

Lesbian and heterosexual Spanish and Swedish couples: Division of labor and life-satisfaction

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Abstract

Objective: To compare the distribution of housework and childcare and satisfaction with work-life balance resources among female same-sex and different-sex parenting couples in Spain and Sweden, and their association with life satisfaction.

Background: Same-sex couples have generally reported higher levels of co-responsibility than their different-sex counterparts in terms of housework and childcare. It has yet to be determined whether these differences are maintained in countries with different public gender equality and family policies.

Method: Structured interviews were held with 154 mothers who lived with their partner and had children under 13 years of age: 89 from Spain (65 with different-sex partners and 24 with same-sex partners) and 65 from Sweden (27 with different-sex partners and 38 with same-sex partners). Interviews focused on the distribution within the couple of housework and childcare, problems related to work-life balance, satisfaction with work-life balance resources and life satisfaction.

Results: Differences were observed in the division of labor between same-sex and different-sex couples in Spain but not in Sweden. Spanish different-sex couples reported a less equal distribution of housework and childcare than their Swedish counterparts. Same-sex couples were as equal in their division of labor in Spain as in Sweden. Satisfaction with housework distribution and personal time availability positively predicted life satisfaction, whereas problems related to work-life balance negatively predicted it.

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Conclusion: Female same-sex couples, in the microsystem, and public gender equality policies in the macro-system, are encouraging a process of “de-gendering” of family labor, promoting co-responsibility in couples, and thereby fostering their psychological well-being.

KEYWORDS

childcare, different-sex couples, housework, life satisfaction, same-sex couples

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, we have witnessed a rise in the number of same-sex parent families, particularly following the recent legal recognition of this type of family unit in many different countries (Cortina & Festy, 2020). The increased visibility and more widespread presence of same-sex parent families have prompted researchers to rethink the heteronormative approaches from which families have been viewed and studied in the past (Allen & Mendez, 2018). Certain aspects of family functioning that had hitherto been taken for granted, such as the distribution of housework and childcare, are now being questioned. These tasks have always been deeply and institutionally linked to gender, not only because they were assigned to women in the patriarchal culture, but also because they recreate and perpetuate the construction of gender itself. As women do housework and look after the children (and men do not), they are “doing” gender (Berk, 1985; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

In light of the above, it is interesting to analyze how housework and childcare are distributed within same-sex parenting couples, in comparison with their different-sex counterparts. This comparison will enable a rethinking of the value and meaning of said distribution in couples who, a priori, are not impelled to act in accordance with this gender differentiation (Goldberg, 2013). New nuances may also be added by comparing the situation in countries with different family and gender equality policies, thereby enabling the analysis to take into account the combined influence of the sociocultural or macro-system context, thus following the principles the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This theory postulates the need to take into consideration the hierarchy of interrelated systems in which human development takes place, the most remote and involving of which is the macro-system (which includes beliefs systems, laws, public policies, socioeconomic situation, etc.). Social constructionist views of gender are also relevant to this analysis, since it postulates that gender as being shaped by the institutions and sociocultural context (Risman, 2004) and also by everyday interactions, as the Gender-As-Relational approach explains (Thomeer et al., 2020).

BACKGROUND

Division of labor among different-sex and same-sex couples

The increasing incorporation of women into paid work has triggered deep-rooted changes in the sexual division of labor among different-sex couples since women are no longer available all the time for housework and childcare, as reflected in the sharp drop in their dedication to these tasks over recent decades (Altintas & Sullivan, 2016). Although one may expect this situation to result in the corresponding involvement of men in unpaid work, this is not occurring at the same pace. Indeed, although the tendency in these families is to divide paid and unpaid work

in an increasingly less traditional manner, women continue to spend significantly more time than men engaging in housework and childcare (see Blair, 2013; Rashmi & Kataria, 2021; Sullivan, 2018, for reviews).

However, studies focusing on same-sex parent families have found that these couples tend to share housework, childcare and breadwinner tasks significantly more equally than their different-sex counterparts (see Brewster, 2017; Goldberg, 2013; Murphy et al., 2021, for reviews). These differences between same-sex and different-sex couples in terms of equality in the division of housework and childcare were reported in some of the earliest studies in this field, carried out during the nineteen-nineties with (mainly) female same-sex mothers with biological children (Chan et al., 1998; Tasker & Golombok, 1998), and continue to be observed in more recent research conducted with much larger and more diverse samples (Farr & Patterson, 2013; Goldberg et al., 2012; Jaspers & Verbakel, 2013; Martell & Roncolato, 2020; Patterson et al., 2004; Perlesz et al., 2010; Smart et al., 2017; Tornello et al., 2015), or which combine databases from seven different countries (Bauer, 2016).

In short, one is more likely to find differentiated patterns or a disproportionate distribution of housework and childcare among different-sex parent families, and more equal patterns and fairer distributions among their same-sex counterparts. To understand the origin of these differences, qualitative studies carried out with same-sex couples have shown how they contest heteronormative prescriptions and deconstruct assigned gender roles (Dalton & Bielby, 2000) and how they organize task distribution based on the time availability, sensitivities, preferences and skills of each partner (Kamano, 2009; Perlesz et al., 2010). This distribution does not result in the specialization of one member of the couple in household tasks that are traditionally considered to be female and the other in activities traditionally seen as male; rather, the division of domestic labor is based on the singularities of each couple (Dalton & Bielby, 2000; Goldberg et al., 2012), as well as on an ideological base that appreciates and aspires to equality in the relationship (Patterson et al., 2004) or invokes the principles of distributive justice (Esmail, 2010).

It is interesting to point out, however, that some studies have found less egalitarian patterns in the distribution of housework and childcare within some same-sex parenting couples (Auber, 2017; Goldberg et al., 2012). These patterns appear to be associated with (among other factors) differences in the demands of each partner's job (Sutphin, 2010), in income (Goldberg et al., 2012) or in status between the biological mother and the stepmother in female same-sex stepfamilies (Moore, 2008). In any case, comparative studies between same-sex and different-sex couples continue to indicate that, in general, the distribution of household tasks is more equal in the former than in the latter. It is likely that this comparative analysis requires an approach that takes into account a range of different angles and adds important nuances (Goldberg, 2013).

Sociocultural context and distribution of housework and childcare

So far, we have explored families' distribution of housework and childcare as if it were something separate from the sociocultural framework in which they live. However, studies carried out with different-sex couples over the past two decades have shown that differences in the time spent on said tasks by men and women vary substantially from one couple to another and that these differences at the microlevel are linked, to a large extent, to differences at the macro-level, particularly in terms of gender empowerment or gender equality policy (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017; Fuwa, 2004; Ruppanner, 2010; Stier & Lewin-Epstein, 2007). It seems clear that different sociocultural contexts project different expectations about gender roles in the domestic sphere, and they socially and legally reinforce certain types of behavior, while rejecting or punishing others (Risman, 2004; Sullivan, 2018).

In Europe, Nordic countries have typically had a smaller gap between men and women in terms of the time spent by each gender on housework and childcare than Mediterranean

nations, in which women spend twice as much time as men on these tasks (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017; Gálvez-Muñoz et al., 2011). In terms of evolution over time, analyses of how the housework and childcare patterns of men and women have changed over recent decades have reported a certain degree of convergence, although the process has occurred much more quickly in Nordic countries than in Mediterranean nations (Altintas & Sullivan, 2016; Yee et al., 2011). This is not a coincidence, since Mediterranean and Nordic countries represent opposing regimes in terms of public gender equality and family policies, with Nordic nations having many public strategies and services designed to foster co-responsibility in housework and childcare (Evertsson, 2014), whereas in the Mediterranean region, these policies are much scarcer and more recent, and support from the extended family plays a much greater role in achieving a good work-life balance (Gálvez-Muñoz et al., 2011; Meil, Díaz-Gandasegui, et al., 2021).

To the best of our knowledge, the study by van der Vleuten et al. (2021) is the only one that has compared the distribution of household tasks in same-sex couples from six different countries. They found no difference in the distribution of housework between same-sex couples living in countries which showed different degrees of egalitarianism, according to the Gender Empowerment Measure index, an indicator of women's economic power, participation in politics and their access to professional opportunities.

The extant scientific literature therefore suggests that although gender equality policies are associated with a more equal distribution of housework and childcare among different-sex couples, this effect has not been observed among same-sex couples, although further research is required to confirm this.

Work-life balance, division of labor and psychological well-being

Being able to cope with the challenges of achieving a good work-life balance or, on the contrary, feeling overwhelmed by them, is reflected in the psychological well-being of parents who must struggle daily to achieve this difficult balance. In this sense, the results of the First European Quality of Life Survey (Eurofound, 2005) revealed that European citizens who perceived more difficulties coping with family responsibilities or who spent less time than they would like on family and social relationships had lower levels of life satisfaction. Other cross-national studies have confirmed these results, adding that this relationship is moderated by the level of gender equity in society, such that high levels of work-life balance were more positively associated with life satisfaction and more negatively associated with anxiety for individuals in gender egalitarian cultures (Haar et al., 2014; Riva et al., 2019).

The division of labor in the couple has also been related to psychological well-being of its members. Empirical evidence indicates that being in an equal romantic partnership with a fair distribution of tasks or, on the contrary, having an unfair and disproportionate distribution of household labor has consequences for individual and relational well-being (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Ryjova et al., 2022; Sutphin, 2010).

Interestingly, the extant scientific literature suggests that it is not a fair or unfair distribution of housework and childcare in objective terms that impacts psychological well-being or distress, but rather the individual's subjective perception of the fairness or unfairness of this distribution. One is more likely to find evidence of anxiety, depression or psychological distress among women who feel that the distribution of housework and childcare in their family is unfair (Claffey & Mickelson, 2009; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2004; Haar et al., 2014), and more likely to find evidence of psychological well-being among those who claim to feel satisfied with said distribution (Ryjova et al., 2022; Tornello, 2020; Tornello et al., 2015).

THE PRESENT STUDY

According to the extant literature, there is a fair body of empirical evidence attesting to the similarities and differences between female same-sex and different-sex couples in terms of division of labor. Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have yet sought to determine whether these similarities and differences are also present in countries with different sociocultural frameworks in relation to public family support and gender equality policies.

For this reason, we conducted a study to determine the work-life balance and division of labor strategies applied in female same-sex and different-sex couples in Spain and Sweden. This study was part of a larger project funded by the European Union about reconciliation strategies in family diversity. Governmental institutions from Spain and Sweden were involved in this European Project, although the study was led by the Spanish team signing this paper.

Sweden and Spain, although geographically distant (being located in the north and south of Europe, respectively), nevertheless have certain aspects in common. They were two of the first countries to legalize marriage between people of the same sex (Spain, in 2005 and Sweden, in 2009) and both have a high level of social acceptance of LGBTI people, with Sweden topping the ranking of European countries in this regard and Spain being ranked third (European Commission, 2019). There are certain differences, however. They have very different regimes in terms of gender equality and family support (Gálvez-Muñoz et al., 2011; Meil, Díaz-Gandasegui, et al., 2021), as evident in two key indicators. First, expenditure on family/child benefits relative to gross domestic product is 2.9% in Sweden, as opposed to 1.3% in Spain (Eurostat, 2022). And second, Sweden is the country with the 4th lowest inequality rating in the world (with respect to the Gender Inequality Index), whereas Spain has the 14th lowest rating (UNDP, 2022). Indeed, studies focusing on the distribution of tasks within different-sex couples have found that, in Spain, although progress is being made in relation to equality, there is still a clear gender gap in terms of the hours that men and women spend on housework and care tasks (Borrás et al., 2021). In Sweden, on the other hand, following years of gender equality policies, these differences are now much smaller (Alsarve et al., 2016; Thomas & Hildingsson, 2009). In relation to the psychological well-being of the population, life satisfaction and happiness analyses rank Sweden very highly in Europe (in 5th place), whereas Spain is located under the mean, in 16th place (Eurofound, 2017).

This study had a twofold aim. First, it sought to analyze the similarities and differences between mothers with same-sex and different-sex partners in Spain and Sweden in terms of their perceived division of labor in housework and childcare, their satisfaction with that division and the different work-life balance resources available, and their perception of having problems achieving a good work-life balance. Second, the study aimed to explore the role of factors such as country, type of couple, division of labor, problems related to work-life balance, satisfaction with the division of labor and work-life balance resources in mothers' level of life satisfaction.

Our theoretical framework and the relevant literature led us to pose several hypotheses. In relation to the first aim, we expected to find a more equal distribution of housework and childcare among same-sex couples than among different-sex ones (Brewster, 2017; Murphy et al., 2021); we also expected to find a more equal distribution among Swedish different-sex couples than among their Spanish counterparts (Altintas & Sullivan, 2016), although we did not expect to find differences between same-sex couples from Spain and Sweden (van der Vleuten et al., 2021).

In relation to the second aim, we expected to find higher levels of life satisfaction among mothers who were more satisfied with the division of labor in their couples (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Tornello, 2020), as well as among those who reported fewer problems linked to achieving a good work-life balance and who claimed to feel more satisfied with available work-life balance resources (Haar et al., 2014; Riva et al., 2019). However, we did not know whether these conditions would take precedence over being part of a same-sex or different-sex couple, or living in Spain or Sweden.

METHOD

Participants

The sample comprised 154 mothers, 62 with a same-sex partner (24 from Spain and 38 from Sweden) and 92 with a male partner (65 from Spain and 27 from Sweden). All complied with the following inclusion criteria and had done for at least a year: both members of the couple were working at the time of the study; the couple had been in their current family situation for at least a year; they lived alone with their children, with no other family members; and all their children were under 13 years of age. This age limit was chosen because, after it, with the transition to Secondary Education, a phase begins in which most families tend to reduce behavioral control and promote greater autonomy in their children (for instance, go to school alone) (Lionetti et al., 2019).

The mothers interviewed were Spanish and Swedish natives. In different-sex couples, the interviewee was always the mother; in same-sex couples, interviews were held with the mother who spent most time with the children. In the event of both mothers spending the same amount of time with their children, one member of the couple was chosen at random. In the case of Spain, the families were from the Andalusia region, whereas the Swedish families interviewed came from the Stockholm region. The mean age of the mothers participating in the study was 39 years ($SD = 5.86$); participants had a mean of 1.65 children, and the mean age of their children was 4.97 years ($SD = 3.14$). They worked an average of 35.14 hours per week ($SD = 7.12$) and the majority (60.4%) had a university education. A higher percentage of mothers with a same-sex partner had a high education level (i.e., high school diploma or university degree) than mothers with a different-sex partner ($\chi^2 = 8.16$; $p = .04$; $V = 0.23$). Similarly, a higher percentage of mothers from Spain had primary or secondary school level qualifications than mothers from Sweden ($\chi^2 = 31.26$; $p < .001$; $V = 0.45$).

In relation to their partners, the mean age was 38 years ($SD = 5.86$), and 57.1% had a university qualification. Partners worked an average of 40.55 hours per week ($SD = 8.59$). Among participants with same-sex partners, no statistically significant differences were found between the number of hours worked by the mothers interviewed and the number of hours worked by their partners in either Spain ($t = .42$; $p = .68$) or Sweden ($t = .97$; $p = .33$). Significant differences were found, however, among Spanish different-sex couples, with the mothers interviewed claiming to work fewer hours than their male partners ($t = 7.85$; $p < .001$); this difference was not observed in Sweden ($t = 1.53$; $p = .13$).

Instruments

A structured interview was designed ad hoc for the study. The interview contained mainly closed-ended questions, but also some open-ended ones that were designed to be easily and directly coded by interviewers (e.g., people involved in daily childcare). The questions were drafted following a review of the extant literature, inspired by previous instruments (Cowan & Cowan, 1990; European Communities, 2009) but adapting them to the objectives of the present study. Once designed, they were tested to confirm that they could be correctly understood and could be asked and answered within the estimated interview time. The interview focused on the following dimensions:

Daily childcare tasks: To determine the distribution of labor in daily childcare tasks, the following question was asked: "In your family, who takes care of the children in each of these daily life situations? Please list all those involved in these situations: caring for children before going to school (hygiene, breakfast), taking/bringing the children to school; lunch time; supervising homework; dealing with extracurricular and leisure activities; dinner time; and bedtime routines."

Occasional childcare tasks: The question asked was: “In your family, who takes care of the children in the following special situations? Please list all those involved in these situations: taking care of a children when they are sick, during school holidays and strikes at school, when the regular carer is not available, when/if you travel for work reasons, or when/if your partner travels for work reasons; taking the children to the doctor; attending school meetings; when/if you work during the weekend; when/if your partner works during the weekend.”

Housework: The question asked was. “Please could you tell me who performs the following tasks at home? Preparing food; washing the dishes; making minor repairs at home; vacuum cleaning or moping the floor; taking out the trash; domestic shopping; paying bills, washing clothes; writing letters; calling family or friends; car care; pet care; and caring for plants or the garden.”

In the three dimensions outlined above (daily and occasional childcare tasks and housework), only those tasks that were carried out by the interviewee and her partner were taken into account, as these were the object of this study. In all cases, differential scores were calculated with the number of tasks carried out by the partner being subtracted from the number carried out by the interviewee. Positive differential scores therefore indicated that interviewees performed more tasks than their partners, with higher scores indicating a greater degree of inequality in the distribution of housework and childcare.

Problems related to work-life balance: The question asked was: “Would you say that, in general, you have problems striking a good work-life balance? Please answer on a scale from 1 (*I have no problems*) to 5 (*I frequently have problems*).”

Satisfaction with childcare resources: The following question was asked: “On a scale from 1 (*extremely dissatisfied*) to 5 (*extremely satisfied*), to what extent are you satisfied with the resources or people who help you care for your children?”

Satisfaction with the work-life balance measures offered by their companies: The following question was asked: “On a scale from 1 (*extremely dissatisfied*) to 5 (*extremely satisfied*), to what extent are you satisfied with the work-life balance measures offered to you by your company?”

Satisfaction with the distribution of housework in their family: The question asked was: “On a scale from 1 (*extremely dissatisfied*) to 5 (*extremely satisfied*), to what extent are you satisfied with the distribution of housework between you and your partner?”

Satisfaction with personal time: This was explored through the question: “On a scale from 1 (*extremely dissatisfied*) to 5 (*extremely satisfied*), to what extent are you satisfied with the personal time that you have?”

Life satisfaction: this variable was evaluated using the Swedish and Spanish versions (both validated) of the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) by Diener et al. (1985). This scale comprises 5 items (for example: “In most ways my life is close to my ideal”) rated on a scale of 1 to 7, with higher mean scores indicating higher levels of life satisfaction. The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .76.

Procedure

Andalusian mothers with same-sex partners were contacted through several LGTB associations. All mothers that met the criteria and were contacted agreed to participate. Andalusian mothers with different-sex partners were recruited through different pathways. First, we contacted 35 mothers who had taken part in a previous study (Díez et al., 2021), although only 11 of these agreed to participate. Consequently, we decided to use to a nonprobabilistic snowball sampling method, using those mothers who had already agreed to participate as our starting point. These participants put us in contact with other mothers in different-sex couples who met the inclusion criteria. A further 54 mothers were recruited using this method.

In Sweden, participants were randomly selected using SPAR, the Swedish State Personal Address Register, from among those who met the criteria. Both sample selection and data collection were carried out by a specialist Swedish enterprise that provided no information about mothers who declined the invitation to participate.

All participants were interviewed in their mother tongue (Spanish or Swedish) by experts in the topic who had received prior training. Interviews were held over the telephone and lasted for between 20 and 30 min. The anonymity and confidentiality of the data were guaranteed in accordance with the legislative resolution of the European Parliament (2014) on the processing of personal data.

Statistical analysis

The SPSS V.26 statistical software package was used for all the statistical analyses.

To explore the similarities and differences between same-sex and different-sex couples in Spain and Sweden, multivariate analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were performed, in which mothers' education level was entered as a covariate, since differences were found in relation to this variable both between the two countries and between the two types of couple included in the study. To explore the relationship between life satisfaction and division of labor, problems related to work-life balance, and satisfaction with work-life balance resources and personal time, two different types of analysis were performed. Firstly, correlation analyses were carried out with the whole sample and also with each subsample, combining country and type of couple, and secondly, a linear regression analysis was performed using the hierarchical regression method and including life satisfaction as a dependent variable. In the first step, we included education level as a control variable, and in the second step, we included type of couple (same-sex or different-sex) and country (Spain or Sweden) as independent variables. In the final step, we also included division of labor measures, problems related to work-life balance, satisfaction with work-life balance resources and personal time as independent variables.

RESULTS

Similarities and differences between same-sex and different-sex couples in Spain and Sweden

As shown in Table 1, analyses of covariance revealed that the mothers in same-sex couples in our study perceived a significantly fairer distribution of daily and occasional childcare tasks (with a medium effect size in both cases), and housework (with a small effect size) than mothers in different-sex couples. Similarly, mothers in different-sex couples perceived more problems related to work-life balance than their same-sex counterparts, with a small effect size. Finally, mothers in same-sex couples expressed a significantly higher level of satisfaction with the distribution of housework than their different-sex counterparts, with a large effect size.

In relation to country, as shown also in Table 1, Swedish mothers reported a significantly fairer distribution of both daily and occasional childcare tasks than Spanish ones (with a large and small effect size, respectively) and of housework (small effect size). Swedish mothers also perceived a significantly lower number of problems related to work-life balance (medium effect size) than Spanish mothers. In terms of satisfaction, Swedish mothers reported significantly higher levels of perceived satisfaction with the distribution of housework (large effect size) and with the personal time they had available to them (medium effect size), as well as higher levels of life satisfaction (small effect size).

TABLE 1 Division of labor and satisfaction variables by couple type and country.

	Couple type		ANCOVA ^a			Country			ANCOVA ^a		
	Different-sex (N = 92) M (SD)	Same-sex (N = 62) M (SD)	F	p	η^2 ^b	Spain (N = 89) M (SD)	Sweden (N = 65) M (SD)	F	p	η^2 ^b	
Daily childcare differential ^b	1.62 (2.22)	0.03 (1.79)	20.11	<.01	0.12	1.58 (2.45)	0.15 (1.52)	17.03	<.01	0.10	
Occasional childcare differential ^b	1.24 (1.73)	0.19 (1.27)	16.48	<.01	0.09	1.18 (1.65)	0.32 (1.51)	10.73	<.01	0.06	
Housework differential ^b	1.31 (2.63)	0.48 (1.51)	4.49	.03	0.03	1.42 (2.34)	0.37 (1.52)	10.37	<.01	0.06	
Problems linked to work-life balance ^c	2.46 (1.27)	2.09 (1.33)	3.99	.04	0.02	2.73 (1.27)	1.75 (1.13)	25.06	<.01	0.14	
Satisfaction with childcare resources ^c	4.05 (1.04)	4.26 (0.93)	1.62	.20	0.01	4.10 (1.00)	4.19 (1.01)	.25	.61	0.00	
Satisfaction with measures in company ^c	3.34 (1.19)	3.33 (1.25)	0.04	.33	0.00	3.23 (1.18)	3.49 (1.25)	1.72	.19	0.01	
Satisfaction with distribution of housework ^c	3.69 (1.28)	4.74 (0.65)	33.35	<.01	0.18	3.71 (1.28)	4.66 (0.75)	27.66	<.01	0.15	
Satisfaction with personal time ^c	3.15 (1.24)	3.53 (1.23)	3.51	.06	0.02	2.92 (1.14)	3.83 (1.22)	22.40	<.01	0.13	
Life satisfaction ^d	5.34 (0.97)	5.75 (0.77)	7.12	<.01	0.04	5.32 (0.91)	5.76 (0.87)	9.27	<.01	0.05	

Note: Eta squared: small (.01–.06), medium (.06–.14), large (>.14) (Fritz et al., 2012). Differential scores were calculated, with the number of tasks carried out by the partner being subtracted from the number carried out by the interviewee.

^aEducation level as covariate.

^b>0: Mothers interviewed perform more tasks than their partners.

^c>0: 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 5 (extremely satisfied).

^d–1 to 7 scale: 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to (extremely satisfied).

Analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) performed separately for each country (Table 2) revealed that, in Spain, same-sex couples had a significantly fairer distribution of daily (medium effect size) and occasional (small effect size) childcare tasks than their different-sex counterparts. Moreover, also in Spain, mothers from same-sex couples had significantly higher levels of perceived satisfaction with the distribution of housework (large effect size) and greater life satisfaction (small effect size). In Sweden, however, no significant differences were found between same-sex and different-sex couples for any of the variables studied, except for distribution of occasional childcare tasks, in which mothers from same-sex couples reported a fairer distribution than their different-sex counterparts, with a medium effect size. The multivariate analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) performed separately for each type of couple, in accordance with country of residence (Table 2), revealed that Spanish mothers with different-sex partners had a higher childcare differential (medium effect size) and reported significantly more problems linked to work-life balance (large effect size) and lower levels of satisfaction with the distribution of housework (large effect size), personal time available (medium effect size), and life satisfaction (medium effect size) than Swedish ones. Among mothers with same-sex partners, the only statistically significant difference found between Spain and Sweden was in the occasional childcare differential (medium effect size), in which scores were fairer in Sweden than in Spain.

Relationship between division of labor, work-life balance and life satisfaction

In light of the differences found between the two countries, correlation analyses were carried out separately for each country between division of labor, problems related to work-life balance, satisfaction with work-life balance resources and personal time and life satisfaction.

As can be seen in Table 3, the bivariate correlations carried out with the total sample showed that all the studied variables, except the occasional childcare differential score, correlated significantly with life satisfaction. All the differential scores and the perceived problems of work-life balance correlated negatively with life satisfaction, while all the satisfaction variables correlated positively with it.

Analyzing the correlations within the subsamples studied, we found that, in the case of Spanish mothers with a different-sex partner, the bivariate correlations revealed (Table 3) that the life satisfaction correlated positively with their satisfaction with their personal time and satisfaction with available childcare resources, and negatively with problems related to work-life balance and the differential scores for childcare and housework. In the case of same-sex partner mothers, life satisfaction only correlated with satisfaction with their personal time.

With respect to Swedish mothers (Table 3), bivariate correlations showed that the life satisfaction of different-sex partner mothers correlated positively with their satisfaction with the work-life balance measures in their company and negatively with problems related to work-life balance. However, any significant correlation was found between the studied variables and the life satisfaction of the mothers with same-sex partners.

After carrying out the correlation analyses, we selected all the variables for which an association was observed with life satisfaction in either Spain or Sweden. To this end, a hierarchical regression analysis was performed to determine to what extent country, type of couple, fair/unfair distribution of childcare and housework, problems related to work-life balance and the different satisfaction measures (with care resources, work-life balance measures in companies, distribution of housework and personal time) were associated with life satisfaction (Table 4). Model 2, which explained 11% of the variability observed in life satisfaction, revealed that country correlated significantly with life satisfaction, with living in Sweden being significantly associated with higher levels of this variable, once education level had been controlled for. However, neither type of couple (same-sex/different-sex) nor the interaction between country and type of couple were associated with life satisfaction. As shown in Model 3, the incorporation

TABLE 2 Division of labor and satisfaction variables by couple type X country.

	Spain		Sweden		ANCOVA ^a Spain SS-DS		ANCOVA ^a Sweden SS-DS		ANCOVA ^a Different-sex SP-SW		ANCOVA ^a Same-sex SP-SW					
	DS (N = 65) M(SD)	SS (N = 24) M(SD)	DS (N = 27) M(SD)	SS (N = 38) M(SD)	F	p	η^b	F	p	η^b	F	p				
Daily childcare differential ^b	2.07 (2.42)	0.25 (2.08)	0.52 (1.36)	-0.10 (1.59)	9.20	<.01	0.09	2.63	.11	0.04	6.21	.01	0.06	0.93	.33	0.01
Occasional childcare differential ^b	1.41 (1.65)	0.54 (1.50)	0.81 (1.88)	-0.02 (1.07)	4.95	.03	0.05	5.21	.02	0.07	1.11	.30	0.01	5.05	.03	0.08
Housework differential ^b	1.70 (2.46)	0.66 (1.81)	0.37 (1.82)	0.36 (1.30)	2.21	.14	0.02	0.01	.92	0.00	3.86	.05	0.04	0.41	.52	0.00
Problems linked to work-life balance ^c	2.83 (1.26)	2.45 (1.28)	1.59 (0.74)	1.86 (1.33)	2.88	.09	0.03	0.88	.35	0.01	26.23	<.01	0.23	3.48	.06	0.05
Satisfaction with childcare resources ^c	4.00 (1.09)	4.37 (0.64)	4.18 (0.92)	4.19 (1.09)	2.74	.10	0.03	0.01	.97	0.00	0.75	.39	0.01	0.55	.45	0.01
Satisfaction with measures in company ^c	3.29 (1.23)	3.08 (1.06)	3.46 (1.10)	3.51 (1.37)	0.17	.67	0.00	0.04	.84	0.00	0.82	.36	0.01	1.70	.19	0.03
Satisfaction with distribution of housework ^c	3.36 (1.31)	4.66 (0.48)	4.48 (0.75)	4.78 (0.74)	19.32	<.01	0.18	2.73	.10	0.04	14.33	<.01	0.14	0.50	.48	0.00
Satisfaction with personal time ^c	2.83 (1.16)	3.16 (1.05)	3.92 (1.10)	3.76 (1.30)	1.13	.29	0.01	0.23	.63	0.00	15.18	<.01	0.14	3.49	.06	0.05
Life satisfaction ^d	5.18 (0.92)	5.69 (0.77)	5.74 (0.99)	5.78 (0.78)	4.20	.04	0.04	0.08	.77	0.00	5.85	.01	0.06	0.17	.68	0.00

Note: Eta squared: small (.01-.06), medium (.06-.14), large (>.14) (Fritz et al., 2012). SS: Same Sex, DS: Different Sex, Sp: Spain, Sw: Sweden. Differential scores were calculated, with the number of tasks carried out by the partner being subtracted from the number carried out by the interviewee.

^aEducation level as covariate.

^b>0: Mothers interviewed perform more tasks than their partners.

^c1-5 scale: 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 5 (extremely satisfied).

^d1-7 scale: 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 7 (extremely satisfied).

TABLE 3 Correlation analyses of the main study variables with life satisfaction.

	Life satisfaction				
	Total	Spain		Sweden	
		Different sex	Same sex	Different sex	Same sex
Daily child care differential	-.19*	-.22	.18	.12	.01
Occasional childcare differential	-.08	.10	.32	-.34	.02
Housework differential	-.18*	-.25	.11	.08	.03
Problems linked to work-life balance	-.39**	-.46**	.01	-.41*	-.28
Satisfaction with childcare resources	.16*	.34**	.27	-.14	-.10
Satisfaction with measures in company	.18*	.12	.02	.41*	.23
Satisfaction with distribution of housework	.33**	.24	.11	.30	.13
Satisfaction with personal time	.35**	.35**	.41**	.26	.14

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 4 Hierarchical linear regression analysis of main variables on life satisfaction.

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	ΔR^2	<i>rs</i> ²
Model 1					.00		
Educat. level	.12	.16	.06	.44			0.00
Model 2					.11	.11**	
Educat. level	.04	.15	.02	.74			0.00
Couple type	1.53	.78	.82	.01			0.02
Country	-1.17	.47	-.63	.00			0.05
Couple type \times country	-.51	.31	-.88	.10			
Model 3					.32	.21**	
Educat. level	.16	.14	.08	.27			0.01
Couple type	.55	.74	.29	.46			0.00
Country	-.29	.16	-.16	.99			0.00
Couple type \times country	-.20	.29	-.34	.49			0.00
Daily child care diff.	-.01	.03	-.02	.76			0.00
Housework diff.	.01	.04	.03	.69			0.00
Problems work-life balance	-.16	.06	-.24	.00			0.04
Satisfaction with childcare resources	.09	.08	.10	.17			0.01
Satisf. with measures in company	.07	.06	.09	.23			0.01
Satisf. with distribution of housework	.16	.08	.20	.05			0.02
Satisfaction with personal time	.15	.06	.21	.01			0.03

Note: The reference value for education level is not having a university degree. The reference value for couple type is being a heterosexual couple. The reference value for country is Sweden.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .001$.

of predictor variables significantly increased the variance explained by 21%. In this model, the contribution of country was no longer significant, and women who had fewer problems related to work-life balance and who felt more satisfied with the distribution of housework in their family and with the amount of free time available to them had higher levels of life satisfaction. This model explained 32% of the variance observed in life satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

This study examined similarities and differences in the division of labor between different-sex and same-sex couples living in Spain and Sweden, two countries with different sociocultural frameworks in terms of gender equality and family support policies. The results obtained confirm most of the initial hypotheses and provide new insights from a gender and cultural perspective.

Division of labor among different-sex and same-sex couples

The analysis of the entire sample revealed that mothers with same-sex partners reported a clearly more egalitarian distribution of housework and childcare, perceived fewer problems related to work-life balance and felt more satisfied with the distribution of housework, than the mothers with different-sex partners. These findings confirm our first hypothesis and add to and help consolidate the extant scientific literature attesting to fairer and more equal distribution of housework and childcare among same-sex couples than among different-sex ones. They are also consistent with the findings reported by Bauer (2016), who combined data from different countries, as well as with those observed in studies carried out in very diverse societies (Chan et al., 1998; Farr & Patterson, 2013; Goldberg et al., 2012; Jaspers & Verbakel, 2013; Perlesz et al., 2010; Smart et al., 2017).

Although we did not explore the reasons prompting couples to organize task distribution in one way or another, based on the extant literature, we may assume that the fairer distribution found among same-sex couples (from both Spain and Sweden) is rooted in an ideology that appreciates and aspires to equality in the relationship, as indeed found by Patterson et al. (2004), or which invokes the principles of distributive justice (Esmail, 2010). Alternatively, it may be that couples formed by women do not attach negative connotations to housework and childcare, viewing them simply as part of their adult duty to care for themselves and their relationships, and believing that sharing said tasks may help consolidate and strengthen their relationship, as found by Kamano (2009) in her interviews with female same-sex couples in Japan.

Sociocultural context and distribution of housework and childcare

When the analyses were performed separately for each country, interesting differences were observed. The results for Spanish couples were mainly as expected: female same-sex couples had a significantly fairer distribution pattern for daily and occasional childcare, as well as greater satisfaction with the distribution of housework. These results are consistent with those reported by studies carried out in other countries, which were analyzed in several reviews (Brewster, 2017; Goldberg, 2013; Murphy et al., 2021). The fact that no differences were found between members of Spanish same-sex couples in terms of the number of paid working hours, whereas men in different-sex couples were found to dedicate more time to their paid job than their female partners, is also worth noting. It is likely that these two findings reflect different sides of the same phenomenon: in Spain, even when women are in paid employment, the evidence continues to point to a traditional distribution of gender roles in different-sex couples (Borrás et al., 2021).

However, the analysis of the results obtained with Swedish mothers revealed no differences between same-sex and different-sex couples in terms of distribution patterns, meaning that our initial hypothesis cannot be confirmed. In the case of both same-sex and different-sex couples, both members performed a similar number of daily childcare and housework, and only in the case of occasional childcare tasks did same-sex mothers report a more equal distribution.

Moreover, all the women interviewed expressed a high level of satisfaction with task distribution, and none of the scores revealed significant differences between mothers with same-sex and different-sex partners. To the best of our knowledge, no other studies have been carried out in Sweden comparing the distribution of housework and childcare among same-sex and different-sex couples. Nevertheless, the results of the present study are consistent with those reported by others carried out in Sweden on the distribution of housework and childcare among different-sex couples with children, which found that task distribution is mainly perceived as fair (Alsarve et al., 2016; Thomas & Hildingsson, 2009).

As mentioned earlier, comparative studies carried out previously in a range of different countries, including the United States (Chan et al., 1998; Farr & Patterson, 2013; Goldberg et al., 2012; Smart et al., 2017), the United Kingdom (Tasker & Golombok, 1998), the Netherlands (Jaspers & Verbakel, 2013) and Australia (Perlesz et al., 2010), found differences between same-sex and different-sex couples similar to those observed in the present study among Spanish couples. The absence of differences between same-sex and different-sex couples in Sweden contrasts with all the empirical evidence accumulated to date, and requires further analysis in terms of the historical-cultural construction of gender. Sweden has a long tradition of public policies for promoting gender equality and gender co-responsibility (Evertsson, 2014), something that has helped close the gap between the time dedicated by men and women to housework and childcare faster than in other countries (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017; Yee et al., 2011). This process has occurred as society (and particularly men) has gradually adopted an egalitarian ideology that challenges assigned gender roles and fosters co-responsibility in parenting and household tasks (Alsarve et al., 2016; Evertsson, 2014).

In societies such as Spain (and others in which comparative studies have been carried out), in which gender equality promotion policies are still very recent or less mainstream, it continues to be more likely to find unequal patterns of involvement in housework and childcare among different-sex couples, even though gradual headway is being made in this area (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017; Borrás et al., 2021). The recent extension of paternity leave in Spain, to match maternity leave, opens up hope for the future regarding a greater involvement by fathers with female partners in childcare tasks. Indeed, some data from Spain have begun to suggest evidence of this change (Meil, Rogero-García, et al., 2021), which has indeed been verified in Nordic countries, which were pioneers in establishing these kinds of measures (Haas & Hwang, 2008; Kotsadam & Finseraas, 2011).

As expected in light of the above, our comparison of mothers with different-sex partners in Spain and Sweden also revealed very significant differences. The Swedish mothers interviewed perceived a fairer distribution of everyday childcare tasks than their Spanish counterparts, reported fewer problems linked to work-life balance and were more satisfied with the distribution of housework in their couple, as well as with the personal time available to them and with life in general. These findings confirm our hypothesis and are consistent with the results of transnational population-based studies in terms of both task distribution (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017; Fuwa, 2004; Ruppner, 2010; Stier & Lewin-Epstein, 2007) and life satisfaction (Haar et al., 2014; Riva et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, very different results were found when we compared same-sex couples from the two countries studied. Despite their geographical and cultural distance, female same-sex couples in both Spain and Sweden reported an almost equally fair distribution of housework and childcare and felt equally satisfied with said distribution, as well as with the personal time it afforded them and with life in general. These results confirm our initial hypothesis and are consistent with the lack of differences found in the only study to have compared the distribution of housework among same-sex couples from different countries in terms of macro-indicators of gender (van der Vleuten et al., 2021). It therefore seems possible to conclude that same-sex couples are revising and neutralizing childcare and housework-linked gender mandates that are still prevalent in societies with a strong patriarchal tradition. They are *undoing gender*

(Deutsch, 2007) and, by doing so, are spearheading the change towards more egalitarian patterns in the distribution of housework and childcare, becoming increasingly more similar to couples living in more egalitarian societies (from which they are practically indistinguishable) than to different-sex couples from their own countries.

Work-life balance, division of labor and psychological well-being

Given the results outlined above, it is hardly surprising that certain differences were also observed in the whole sample in terms of life satisfaction. The mothers with same-sex partners in our study reported a higher level of life satisfaction than those with different-sex partners, which is consistent with their higher level of satisfaction with the distribution of housework and childcare, a relationship repeatedly found in the scientific literature (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Ryjova et al., 2022; Tornello, 2020; Tornello et al., 2015). It is also not surprising that the Swedish mothers in our study reported higher levels of life satisfaction than their Spanish counterparts. This is consistent with previous research that has found differences in life satisfaction across countries, with Nordics being in the lead, among other reasons due to the resolution of their work-life balance problems, which is significantly associated with greater life satisfaction (Eurofound, 2005; Haar et al., 2014; Riva et al., 2019).

As expected, in Spain, differences were observed in the life satisfaction levels of women with same-sex and those with different-sex partners, a finding which is consistent with the former's higher level of satisfaction with the distribution of housework and childcare. These differences were not, however, observed in Sweden, which is consistent with the high level of satisfaction with task distribution observed among both kinds of couple, a circumstance which may in turn be linked to the gender equality promotion policies that have been implemented in that country (Evertsson, 2014). Similarly, Glass et al. (2016) found that differences in happiness levels between couples with and without children (with the latter reporting higher levels) disappeared when respondents lived in countries with strong family support policies, such as Sweden and other Nordic nations.

The correlation analyses carried out with the whole sample, between the different variables measured and life satisfaction, provided some interesting results. Thus, greater life satisfaction was reported by mothers who had co-responsible partners and who felt satisfied with the distribution of housework, the amount of free time available to them and the childcare resources to which they had access. This is consistent with both our initial hypothesis and that reported in the extant literature (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Ryjova et al., 2022; Tornello, 2020; Tornello et al., 2015). Conversely, those who perceived to have more problems related to work-life balance also had lower levels of life satisfaction, in line with what has been found to date (Haar et al., 2014; Riva et al., 2019).

Correlation analyses within each sub-sample of mothers revealed interesting differences and some similarities. Thus, beginning with different-sex couples, both in Spanish and Swedish mothers, we found greater life satisfaction among those who acknowledged having fewer conciliation problems. However, a curious difference appeared between them: while in Spain those who were more satisfied with childcare resources or with their personal time showed greater life satisfaction, in Sweden, it was satisfaction with the work-life balance measures in place in their company that was associated with life satisfaction. The different associations found in the two countries are probably related to mothers' different situations and expectations. In Sweden, couples mainly enjoy an equal distribution of childcare and housework, about which they feel very satisfied; however, at the same time, they have, for decades now, had access to good childcare resources, with which they also claim to feel highly satisfied. It is likely that the work-life balance measures established in companies may be perceived as a less frequent resource that is adapted to their specific needs, or it may be that there is a greater degree of variability across

companies in this respect, which is why this variable is associated with life satisfaction. In Spain, however, a country within the so-called Mediterranean regime, in which equality and family support policies are a much more recent phenomenon (Meil, Díaz-Gandasegui, et al., 2021; Sullivan, 2018), mothers are unlikely to expect the companies in which they work to help facilitate their work-life balance.

Interestingly, in the case of the subsamples of mothers with same-sex partners, there were no variables significantly associated with life satisfaction among the Swedish mothers, and only one—satisfaction with personal time—among the Spanish mothers. This absence of significant relationships may be due to the homogeneity of these subsamples, made up of generally very egalitarian couples, or to their small size, which hides differences that could have been significant in larger samples.

The regression analysis revealed that only three variables had a specific significant association with interviewees' life satisfaction. The first of these was their perception of having few problems related to work-life balance, which is consistent with the scientific literature focusing on this topic (Haar et al., 2014; Riva et al., 2019). The second and third variables found to predict mothers' life satisfaction were feeling satisfied with the distribution of household tasks in their couple, and feeling satisfied with the amount of personal time available to them. The fact that it was not those variables that reflected the true situation regarding distribution, but rather interviewees' satisfaction with said situation that was associated with life satisfaction, suggests that it is individuals' subjective interpretation of reality that is the determining factor. This has been found previously by studies analyzing the effect of this on increased psychological well-being (Ryjova et al., 2022; Tornello, 2020; Tornello et al., 2015), and those demonstrating that perceived lack of fairness and equality in task distribution was associated with an increase in psychological distress indicators (Claffey & Mickelson, 2009; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2004; Tornello, 2020).

The fact that life satisfaction was not specifically associated with living in a Nordic or Mediterranean country, or with being part of a different-sex or same-sex couple, paints a clearer picture of the set of influences determining the psychological well-being of the mothers interviewed in our study. It also sheds light on the different processes at work and refines the rather general conclusions that could be drawn from our results. It is not same-sex or Swedish couples who, in general, have higher levels of well-being, but rather those who feel satisfied with the way in which their family responsibilities are shared, no matter the sex of their partner or the country in which they live. As in other areas of the study of family diversity (see Imrie & Golombok, 2020, for a review), it seems that psychological well-being is not associated so much with the structure of the family itself, the sex of one's partner, or the country in which one lives, but rather with the quality of family life, or in this case, the quality of the couple's life together. It may be that the co-responsibility with which couples share housework and childcare is simply another indicator of a good, respectful and collaborative couple relationship on a wider range of planes, although this aspect was not evaluated in our study.

Limitations and implications

This study has a series of limitations linked, firstly, to the size of the sample, the lack of proportion between the number of same-sex and different-sex couples in Spain and Sweden, and the recruitment procedures used to access the sample in Spain. This is mainly due to the fact that, in Spain, it is still difficult to find official access routes to representative samples of non-conventional family models. Although the snowball strategy and contact through specific population groups are commonly used to access what are known in the literature as *hard-to-reach populations* (Atkinson & Flint, 2001), these methods do result in certain limitations, such as the impossibility of generalizing the data found. We therefore aim to carry out further research with

broader, more numerically balanced and more representative samples in order to confirm the associations observed in this exploratory study. Another limitation is linked to the fact that the instruments used to evaluate task distribution are not standardized. The results therefore need to be confirmed with instruments that are.

It would also have been enriching to have analyzed the arguments used by mothers to explain the distribution of housework and childcare in their families, in order to gain a better understanding of the reasons underlying arrangements which are, objectively, fair or unfair and are perceived with differing degrees of satisfaction. A combination of a qualitative and quantitative approach may provide more complex and relevant information in this respect.

However, despite the limitations outlined above, this is the first study to explore the similarities and differences in division of labor between different-sex and female same-sex couples from two European countries with very different traditions and histories of public gender equality and family support policies. The results suggest a need to rethink accumulated theories regarding both transnational differences in the distribution of housework and childcare and differences between same-sex and different-sex couples, since as explained above, interesting similarities were observed between the different populations studied.

The study sheds light on the process through which housework and childcare are gradually being stripped of their deep-rooted, institutionalized link with gender, by two different yet complementary means. First, by distributing family responsibilities in a fairer way, female same-sex couples are “undoing gender” (Deutsch, 2007; Goldberg, 2013), at the same time as they are constructing new fairer and more satisfactory ways of sharing responsibility within their couples. Second, it seems clear that societies with a long tradition of fostering public gender equality policies are more efficient at promoting an equal division of family labor in different-sex couples, who are, in this aspect, indistinguishable from their same-sex counterparts. We are therefore witnessing a de-gendering of housework and childcare through both relational processes in the microsystem of same-sex couples, and through institutional and sociocultural processes in the macro-system.

Let us finish by making two final observations regarding the implications of the results of the present study for social and family interventions. First, the added value of investing in public policies aimed at fostering equality and co-responsibility among couples should be acknowledged, since said investment seems to result in better individual and, one may assume, collective health. Second, in societies that are still very patriarchal, same-sex couples are good models of egalitarian and co-responsible division of family labor from which said societies have much to learn to advance in justice and equity.

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