

# A Family Matter: Responsibility and Selfishness in Spanish Households

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Under the pressure of work's devaluation and the state's retrenchment, men and women in Spain manage their extended family resources in a struggle to provide for their dependents. These resources have become the main axis of inequality in Spain's financialized economy. Drawing on fieldwork in Madrid, I show that men and women understand themselves in terms of this responsibility, internalizing capitalist pressures on social reproduction as a family matter. This self-identification cuts through the solidarities that exploited waged work and gendered domestic work might generate, and it makes family one's ultimate reference point. Instead of the refusal of a responsibility that used to be socialized being a principled and political stance, then, it is dismissed as selfish.

**Keywords** extended family, gender, refamiliarization, responsibility, social reproduction, Spain

You couldn't pay Laura to go back to her twenties! All that fretting over what to do, who to be with, what she's good at. Now, at forty-one, she can finally just go with the flow. I wasn't expecting anything upbeat on entering her small apartment and being introduced to her aunt, who was suffering from dementia. Her aunt was living with Laura and her husband, Álvaro, sharing their nine-year-old's bedroom. For seven long years, Laura had worked hard at a marketing job. Losing that job allowed her to become a full-time mother. She returned to marketing as a freelancer when her son entered preschool. Then, when her husband's teaching job became permanent, she dropped freelancing for art studies. Now they are able to make ends meet, thanks to her parents' help with the bills and mortgage payments. No, this doesn't bother her in the least. After all, she takes care of her aunt—isn't that what families are for? She would like to do more for her parents, too, but they live far away, in a town with scant employment opportunities.

Forty-three-year-old Álvaro would also like to live closer to his parents, who could then help with childcare. More harried than Laura, he is actually nostalgic for his twenties, what with all those hours he spent on campus discussing Plato and Kant without a care in the world. His parents owned an apartment in Madrid where he and his brother lived while studying. When Álvaro and Laura married, they bought it from his parents at a below-market price, with a bank mortgage they will be paying—with his in-laws' help—until 2038. The principal of the high school where he teaches piles so much work on him that it leaves little time for anything else. Laura is a free spirit, while he plans and strategizes, haunted by the fear of not doing enough for his family. His most adult moments are

when managing the family budget, which he hates but does anyway. He reluctantly leaves most of the care work to Laura.

Laura and Álvaro's experiences were characteristic of a pattern I saw emerging from my fieldwork on adulthood. Gender roles were mostly traditional. Women struggled to make a living while also doing most of the domestic and care work. Men, too, struggled to make a living but were expected to provide for their families financially. Whenever I told people about researching adulthood, they asked if I meant men or women. Men would complain that sometime in their twenties, women stopped being any fun, and women charged men with refusing to grow up. But, as with Laura and Álvaro, none of the people I interviewed articulated their own lives, nor the society that allocates roles, in gendered terms. Nor were most of my interlocutors moved to critique these predicaments. They were preoccupied, instead, with their responsibilities for and within their extended families.

My initial approach to contemporary adulthood was through the lens of work (Weiss 2021a), but the predominance of family and gender in my interlocutors' accounts made me broaden my perspective. Scholarship on Spain likewise alerted me to changes now occurring. A marked increase in women's paid employment and new welfare policies since the 1980s placed gender equality higher on the public agenda (Tabío 2017). But Spain's post-2008 financial crisis austerity measures and state retrenchment, combined with high rates of unemployment and dispossession, have endangered these fragile gains. Relatively low spending on family services, along with unsynchronized school and work timetables, have long hindered Spanish women's full integration in the job market, making husbands the main earners. Despite increasingly egalitarian attitudes in Spanish society, the lion's share of house and care work continues to fall upon women, who are also hit hardest by cuts to public services (Abril et al. 2015; Carrasco and Recio 2001; Comas-d'Argemir, Marre, and San Román 2016; Gálvez and Rodríguez-Modroño 2016; Moreno-Mínguez 2010).

Drawing on my fieldwork in Madrid, I aim to flesh out some of the pressures on gender and family in austerity-era Spain, asking why it does not lead to greater politicization. I spent fourteen months studying issues pertaining to the adulthood of thirtysomethings and fortysomethings in Madrid. My fieldwork included informal hangouts<sup>1</sup>; one-off, open-ended interviews with people I met there or through contacts; ongoing conversations with key interlocutors I befriended; a focus group; and participation in self-help seminars. The people I met through my fieldwork spanned a range of income levels and employment situations, though they have been predominantly nonimmigrants with at least high-school education. Since they lived in Madrid, they faced particularly high costs of living and aggravated austerity measures imposed by a conservative local government. These factors converged with the strains of unmet employment expectations, extended family pressures, and (a lack of) resources, all of which placed them in the eye of the storm.

I draw on this fieldwork to argue, first, that under current pressures on households to provide and care for their own, and as inequality progressively hinges on household material and immaterial resources, men and women are consumed by the responsibility of managing and optimizing their extended family resources. Second, I argue that they internalize this responsibility in ways that make them identify first and foremost as members of their families. This self-identification cuts through the solidarities that might arise among women performing care work vis-à-vis a retrenched state or among exploited workers vis-à-vis their employers.

In the following section, I draw relevant insights from scholarship that identifies the gendered stakes of waged and unwaged work. I then show how, even as waged and care-work-based gender inequalities intensify among the current generation of adults in Spain, structural pressures on these adults to provide for and care for their dependents by managing family resources make extended

families their ultimate reference point. Finally, I show that the tensions and sentiments generated by internalizing economic and social pressures as a personal and family matter serve to depoliticize these pressures.

## Social Reproduction and Refamiliarization

When I first started reading popular literature on adulthood, I was struck by the fact that nearly all books on immaturity—identified as a failure to attain adulthood—referred to men, while nearly all books on aging—discussed as a failure to retain its rewards—referred to women. But I soon caught on. The midlife crisis (Rosenberg, Rosenberg, and Farrell 1999) as well as the Peter Pan complex (Kiley 1983) were popularized at the height of 1980s neoliberalism, as men were forced to bear the growing burden of financing the needs of their dependents. Those who dodged this burden were pathologized. Popular literature and discourse offered advice to family members affected by these men's behaviors, namely parents of sons who would not leave home (Newman 2012) and women whose husbands "have never grown up" (Kiley 1983).

In contrast, anti-aging advice was foisted on women just as it became urgent for them to retain their attractiveness to male wage earners. In addition to receiving lower wages, women were disproportionately subject to workplace ageism (Morganroth Gullette 2011). The normative expectations of childbearing, along with men's predilection for younger partners made aging a specific opportunity-loss for women (Illouz 2012). Women who chose not to adhere to youth and beauty standards risked the refusal of male patronage, which could spell the loss of decent livelihoods (Bartky 1997).

Although personal conversations and the relationships I nurtured formed the bulk of my fieldwork, I supplemented them by attending around twenty seminars designed to help people form and manage relationships.<sup>2</sup> Gender differences were most overt in these seminars. Men expressed their ambivalence about romantic relationships, desiring intimacy but repelled by commitment. Those who dated complained about women being mercenary. They spoke about having to live up to expectations that they always aim higher and seek better pay. Women, for their part, mourned bad relationships that wasted valuable years of their lives. They maintained that they would need a reliable partner as well as a house and stable job of their own to raise children. They asked each other if they had partners and expressed frustration at immature, commitment-averse men.

Women were also more vocal about aging. In one seminar, they shared stories about being called *señora* and having to dye their graying hair, while men insisted that their attraction to younger women was an impulse beyond their control. Women who wanted children spoke of their biological clock and their concern about becoming "old" mothers. Men mentioned opportunities lost to family obligations. One man longed desperately to become a pilot but recognized that getting a pilot's license would be expensive and that his family's needs had to be prioritized. Another contrasted his high-powered job to fatherhood, which arrested him in a protracted present where every day was the same. Yet another participant recalled his pain at having to sell his motorbike to pay for a kitchen renovation when he moved in with his wife.

Gendered divisions in waged work, care work, and adulthood were omnipresent. Yet, in personal conversations with men and women about their lives, these divisions were muted. This was also true at seminars on troubled relationships. They were attended almost exclusively by women, despite being open to everyone, arguably because women had higher stakes in relationships on which they and their children were economically dependent. Yet no one mentioned that relationship

maintenance was de facto the woman's job. This was also true at a support meeting for family caretakers. It was only when she decided that her disabled twenty-two-year-old was a priority, said one mother, that she stopped being tormented by her caretaking duties competing with other interests. Another woman caring for her elderly mother claimed that whenever she took so much as a TV break, she was consumed by guilt. Of the hundred or so caretakers to show up at this particular open meeting, only three were men. Still, the expectation that care work be performed by women was never brought up. On the contrary, organizers and caretakers alike mentioned only the generosity or the burden it implied, spending more time discussing the management of the household.

I want to think through this silence about conventional gender roles with the help of social reproduction theory, an analytic for making sense of gender and the household in capitalist society. Social reproduction refers to the process by which society persists over time, replicating its relations and resources. It foregrounds tensions between the accumulation-driven logic of capitalism's production process and the survival and well-being of the people subject to it (Weiss 2021b). One such tension arises from the fact that wage earners are made responsible for satisfying not only their own needs but also those of the unwaged, including the elderly, children, the sick, and the disabled (Marx 1992; Vogel 2013). Over much of the twentieth century, certain advanced economies have attempted to distribute this responsibility across society through institutions like public healthcare and education, unemployment insurance, and pensions. But neoliberal policies shift the burden of providing for the unwaged back upon their families in a process that has come to be known as refamiliarization.

Refamiliarization takes place as the wages that households use to support their families stagnate. It hits women harder than men because they are expected to undertake most of the unwaged domestic work while their jobs are less steady and their wages lower. Social reproduction theorists underscore the necessity of women's unwaged or undervalued "reproductive work" of birthing and caring for workers and future workers for the reproduction of waged, "productive" work (Bhattacharya 2017; Vogel 2013).

But not all women are cut from the same cloth, and social reproduction theorists have also insisted on the intersection of gender with class. House and care work differ according to women's social and economic positioning. Higher-income women can purchase physical domestic work and spend "quality time" with their children. Lower-income women are often tasked with undervalued care work in the households of others, on top of performing this work without wages in their own homes (Gimenez 2018). Class, too, is lived out in gender-specific ways. With this in mind, Karen Sacks (1989) proposes replacing the category of the individual "generic worker," juxtaposed with the employer, with a collective definition of the working class as a community that depends on waged labor but is unable to reproduce itself through this labor alone, such that many of its female members are assigned unwaged domestic work.

Based on this definition of the working class, Sacks (1989) suggests that tracing how women belonging to different ethnicities, times, and regions confront the state over welfare broadens our conception of class struggle. Indeed, it is in the intersections of gender and class that social reproduction theorists seek grounds for struggle and resistance. The conflicts arising from the expectation that women complete, in their households, the socially reproductive work offloaded by the state, parallel those of workers confronting their employers (Bhattacharya 2017), as does the reproductive workers' proximity to the needs of the people they are helping, which they might leverage in the resistance against the alienating tendencies of capitalism (Ferguson 2020).

Social reproduction theory helps us perceive gender and class inequalities in the reproduction of capitalism. But in positing women's exploitation through unwaged reproductive work as the fulcrum of political resistance, this approach deepens the mystery of politics' tenuousness among men and women facing pressures as intense as those in present-day Spain. I therefore propose to step back from "class" in the sense of waged and unwaged work, which was the focus of social reproduction theorists of the 1970s and 1980s, and instead attend to inequality in family resources.

I take my cue from Jane Collier (1986, 1997), who studied changing gender norms in a Spanish village. She found them varying in accordance with, and as idioms for, interpreting and manipulating the changing forms of inequality. In the 1980s, inequality was indeed organized according to employment, wages, and the unwaged support of an employed husband. But this has not always been the case. In earlier decades, inequality had been organized according to the management of family property, resources, and inheritance. It was household resources that had generated distinct forms of self-identification and gender relations.<sup>3</sup>

Such organization of inequality is not just a thing of the past. A common understanding of contemporary capitalism is that, as jobs grow precarious and wages stagnate, property regains its earlier importance. Thomas Piketty's (2014) account of the growth of property-generated wealth outstripping that of wages has inspired some to relate present-day inequalities to ownership rather than employment and, by extension, to family resources (Adkins, Cooper, and Konings 2020). This has been the experience of the financialized Spanish population. Fortunes and opportunities for upward mobility have increasingly been tied to homeownership and asset price inflation. Falling housing prices after the 2008 financial crisis have therefore been catastrophic. Compounded by high rates of unemployment and falling incomes, housing wealth has been converted into unpayable debt. Spanish households have typically weathered this calamity by pooling resources within extended families (Rey-Araújo 2021).

Optimizing pooled household resources to make payments demands resourcefulness, punctuality, and planning (Adkins 2018). This activates novel forms of responsibility, reducible to neither waged work nor unwaged house and care work (Fraser 2016; Gimenez 2018; Munro 2019; Vogel 2013). It operates, rather, at the level of distribution. If social reproduction refers to the conditions for capitalist society to persist, it demands a correct distribution of people and resources (Narotzky 1997). Indeed, distribution grows in importance as waged work becomes scarcer and less gainful. To secure necessary resources, including cash transfers and credit from relatives, friends, and public and private institutions, family members must engage in what James Ferguson (2015) calls distributive work.

Against the backdrop of refamiliarization, distributive work is the optimal management of resources among one's in-group. Such distributive work confronts no powerful external agent. While it can certainly generate personal resentment against the family member who doesn't pull their weight, it is unlikely to engender the kind of collective antagonism that employers might provoke among waged workers, or that a retrenching state might provoke among care workers.

Social reproduction theory has underscored the exacerbated pressure on women as unwaged house and care work intensifies, at the same time as their compensation for waged work declines. Having emerged in the 1970s and the 1980s, social reproduction theory pinpointed for critique the nuclear family. It juxtaposed wage work with care work, an ethical and social relationship based on affection and a sense of service requiring and producing sympathetic attachments with others (Dowling 2021). In contrast, the growing asset-based inequality between extended families brings the distributive work of household resource management to the fore. This responsibility internalizes

social and economic pressures into the household. In an era in which extended family resources are at once necessary and insufficient, the effects of distributive work on household members are more immediate and pronounced than those of (gendered) waged work and care work. In the next section I show how the intra-household nature of this responsibility dilutes broader class and gender agendas.

### Household Resources and Distributive Work

Spain is well-known for adults living with their parents. Outsiders like to joke about inept thirtysomethings living at home, doted on by overprotective mothers. Spaniards can wax equally cartoonish when they label Spanish families as singularly loving, their members thus able to avoid the fate of proverbial Scandinavians who, thrown out of their homes at seventeen, invariably end up killing themselves, their bodies discovered decomposing because no one bothered to check in. But whenever I inquired into personal motivations for living with or near one's parents, answers were fully pragmatic: "After losing my job, I had no money to pay the rent," one woman told me. "My friends who live alone work crazy hours and spend every last dime on rent alone," claimed a man. A pregnant woman gestured at her belly and said, "My husband and I work until 6 p.m. There's no childcare after 4 p.m. Someone will have to look after her."

Despite Spain's idiosyncrasies, these explanations should resonate with anyone coming of age in recent decades, as the resources of one's family determine much of one's opportunities in life. Families are tasked with providing everything from comfort—through cleanliness, nutrition, safety, and health—to education, entertainment, and cultural training to their members. They do so through a combination of unwaged and distributive work that includes gathering supplies, transportation, preparing food, transmitting knowledge and skills, cleaning, maintenance, and repair; by purchasing commodities and commodified services such as cars, washing machines, food, and babysitting; and by mediating public services like public education and healthcare (Munro 2019).

In Spain, the delegation of education, healthcare, childcare, and eldercare upon households has not just intensified claims upon them. It has also increased inequality between households according to their needs and resources (Bakker 2003). This is easiest to spot when observing grandparents and extended family members. They can be an asset in terms of providing childcare, housing, and finances. But they can also be a liability, needing care or material help from their adult children. Spain's relatively long life spans create many elderly dependents. It has a long tradition of eldercare being the informal charge of daughters and daughters-in law, which has interfered with women's participation in the workforce. Initiatives like the 2006 Dependency Act have attempted to reduce this burden, but the global financial crisis precipitated a tightening of public expenditure such that Spanish families ended up taking on even greater care responsibilities than before the crash (Spijker and Zuares 2020).<sup>4</sup>

Some couples I talked to identified the main disequilibrium between them as the respective age of their parents: one spouse's parents were youngish and able to help with childcare, while the other's were older and in need of care themselves. It was a notable component of the baggage each spouse brought with them to the partnership. Couples also distinguished themselves from other couples on this basis. One man who was his mentally ill mother's legal guardian would run errands on her behalf after work, while his wife was caring for her elderly parents. He resented their friends asking when they planned to have a second child; unlike those friends, they had no help with theirs. Another woman explained the rewards of parental help: her parents bring her children to school

every morning, and her partner's parents, who live farther away, pick them up from school twice a week. Weekends are coordinated: if she is preparing material for work, her partner shops and cooks for the week and vice versa, while their parents take turns minding the kids.

The weight of having elderly parents varied widely. One man admitted his relief at having siblings living near his parents, minimizing family expectations from him. Others took comfort in knowing that, financially at least, their parents were covered. In contrast, many lamented that because of their full-time jobs, they would not be able to do as much for their parents as their (typically housewife) mothers had for theirs. "My parents would never say anything, they understand the situation," one woman told me, "but still I feel so guilty."

Housing is a resource in which extended families play a vital role. The real-estate boom of the 1990s supplemented the decline in real wages, an underfunded pension system, and insufficient welfare arrangements. Young people could benefit from inheritance or parental help in acquiring a mortgage (Charnock and Ribera-Fumaz 2014; López and Rodríguez 2011). But the busts that followed forced income-constrained adults back into their parents' homes. Social inequalities now take shape as asset-rich vs. asset-poor families, with each optimizing their resources to enhance opportunities for their children and protect their oldest and youngest family members from calamity (Flynn and Schwartz 2017).

Such strategizing marked the fortunes of a forty-year-old man I came to know. He aspired to live alone but was living with his mother to help her care for his sick grandmother. When his grandmother died, they lost her pension. With his mother's monthly pension of under EUR 700, she would have had trouble paying the EUR 500 per month in rent without his help. His earnings from the business he had founded a few years earlier were still too irregular to enable him to pay his own rent while also helping his mother. And so he resigned himself to continue living with her. His situation stood in contrast with others I met who could, in fact, live on their own thanks to having received their apartment or part of the money for its rent or purchase from their parents or grandparents, or thanks to having saved the amount needed for the down payment by living in their parents' homes rent-free well into adulthood.

The combination of low or erratic wages with high housing prices gave the reliance on family help a bitter edge. Susana Narotzky (2021) describes ambivalence among young Spaniards she interviewed. Grateful for their parents' help, they were also susceptible to discourses about unfair generational distribution of resources. I heard similar claims. One woman told me that her parents paid off their home in a mere three years and then proceeded to save money, even though they were raising four children and only her father worked for a wage. In contrast, she and her husband would need twenty-six years to pay off their mortgage and had no savings despite being childless and both employed. But, as with Narotzky's (2021) interviewees, her observation was abstract in comparison to the very immediate intergenerational dependencies she negotiated within her extended family.

With deficient public childcare compounded with other economic ills, birth rates in Spain have plummeted. Carrie Douglas (2005, 2007) spoke to Spaniards in five different cities to examine how such demographic changes are reflected in their perspectives on adulthood. One of her observations is that, if young adults in northern Europe associate freedom with leaving their parental home, their Spanish counterparts—who could seldom afford to set out on their own that early—associate it with lack of economic responsibility.

This was true for another of my interlocutors. When I told him that Laura and Álvaro were receiving financial help from her parents, he said he would do anything to avoid being as dependent on his. His family's dependence ran the other way. The oldest of three, he resented being appointed

by his parents as the family patriarch in charge of managing the family property. He had recently completed the paperwork to get his father's blindness recognized for disability aid and was desperate for some time off to devote to his daughter. He complained about having to attend yet another family meeting, which he figured would be about selling some unused farmland in their old village. The next time we met, he told me they had surprised him instead with a nice dinner to thank him for the disability recognition he had managed to arrange. But he was not thrilled about it. To him, the gesture was just his family's preparing the ground for new claims on his time.

Since their fortunes were so intertwined with those of their parents, my interlocutors assumed the same would apply to their children. Some explained that they took on thirty-year mortgages to give their children advantages in life. Others spoke about their hands being tied and youthful dreams forfeited. One mother reminisced about the backpacking adventures to which the arrival of her children put an end, and a father insisted that if not for his children, he would be living in a cave making art. When I asked people when they first felt like adults, the parents among them pronounced parenthood as a benchmark. "All at once, your priorities change," explained one. "I always considered myself easygoing, a believer in freedom, but with my children, I'm no longer that person," admitted another. One father suffered nightmares about being unable to save his son from trouble. And a mother said she obsessed about her children's health, their school performance, her relationship with them, and their growing up to be good and happy adults. When I asked whether she felt all those things to be her responsibility, she replied, taken aback: "Who else's would they be?"

Responsibility for their children made my interlocutors keenly aware of their family entanglements. This was true with Elena. Pregnant with her second child, she commented on her rental apartment being too small as she showed me around. She and her husband, Raúl, were waiting for prices to go down before buying a home. Raúl's parents had nothing to spare and burdened him more than they helped. But her parents owned several houses, and she expected to eventually inherit one. Raúl's even-keeled nature was a good balance for her tumultuousness. She had known he was "the one" when she saw how well he handled her depression: it was important that her kids have such a father. He had also helped her become less dependent on her parents, freeing them to help her needier brother. Elena's salary as a statistician would never suffice to cover the rent and their daughter's daycare. Raúl, a programmer, contributed more money, while she did more of the care work. If Raúl lost his job or died (she often worried about such things), she would have to cut down her lifestyle radically. Still, she would have her parents' help.

I saw situations like Elena's repeated endlessly, with people handling the pressures of refamiliarization through the distributive management of their extended family's material and immaterial resources. It was this responsibility that weighed on them the heaviest. With a focus on the United States, Karen Sacks (1989) finds this responsibility to be disproportionately assigned to women, while Jessi Streib (2005) finds that the responsibility is more often undertaken by the spouse with a middle-class background. But I found no such clear-cut gender or class divisions in my own fieldwork in Madrid. In fact, the very open-ended and negotiated nature of this responsibility contributed to blunting the political edge of other inequalities, to which I turn next.

### Responsibility and Selfishness

In my conversations with men and women, it was responsibility over the distributive work of resource management in the household, more than wage-earning or domestic care work, that carried the greatest urgency in the context of refamiliarization. The effort to secure the family's future by

optimizing its material and immaterial resources shaped their self-perception as, first and foremost, members of extended families. Rather than the confrontational attitude toward employers or the state to which waged and care work might give rise, these self-perceptions addressed an in-group to which one was committed.

Rayna Rapp (1978) explains the ideological work that the concept “family” performs. Access to resources depends on the capitalist market and is subject to its exploitation. Yet family commits people to this market: they work for the sake of their family, a source of personal gratification. Family also creates a sense of autonomy defined as having escaped one’s childhood home to become an adult with a family of one’s own. And family is the idiom by which claims on resources are made, with imputed members of one’s family owing each other care and material help. Family is therefore particularly valuable for those whose need for such resources is greatest, while often weighing on those who might otherwise be able to ascend materially.

This last aspect suggests the different stakes men and women have in the family, as reflected in their aforementioned attitudes toward adulthood and aging. But insofar as the family wins out, it also functions as what Rapp (1978) calls a shock absorber to the tensions generated by the unequal allocation of resources. People’s personal dependence on and commitment to their families counteracts possible collective grievances over their exploitation as workers or as women. Indeed, their distributive work within the family carries a very different emotional charge.

Sylvia Yanagisako (2002) observes that a focus on the family is inevitably a focus on sentiments, too. Sentiments are, therefore, ethnographically valuable in exposing some of capitalism’s costs. The sentiments of my interlocutors revealed an internalization within the household of pressures on livelihood coming from without. These sentiments responded to the ways in which the responsibility for handling these pressures was internally distributed.

My interlocutors were highly aware of the long-term demands of raising children in terms of planning and resourcefulness. This challenge, more formidable in the face of erratic incomes and other twists of fortune, meant that only one parent (if any) could afford to be spontaneous and easygoing at any given time. The sentiments that men and women most readily expressed had less to do with their wage-earning, house work, or care work than with optimizing family resources. The parent that bore the brunt of this burden was also the one to carry a distinct emotional charge expressed in appearing nervous, exacting, or rigid. The responses of the other could in turn be read as selfish. And it was often the case that the one triggered the other.

This was the case with David, whose wife had spent years studying for, taking, and retaking the exams that would make her high-school teaching job permanent. Now that it was permanent, she still knew no rest, devoting every evening after their child was in bed to preparing the next day’s class. She had lost touch with her friends whereas David—a nonpermanent primary school teacher—regularly spent time with his. He told me that she fretted about every expense, where he liked to splurge. She planned and worried, where he liked to be surprised. He considered her a perfectionist and control freak and encouraged her to loosen up a bit. Of course, he was aware of his good fortune. Her parents had helped buy their apartment, and he had extra income from a family business to which he contributed nothing. If he lost his job, that income combined with his wife’s would suffice. His goal in life? To have fun—and yes, he mostly managed to do just that.

In her research on young adults in Spain, Carrie Douglas (2005) identifies an enduring perception of marriage as being tied down, of childrearing as an economic burden, and of motherhood as a sacrifice. She finds that, with marriage and children being nevertheless desirable, men and women who avoided them were perceived as selfish and addicted to comfort. I observed similar judgments

in my own fieldwork. In relationship seminars, a recurrent theme was the overcoming of one's selfishness. One must prioritize loving and supporting one's children over personal whims; if one's children see their parents caring for their own elderly parents, they will one day do so themselves; and difficulties at work must be handled with restraint for the sake of one's family.

An informal conversation pitted parents against those who had no children, each accusing the other of selfishness. Parents imagined their childless friends leading freewheeling lives, never having outgrown the desire for fun or their ambition for professional success. And those without children accused friends or siblings of making excessive claims on their families' resources to help raise the children they wanted but could not afford. One man admitted that he felt selfish in refusing to have another child with his new partner. This emboldened a woman to share that she selfishly wanted another child, even though her husband was working double shifts to provide for the two they already had.

Leaving resource management to one's spouse meant that the spouse could be held accountable for bad decisions. Marta told me she was like a teenager, full of runaway emotions. It made her a good mother: she understood children. She had long dreamed of starting a parent-child center. After complaining a number of times about her dull office job, her husband told her to just leave it and follow her dream. And so she did. But the center went bankrupt within a year, leaving her unemployed and their savings gone. Thankfully, her husband got them back on their feet by taking on more assignments at work. According to Marta, he managed the finances for a few companies; she was not exactly sure, but it was very serious. Buying their apartment with a long-term mortgage was also his idea. Many years of being in debt frightened her, but she left financial decisions to him. Money matters were boring to her. She preferred to live in the moment with him and their children.

Most married women I met did more of the unwaged domestic work, while most of the married men earned more than their wives. Still, it was the budgeting and strategizing with respect to family resources that was the nexus of their emotional investments. This responsibility was so loaded precisely because of its exigency for securing the household's future and because of its open-ended and negotiated nature. Unlike the practically predetermined nature of other household tasks, men and women came to assume or evade this responsibility—often unwittingly, sometimes unsuccessfully, and almost always in a relative and evolving sense—in response to the changing circumstances of their extended families and to their partner's willingness to take charge.

The spouse that bore this responsibility also bore its emotional cost. This was true for Estella, who was so tightly wound that I tensed up just talking to her. She told me she could make the down payment on her apartment thanks to having lived with her parents until her thirties. She bought it without her life partner, and she was also ready to have a child without him, supported by her parents. The problem was his immaturity and unwillingness to settle down. Only once he realized she would leave him did he finally come around. Now, they have two children, and he takes his work seriously, returning home at six p.m. rather than stopping for drinks first. Still, he always wants to buy unnecessary things and go on vacations they can scarcely afford, forcing her to put her foot down more often than not.

Ester spoke about having this responsibility foisted upon her when she got divorced. Her parents helped with childcare, but she had to make all the decisions herself. She had taken over her ex-husband's share of the house, prolonging her mortgage debt. Her ex did not always transfer child-support payments on time, and, for the first time in her life, she had to pay a lot of attention to money. She had never been a spendthrift, she just never wasted time thinking about it, having always felt

economically at ease. After the divorce, she had to plan and budget. When you go through a divorce as a mother, she explained, you are put in charge and it forces you to grow up.

Carlos, in turn, was tormented by the thought of not doing enough for his sons. One had behavioral issues and the other had been recently diagnosed with a disability. His wife broke down. He was also devastated, but one of them had to keep it together. He worked overtime whenever he could. I never saw him not tired or overextended. His wife worked, too, but put in fewer hours. Also, she was like a child when it came to money. She knew she could always ask someone—she used to ask her parents, now she turned to him. Carlos, on the other hand, had worked since his teens and kept tabs on their income and expenses. He felt he had to set an example for his sons, in both work and fatherhood. At the same time, he would joke about having no say at home: his wife, the boys, even the dog had more agency than he did.

I would like to pause on this last point because—contrary to what one might expect—greater responsibility in managing household resources did not spell greater autonomy. On the contrary, it was more often the source of vulnerability. This vulnerability issued from a sense that, faced with insecurity, any false move would make the entire edifice of the household come crashing down. The emotional costs of responsibility were easy to sympathize with. It placed me, the ethnographer, in a paradoxical position. Politically, I felt strongly that no one ought to assume personal responsibility for demands that are structurally superimposed and that should at least be borne collectively. On principle, then, I sided with its refusal. Yet for every self-asserting free spirit I met, there was a parent or partner picking up the slack. I could not overlook how, as households are made almost singularly responsible for their members' fortunes, such refusal means burdening one's other family members with more than their fair share.

This experience clued me in to the diluting of possible work- and gender-based grievances. Since family had become the common reference point for responsibility, the refusal of this responsibility was viewed neither as a principled act nor as socially deviant but rather as selfish: putting one's own desires ahead of their dependents' genuine needs. This was the lens through which everyone interpreted their own shortcomings or those of their family members. In a context in which extended family resources and their management weighed highly in determining individual fortunes, the expectations that people had of each other were personalized, making their social and political stakes seem rarefied and distant. Whatever men and women would or would not do was, in fact, a family matter in the most immediate and practical sense, its effects rippling first and foremost through their own household. As such, it was politically meaningless.

## Conclusion

That inequality now hinges primarily on family assets and resources calls for an updating of social reproduction theory from its erstwhile focus on unwaged domestic work and the nuclear family to a contemporary analysis of distributive work and the extended family. Jane Collier and Sylvia J. Yanagisako (1987) have argued against transhistorical assumptions about gender and kinship. Taking gender and kinship to be mutually constructed, they have called instead for their understanding as historically evolving systems of inequality. I have attempted to do so here by exploring how traditional gender differences play out for family members in contemporary Spain.

The reproduction of capitalist society relies on waged workers providing not only for themselves but also for nonworkers. In advanced economies, much of this responsibility had been socialized during part of the twentieth century. But in recent decades, it has been reprivatized to be shouldered

primarily by families, their burden exacerbated by the devaluation of work and by austerity measures. The harder it is to make a living and help the next generation do the same, the greater the pressure that refamiliarization places on households. Each household is differently equipped to bear these costs in which extended family needs and resources loom large. Inequality hinges on family resources, sidelining waged work, and unwaged domestic work.

Waged work and domestic work remain deeply gendered in Spain. Yet their significance for households wanes in comparison to the distributive work of optimizing extended family resources. These resources include the capacity of grandparents to look after their grandchildren as opposed to their needing care themselves, and they include the property and assets they might share, gift, lend, or leave behind. Differences in spouse's extended family resources, and in the inclination or disinclination of each spouse to undertake their management, has become the nexus of inequality and key source of stress within each household, superseding the effects of gendered differences in waged and care work and cutting through any collective solidarities they might engender.

The urgency of optimizing household resources that are rarely sufficient for meeting all household needs, as well as the open-ended and negotiated nature of this distributive work, makes it fundamental to men's and women's self-understandings as adults and family members. Such internalization of external pressures acts against possible confrontation of waged workers with employers or of care workers with the retrenched state. The family serves as the ultimate arbiter of individual action: one family member's responsibility triggers another's selfishness, and vice versa. Whether and how anyone bears responsibility for their dependents is, in this sense, a family matter, far more pressingly than it is a social and political one.

### Acknowledgments

The research for this article was undertaken while I was a fellow at the Madrid Institute for Advanced Study, and I thank my colleagues there for their support. Thanks also to Natalia Buier and Matan Kaminer for excellent suggestions on an earlier draft of this article, and to the anonymous reviewers for excellent suggestions on later ones.

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

### Endnotes

- 1 I used the social platforms Amigos Madrid ([amigosmadrid.es](http://amigosmadrid.es)) and Meetup ([www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com)) to join activities and get-togethers in which men and women met and chatted in small groups.
- 2 Most were offered at public libraries and cultural centers by coaches, psychologists, and self-help gurus who used them to advertise their paid services; a few were offered by public and nonprofit mental health services or by the church.
- 3 For an analysis of how Collier's distinction between employment- and property-based inequality resurfaces in contemporary financialized Spain, see Weiss (2022).
- 4 After slow recovery from the 2008 crisis, the coronavirus pandemic has plunged Spain back into a healthcare and financial crisis, amplifying these pressures and setting off familiarist responses to them.

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