

# WORK-FAMILY BALANCE ISSUES AMONG CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONALS IN SPAIN

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While the topic has already been studied by the construction management research community, most empirical research has been carried out in Great Britain and Australia. Countries vary in the ways in which they address work-family issues, and the national context may affect workers' perceptions and experience of the work-family conflict. The goal of this paper is to explore the subject in a different cultural setting-Spain-. It reports a qualitative investigation on how qualified Spanish construction professionals perceive and experience reconciliation between the different spheres of their lives. Data were obtained via in-depth interviews to 40 qualified construction professionals. Results reveal that many participants do have difficulties in achieving a balance between work and family life, mainly because of irrational time-schedules and overwork. These perceptions are exacerbated in the case of women, while married men over 50 claim to have achieved a greater balance. Salaried participants, rather than self-employed professionals, who enjoy more flexibility, often report greater work-family conflict. Results are similar to those obtained through research carried out in Great Britain and Australia. This may indicate that, whatever the country, the structure and the culture of the construction industry, with its project-based nature of work, make difficult and hinder the achievement of work-family balance.

Keywords: construction professionals, qualitative research, Spain, work-life balance.

## INTRODUCTION

It is evident that the importance of work-family balance has increased world wide since the gradual incorporation of women into the workforce after the Second World War, but mainly during the last 30 years. As in many families both partners work, the relationship between work and family has become more apparent and complex. The traditional work model is represented by individuals working long hours without interference from family issues. The idea of the unencumbered worker with "zero drag" is the universal image of a worker and also one of the main structuring principles of the distribution of material privileges in society (Halrynjo, 2009). However, this assumption can no longer be applied to men and women in the current labour force. In fact, a widely defended thesis is that the various areas in which an individual moves are linked together and events in one area may "overflow" into other areas. Traditional work patterns permeating the culture of many companies are being increasingly questioned in the light of demographic changes and workers' expectations.

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Spain is one of the European countries with the longest working hours, both annually (1,635 hours in, 2006) and on a weekly basis (38.4 hours), above the EU-27 average (36.8 hours per week). On the other hand, 16.6% of Spanish employees have long-working hours (more than 48 hours per week), a similar proportion to that of employees in the whole EU-27 (16.9%). Illustrative is the fact that construction is one of the economic sectors where more employees spend long working hours (15.4%) (Eurofound, 2009). Furthermore, the Spanish construction industry is the least advanced economic sector regarding family-friendly specific measures offered by small and medium companies to their employees (Alegre *et al.*, 2007).

The rationalisation of working time is increasingly becoming part of the Spanish social debate, referring to issues such as achieving work-life balance, improving life quality and increasing productivity. However, as many firms still expect their employees to remain long hours at their place of work (presenteeism) and the Spanish living schedules are a far cry from the general trend in Europe (Brullet, 2010), the rationalisation of working time is a real challenge. In fact, Spanish idiosyncratic working hours (from 9 a.m. till 7/8 p.m., with a long break for lunch) increase the incidence of work-family conflict because there is a long 2 to 3 hour gap between school and office hours (Poelmans *et al.*, 2003).

Another special feature of the Spanish situation is the rapid increase of female workers that are being integrated in the workforce, one of the highest in Europe. Contrary to most countries, this has started only recently, right after Franco's era (1939-1975). This means that the transition from the traditional breadwinner model to the dual-earner household has taken place in a shorter period. As a consequence, the integration of female workers has also been much faster, which may be the cause of more inter-generation and gender-role conflicts (Poelmans *et al.*, 2003, Brullet, 2010).

Additionally, two barriers might be hindering an effective work-life balance in Spain. On the one hand we still have a traditional social model based on a gender division of roles. Spanish women do double work, being expected to assume the family and household duties while men are mainly devoted to remunerated employment outside home. In fact, according to the OECD social indicators for, 2011, Spain has the 6th highest gender gap in unpaid work (3 hours and 7 minutes per day compared to an average gap of 2 hours and 28 minutes) (OECD, 2011). On the other hand, the fear of enterprises towards work-life balance is still often seen as a threat for labour performance and competitiveness (Eurofound, 2009, Alegre *et al.*, 2007).

According to the distribution of responsibilities between the State, the market and the family, several welfare State regimes have been identified: the liberal, the social-democratic, the conservative-corporate and the Mediterranean. South-European countries such as Spain belong to the Mediterranean welfare regime, also known as "familialistic". This model views caring responsibilities as a private duty, and families (women) have assumed and played an important role in the dependent's care, while public administration just helps people under extreme circumstances or social exclusion (Brullet, 2010). In line with this, State provisions for families are much more limited in Spain than in other European countries. As a matter of fact, in, 2008 Spain expended 22.7% of GDP on social protection while the European Union assigned 26.4% (Eurostat, 2011). Family policy is very weak, as expenditures on social protection benefits have been largely allocated to pensions, sickness and unemployment. Spain has one of the lowest expenditure rates in family policies in the EU, which can be contrasted with a low fertility rate (Poelmans *et al.*, 2003).

As in most Latin and South-European countries, the family continues to be an important institution in the Spanish society. Indeed it compensates the lack of work/family policies, since the extended family is generally large, strong and pervasive, geographically closed, and very helpful and capable of providing a raft of support whenever a new baby arrives or an aging parent becomes sick. Coping strategies in Spain, congruent with family values, have been intergenerational solidarity through family networks, low fertility and relatively strong traditional family patterns. The assumption of a broad, supportive family network is embedded in social regulations and the functioning of public services, such as health and child care, which often presume a high availability of house wives willing and to provide help.

Work and family life balance in the construction industry has been examined with negative results in other nations. Given that the topics of work and family are deeply rooted in the culture of a society and in gender roles issues, some authors suggest the need for more international research (Burke *et al.*, 2011, Poelmans *et al.*, 2003). People work more hours in some countries, the amount of vacation time differs, the centrality of work, the importance of the family and the presence of dual-career couples varies across cultures and finally, governments also differ in their support for work-family integration. The approach to the issue differs among countries and national contexts, which may influence perceptions and experience of the work-family balance. In this sense, a wider and richer view could be provided by an analysis of how construction professionals balance work and family life in Spain.

## **WORK-FAMILY BALANCE IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY**

The balance of work and family life in construction management has already been studied by the research community. Participants under study have usually been civil engineers (Watts, 2009; Francis, 2004), architects (Caven and Raiden, 2010; Sang *et al.*, 2008 and, 2007; Caven, 2006; Fowler and Wilson, 2004), and construction professionals (Lingard and Francis, 2008; Lingard *et al.*, 2008; Dainty *et al.*, 2000). In addition, there are men-only studies (Francis, 2004), women-only studies (Watts, 2009; Caven, 2006; De Graft-Johnson *et al.*, 2005), as well as studies with both sexes (Caven and Raiden, 2010; Fowler and Wilson, 2004; Lingard and Francis, 2008; Sang *et al.*, 2008 and, 2007; Dainty and Lingard, 2006).

The majority of previous studies have employed quantitative methodologies using the questionnaire for data collection, although a few have used qualitative interviews (Caven and Raiden; 2010, Watts, 2009; Caven, 2006; Fowler and Wilson, 2004; Dainty *et al.*, 2000), and 'multi-method' or integrative research using both approaches (Sang *et al.*, 2008; Lingard *et al.*, 2008; Lingard and Francis, 2008; De Graft-Johnson *et al.*, 2005; Dainty and Lingard, 2006).

In general, the literature regarding the balance achieved by professionals working in the construction industry reveals negative results and confirms the difficulties experienced. The work-family conflict is particularly serious among those professionals working at construction sites (Lingard and Francis, 2004). The conflict is also negatively correlated with marital satisfaction and satisfaction with life in general (Francis, 2004). Moreover, some authors conclude that while family life is very likely to be influenced negatively by work, interference caused by family life at work has no significant impact. It seems that the key factor hindering balance is "long working hours" (Caven and Raiden, 2010; Watts, 2009; Lingard *et al.*, 2008; Caven, 2006; Dainty and Lingard, 2006; Fowler and Wilson, 2004; Francis, 2004; Dainty *et*

*al.*, 2000). In fact, some research in Australia has shown the positive effects on the work-family conflict of changing schedules at construction projects: limiting the working hours from Monday to Friday, and eliminating work on Saturdays (Lingard *et al.*, 2008).

We also found that professional women are rather pessimistic about balancing both areas. As their family responsibilities increase, women tend to reduce their involvement in work more than men (Lingard and Francis, 2008; Fowler and Wilson, 2004), and they adopt an approach of "either career or family". In short, women feel they must choose between a lifestyle oriented to work (long hours and mobility as required by the nomadic nature of the industry) and family (Dainty and Lingard, 2006; Fowler and Wilson, 2004; Lingard and Francis, 2008). The lack of "family-responsible" policies in architectural firms is one of the reasons that architects leave the profession (De Graft-Johnson *et al.*, 2005) or start their own businesses as freelancers (Watts, 2009; Caven, 2006). Sang *et al.*, (2007) concluded that women architects have poorer health, welfare, and job satisfaction than their male counterparts.

Most empirical research has been carried out in the UK and Australia. In fact, almost everything we know about the issue is based on studies of Anglo-Saxon white middle-class professionals. According to Hofstede's (1980) study on cross-cultural differences both the UK and Australia rank very high in cultural individualism indicating the supremacy of individual goals, emphasizing personal independence and autonomy (see Table 1). On the contrary, Spain shows much lower values for individualism. Australia and the UK also show relative lower values for the power distance index compared to Spain. This shows greater equality between societal levels, including government, organizations, and even within families.

Table 1. Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Ratings for Different Countries

	Power Distance	Individualism	Masculinity	Uncertainty Avoidance
Australia	36	90	61	51
UK	35	89	66	35
Spain	57	51	42	86
World Average	55	43	50	64

Source: Hofstede (1980)

Uncertainty avoidance index deals with a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. Australia and the UK, as opposed to Spain, are uncertainty-accepting cultures, meaning that they have a greater level of tolerance for a variety of ideas, thoughts, and beliefs and try to have as few rules as possible (see Table 1).

At last, masculinity accounts for the social division of roles between sexes. When a society is mainly "masculine", values and traits such as assertiveness, material success, self-centeredness, power, strength, and individual achievements exist through the society even for women. The opposite, "feminine" societies are more concerned with relationships, quality of life and the preservation of the environment. Australia and the UK fall under the category of more "masculine" cultures while Spain falls on the feminine side (see Table 1).

In short, Spanish culture compared to Australian and British cultures has relatively larger power distance and stronger uncertainty avoidance, is less individualistic and more feminine than masculine. It is in this specific context of a country with little support for the family, extended family supportive networks for childcare, increasing

and continuing integration of women in the labour force, and idiosyncratic working hours that we carried out our research.

## METHODS

In choosing the methodology, given the lack of Spanish existing literature, a grounded theory approach was selected in order to develop theory that emerged directly from the data. More specifically, a Glaserian approach was considered the most appropriate (Hunter and Kelly, 2008). In accordance with grounded theory principles, sampling was an emergent and ongoing process that evolved as the theory developed from the data. 40 construction professionals were recruited for the study through snowball sampling. The principle of saturation was applied for determining the sample size, deciding to stop interviewing when interviewees did not contribute with anything new (Goulding, 2009).

My position as lecturer at the School of Building Engineering of the UPV gave me direct access to a number of professionals in the construction industry. Participants were contacted via e-mail, and were sent a letter of introduction explaining the objectives and interest of the research. Most were interested in participating in the project.

Of the qualitative research methods used for data collection, narrated conversation was chosen in general, and in-depth unstructured interviews in particular. Interviewees were seen as “participants” in the research, actively shaping the course of the interview rather than passively responding to pre-set questions. These interviews were recorded and transcribed as soon as possible after they had taken place, and were analysed through a process of comparative analysis. This involved identifying recurring themes, patterns, similarities and importantly, differences (Goulding, 2009). No qualitative research software was used. Data were also broken down, conceptualised and categorised in order to reduce the large amount of material in text form.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The sample consisted of 27 men and 13 women., 20% of respondents were between, 20 and 29 years of age; 35% between 30 and 49; 25% between 50 and 59; and, 20% were over 60. 32.5% were childless, while 55% had between 2 and 4 children; and 12.5% had one child. 34 of the interviewees were building engineers, 3 were architects, and 3 held both qualifications. In relation to their occupations 62.5% were independent pro-fessionals leading projects and managing construction sites, and 37.5% were salaried professionals in construction companies or in engineering and architectural practices.

### The women's view

Almost all of the women interviewed acknowledged that balancing work and family life was a serious problem. In this sense, it was revealing that one woman architect and building engineer, with two very young children, chose to limit her working hours in order to combine family and work. She explained:

*"Society is not ready for a woman to combine work and motherhood. I have not given up my job a 100%, but I have given up a very high percentage. I used to do very big and interesting projects, (...) now I work less, I left all the big projects behind when I left the practice two years ago".*

The words of a 39 year-old former site manager and mother of a two- year-old child were also moving:

*"Do you know why I left the company? Because I wanted a child and I didn't want a family life with this job. Look, you can't have a family life if you are working from 8 in the morning until 10 at night, it's impossible! I remember the first years I would ask my colleagues at work "when do you see your children?" and they would reply "we try to take them to school because when we get home they are already asleep"."*

Both women represent dual-career families and their stories show the intensification of the conflict that occurs because both parents work. Families with two working partners are a variation of the nuclear family in which both partners pursue an uninterrupted career while having a family life that often includes children. Both partners must coordinate and balance work and family demands together. Another difficulty is that since most of these individuals did not grow up as children of dual-career parents they have no family experience that serves as a problem-solving framework. For these women the "options" for balancing work and family life are limited by the circumstances of their partners (Lingard and Francis, 2008).

Similarly to British women civil engineers (Watts, 2009), British women architects (Caven, 2006) and Australian professionals (Lingard and Francis, 2008), Spanish construction professionals have also chosen to readjust their time-schedules according to childbirth. This has meant giving up their professional development in the private sector as salaried employees working for contracting companies or for architectural practices. According to Cabrera (2009) they represent a "leaky pipeline" of women who voluntarily opt out of their careers or create new paths that enable them to combine the rigors of work and home life.

Although women have experienced an increase in the number of hours spent at work, this has not been accompanied by a reduction in the time spent on household tasks. On the contrary, an increase in paid work has occurred at the expense of a decrease in leisure time. Balancing the demands of two careers within the same family is a potential source of stress. Research indicates that having to play the three-fold role of parent-partner-employee, which often implies coping with incompatible demands can be a source of stress (Gracia *et al.*, 1996, De Graft-Johnson *et al.*, 2005). This is clearly illustrated in our interviews.

Only two women were not so negative about reconciling work and family life. Following Halrynjo's (2009) typology, both would be holding the "career position" in which work is interpreted as the source of meaning and self-absorption. One of them, aged 29, revealed that balancing the two was good since her partner also worked in construction, had the same timetable and sympathized. However, she acknowledged that if she had children life would be very complicated and she would not continue working for the same company. Her words foretell that in the future she will probably have to choose between "career and family" at the expense of her work. The other participant successfully combines work and family because "her husband only works part-time and so helps organise the family".

### **The traditional view of the elder**

The respondents with a more optimistic view on the subject and who perceive a balance between the different areas of their life are mostly men over 50. They relied on a traditional and gendered family organisation where the father was the "breadwinner" and the mother a housewife. These respondents stated: "there were two perfectly defined roles - my wife looked after the children and family while I worked" and "when children are small women keep busy". Obviously these men relied on the unconditional support of a woman who "is used to being alone at home" and

"understands that I will arrive late". Other comments include: "you have to put in your hours until 9 or 10 at night" or that "everything depends on how much the family needs". Therefore, at least in this case, the strategy followed has been the complete division of life spheres so as to prevent "overflows" from one sphere into the other. These participants illustrate well the traditional hegemonic position in Spanish working life, representing working time patterns with continuous full-time work and an absence of caring duties: the "career position" men outlined by Halrynjo (2009) which presupposes the care position (of the mother) in order to sustain itself.

But even within this group there exists the recognition of factors that may hinder the achievement of such a balance. The problem is evident when, with a touch of bitterness, some of the male respondents over 55 explained how quickly their children had grown, how little they enjoyed their children's childhood, and how few hugs were exchanged. The respondents accept that their children have grown up and it is now too late for solutions. In fact, these respondents are referring to the work-family conflict; and in many cases they suffer stress. In the words of a 63-year-old building engineer and father of three:

*"When I was younger I never saw my children as they grew up and that was crazy. Yet my generation understood this. We were like vampires, always returning at night. We worked Saturdays and did not have holidays (...) I always saw my daughter asleep. I left the house at 7 a.m. and when I returned my wife had already put her to bed".*

Other respondents pointed out that the balance changes over time. In the early years of a career the demands of work come first, but the balance begins to change with maturity and experience. However, part of that experience may include family tragedies that went unattended because of work. The following words of a 57-year-old manager of a contracting company illustrate this change:

*"The first years of work were difficult. You want to make your mark and become absolutely essential to the firm. I spent more and more time working and less time with the family. But later you discover the need to balance your life and you begin to organise your time more intelligently. Personal and family issues become more important. You learn to enjoy life and still manage to work hard".*

### **The self-employed versus the salaried professional**

From an analysis of the interviews we can infer another generalization: those self-employed professionals appear to have fewer problems balancing their professional and family lives than those working as salaried employees for construction or architectural firms. This is because the self-employed have the possibility to decide the amount of work they can handle, thus enjoying a greater flexibility in the management of their schedules than salaried professionals. This lends considerable support to Caven and Raiden's (2010) conclusion that there is a stark division between salaried and self-employed architects. The more rigid an employee's schedule the more difficult it is to meet the demands of family life – and so the greater the work-family conflict. In fact, flexible working hours are essential for mitigating the work-family conflict, and this reform is being adopted by some companies (Lingard *et al.*, 2008).

Curiously, Sang *et al.*, (2008) have outlined opposite results regarding work-life conflict (a different concept): that self-employed architects report greater concerns over their work-life balance than employed architects. Care has to be taken when comparing research results, since neither the professions nor the countries under study

were the same. Nevertheless, results might not be so different if both studies had focused on architects.

Spanish salaried professionals report that irrational working hours and overwork prevent them from enjoying free time and family life. The construction sector is sometimes described as "vampire-like" or as a "sponge", in terms of the hours worked. Since the Spanish working day is often divided into two halves with a long lunch break, when employees arrive home "there's no time for anything". In the words of one construction company manager: *"I do not have the time for relationships with the rest of the world, and I find this aspect increasingly complicated and difficult"*.

This strong commitment to the company through long working hours implies not only giving up time for the family, but also self-denial of the chance to socialize, practice sports, pursue hobbies or enjoy cultural activities. In summary, it affects the whole private and personal domain, not just the family.

Another building engineer with many years of experience in an architectural firm illustrates how indeed, many professionals work even at weekends:

*"Everything is out of balance, people work more hours than they should – starting at 8 a.m. and working until 9 p.m. If there is a tendering process nearing completion then we often work all night or through the weekends"*.

Four self-employed professionals also mentioned the negative aspects of holidays as they must stay and manage projects that continue through August (traditional holiday month in Spain) or return quickly from holiday destinations. In agreement with the results of Lingard *et al.* (2008), Caven (2006), and Dainty and Lingard (2006) these respondents have followed the traditional male career model of the unencumbered worker with "zero drag" that rewards full-time work and uninterrupted career paths – as well as working long hours and showing high levels of commitment to the firm. Construction salaried professionals also highlight the difficulty of balancing work and personal life when posted outside their hometown, or when they have to travel a lot. In fact, in the literature on work-family conflict these two factors (frequent travel and changes of residence for work reasons) are among the most significant (Gracia *et al.*, 1996). Living alone away from home was also described by a childless site manager:

*"The main problem is that I am away. I have been working away in the town of Elda for two years. There are many times when I'd rather be in the office than at home – alone in a rented flat and watching TV from the sofa"*.

In sharp contrast, two salaried building engineers (a man and a woman) have taken radical career decisions and abandoned their jobs as site managers in order to become University teachers. "Changing my job has been a great relief" said one. These personal career adjustments were done in search of a better work-family balance.

## CONCLUSIONS

More than half of the respondents believe it is very difficult to balance work and family life because of the irrationality of timetables and overwork. These perceptions are exacerbated in the case of women, while married men over 50 claim to have achieved a greater balance between the different areas of their lives. Salaried respondents face greater work-family conflict than self-employed professionals, who enjoy more flexibility.

In spite of the cultural differences, as described by Hofstede (1980), results reveal similar outcomes to those experienced by professionals in Britain and Australia. This



may indicate that the structure and culture of the construction industry make it difficult to achieve a work and family balance in any nation.

In today's competitive global market, the construction industry increasingly demands the complete and flexible availability of employees – especially in the private sector. There are also specific problems that hinder the introduction of flexible working practices: construction projects end within relatively short periods, projects are geographically dispersed and subject to very dynamic changes. This means that staffing decisions must be taken quickly and that employees must adapt themselves to meet the firm's changing needs. Despite dissatisfaction by employees, those who find strategies to integrate work and family life are stigmatized for breaking the rules of the profession. Long working hours and constant physical presence are seen as marks of excellence and commitment in Spanish employees. These values are difficult to alter in Spain, especially in an industry that has proven very resistant to change. Nevertheless, there are many who support the need for cultural change.

In, 2007, the "Asociación Española para la Calidad" (Spanish Quality Association) stated certain key proposals for the Spanish construction industry of the 21st century. It recommended that an effort be made to balance work and family life. There is the need to develop and adopt flexible working patterns that reflect the needs of a new and more diverse workforce. These models should be adapted to the expectations of various groups of employees in accordance with their age, life stage, family structure, and gender. However, unless a deep cultural change is made, the simple implementation of policies for achieving a better balance between personal life and work will not reduce the conflict between them for people in the industry.

One limitation of this research is that the interviewed men in the sample are, on average, some ten years older than the women. This could influence the experiences reported – as it is common for older Spanish men to have partners who are housewives. In this sense, further studies require a more balanced sample in terms of gender and age. Furthermore, since this work is trans-sectional in nature it was not possible to explore how the strategies used to achieve a balance between work and family changed over the life-cycle of the respondents. Longitudinal studies should be carried out to better understand the complexity of the issue.

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