occurring at the community or local level (Moulaert in Nurhasanah et al., 2020). Following this argument, we can thus sustain that the investigated cases fit this definition. They were able to act as a community support in a time of emergency, going beyond the public provision and the market to provide a welfare service based on the needs of the citizens, activated by the local communities and tailored to their specific requirements.

In conclusion, we are aware that this article suffers from many limitations. Only some of our previous interviewees agreed to contribute to the follow-up after the spring 2020 lockdown. At the same time, the survey we conducted in June-November 2020 can only give us an overview of the COVID-19 phenomenon since it is not statistically representative of all mothers in Barcelona. However, we are also convinced of the timeliness and originality of this article. To date, no study in this field has considered the effect of the lockdown on the provisions of socially innovative childcare services. Their weaknesses compared to institutionalised services and the lack of a policy framework to regulate them deepen their invisibility in many fields. These citizen-led projects belong to the sphere of the community –namely, the fourth pillar of the welfare regime, together with the state, the market and the family–. The role of this fourth pillar has been under-researched when analysing welfare regimes' characteristics and their transformations over the past four decades. While there is a wealth of studies on the role of the family in the provision of welfare and its impact on welfare state retrenchment, no comparable effort has been made to research the role of the community in different welfare regime models.

Nonetheless, understanding the functioning and resilience of citizen-led social innovation in crises such as pandemics is relevant for assessing the potential of policy learning through the transferability of key features into the public childcare system. This process may improve the public system's capacity to offer a more equitable and more inclusive solution for the care of children under three in the face of the diversification of needs. More generally, policy-led social innovation may help address some welfare regimes' challenges, such as balancing the attention to diverse needs with universal access to welfare services.

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