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Title: Women's empowerment and social innovation in childcare: the case of Barcelona, Spain

Abstract

Social innovation and empowerment are complex concepts that, from an analytical point of view, are not necessarily related. One explicit goal of social innovation is to empower communities and the individuals that are involved in activities within them, but this does not necessarily always occur. We address the question "Does social innovation in 0-3 pre-school education empower women?". First, we explore whether these projects can be defined as social innovations. Second, we analyse to what extent those arrangements that are identified as innovative in 0-3 education and care empower mothers who choose them. We argue that if the characteristics of a particular social innovation project enhance or reinforce the capabilities of the women who participate in it, that experience will most probably empower them; if not, this is unlikely to occur. The empirical material includes 37 interviews (with key informants, professionals, and mothers involved in the projects), collected in fieldwork in the city of Barcelona in the months that preceded the first COVID-19 lockdown in Spain (March 2020). Our results reveal the socioeconomic bias in these experiences, as well as the costs derived for both participants (mothers and professionals), and the social impact that stem from the projects being under-regulated.

Keywords: social innovation, women's empowerment, pre-school education, Barcelona

Introduction

Over the last few decades, the study of 0-3 pre-school education has contributed to enriching the debate on the welfare state, and has affected policy areas such as social investment, equality of opportunities, equity, gender equality, or the equilibrium between education, care and work-family balance (Blasco 2017). More recently, social innovation in this area has proliferated, raising new questions about women's empowerment that intersect with the previous ones. Thus, a large part of the literature has discussed "social innovation" and "empowerment", as two sides of the same coin (Moulaert *et al.*, 2016). For example, some projects have been analysed that are related to community action (BLINDEDFORREVIEW, 2018 2019 2020), or to the activation of service provision arrangements that are alternatives to the traditional, majority ones (co-production in areas such as housing, health, dependency care etc.) (BLINDEDFORREVIEW, 2019) among others.

However, social innovation and empowerment are two complex concepts that, from an analytical point of view, are not necessarily related. In theory, one of the explicit goals of social innovation is to empower

communities and the individuals that are involved in the activities within them (Baglioni and Sinclair, 2015), but in practice, this does not necessarily always occur (Blanco and León 2017, Cruz *et al.*, 2017; BLINDEDFORREVIEW, 2017). Thus, we pose the question "Does social innovation in 0-3 pre-school education empower women?" In this paper we analyse both to what extent these initiatives are social innovations and to what extent they lead to empowerment, enhancing or reinforcing the capabilities of the women who participate in them. Capabilities refer both to the potential and to the actual power of what a person is able to achieve in terms of valued choices (Gangas 2016, Sen 1985). Empowerment is conceptualised as an increase in women's capabilities, and is operationalized through the relationship between three elements: resources, agency and achievements (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007).

First, we explore the extent to which these projects are new ideas, products, services or models that efficiently satisfy social needs, and that at the same time generate new social relations or collaborations, or if the social innovation is a new discourse that justifies practices that already exist. We focus on social innovation experiences in 0-3 education in the city of Barcelona. We consider three main alternatives to public services or private kindergartens: childminders [*llars de criança*], care groups [*grups de criança*] and free-education nurseries [*espais de criança*]. We argue that, although they might be different in how they function, they are all social innovations because: i. they are usually set up at the initiative of parents or educators; ii. they explicitly promote alternative practices of education for the 0-3 age group, namely free-education methods inspired by Montessori, Waldorf and Pikler among others; iii. their everyday activities require the involvement of the participants, who contribute with volunteer work.

Second, we analyse to what extent the arrangements we identify as innovative in 0-3 education and care empower the mothers who choose them. To this end we study:

- why mothers choose them
- the costs of these options
- the profile of mothers who opt for these types of 0-3 education

The empirical material collected in the analysis includes 37 interviews (19 semi-structured interviews with key informants and professionals, and 18 in-depth interviews with mothers involved in the projects), transcribed in full and organized using CADQAS Atlas-Ti. Our analysis focuses on the interviewees' discourses, narratives and arguments, which we take as an expression of their perceptions and feelings. These narratives allow us to identify the extent to which the interviewees are conscious of the incentive structures that condition individuals' preferences and choices, thereby limiting free agency and, ultimately, empowerment. We do not aim to obtain an objective measurement of empowerment, but a subjective one, in which the individual perceptions of both costs and benefits play a role. In the discussion we reflect on whether these socially innovative arrangements in 0-3 pre-school education contribute to enhancing women's capabilities at the individual level, and whether they reproduce patterns of social inequality at the community level.

In the first section we explore the theoretical relationship between the two concepts of social innovation and women's empowerment, reviewing the (scant) articles that have analysed social innovation in childcare. In the

methodology section, we present our study and fieldwork. Then we illustrate the specific characteristics embodied in social innovation in childcare in Barcelona; to do this we compare the three types of innovations that we examine in this study. We then analyse women's empowerment in the socially innovative projects we have studied, including both mothers and professionals. This is followed by a discussion and our conclusions.

Social innovation and empowerment

Social innovation and empowerment are complex, interwoven concepts that have been the object of extensive research. However, how and why they interrelate still remains underexplored. Social innovation includes practices that aim to satisfy human needs through horizontal cooperative relations among citizens. When we consider the outcome dimension, such practices are social, because the type of goods and services they generate are conceptualized as basic by stakeholders (BEPA 2010:31). When we consider the process dimension, such practices are innovative because they generate alternative arrangements and provision models that are different from those offered by the institutionalised public and private sectors, and which are intended to empower citizens (Grimm *et al.* 2013). Empowerment includes 'processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy decision-making space, so that the people affected come to see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and have influence' (Rowlands 1996:87). Empowered individuals exercise the power to remove social barriers and obstacles that may hinder their own and others' wellbeing, that is, factors that may constrain and limit individuals' agency (Kabeer, 1999; Haug and Talwar, 2016). Although both social innovation and empowerment refer to processes and to outcomes, empowerment has come to be seen as an *outcome* of social innovation processes (Ibrahim and Alkire 2007).

Social innovation and empowerment have been connected through the concept of social transformation, carried out by previously silenced groups in specific territorial contexts (Rappaport 1987). In this view, the relational nature of empowerment becomes central to understanding social innovation. Following Ayob *et al.* (2016), it is possible to identify two traditions in the academic debate on social innovation: a weak tradition, which considers social innovations to be all new or alternative practices that achieve an increase in personal utility (*individual outcomes*), and a stronger tradition, which considers social innovations to be all initiatives that produce collaborative co-productions that have an impact on existing power relations (*process and relations*) (Ayob *et al.*, 2016; Chiappero *et al.*, 2017). A parallel can be drawn between the two traditions and, respectively, the concept of individual empowerment (weak tradition) and community empowerment (strong tradition). Individual empowerment occurs when a person, following their involvement in social innovation, develops self-efficacy, personal competence and the capacity to act according to their own agency. Community empowerment occurs when groups and organisations gain the capacity to influence the distribution of economic, political, and social resources, thus impacting on pre-existing structures of inequalities (Haugh and O'Carroll, 2019).

The missing link between social innovation and empowerment has been a concern in the research on social innovation and on women's empowerment (Andre 2013, Batliwala 1993, Cornwall 2016,

BLINDEDFORREVIEW, 2017, Lindberg *et at.* 2015). In the specific case of women, empowerment involves challenging existing gender relations that shape the structure of opportunities and constraints for women, in order to offer them alternatives that allow them to exercise power and choice over their lives. Sharahunga *et al.* define women's empowerment as "the multidimensional process of increasing the capacity/capabilities (i.e., resources and agency) of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes" (2019:5). Capabilities refer both to a person's potential and to the actual power they wield to achieve goals in terms of valued choices, and indicates a person's well-being (Gangas 2016, Sen 1985). In this framework, empowerment is conceptualised as an increase in women's capabilities, and is operationalized through the relationship between three elements: resources, agency and achievements. Citizens' resources are preconditions that influence their agency (action processes); agency in turn influences their achievements (outcomes) (2019:3). This implies that women use their economic, social, political, familial, legal and psychological capabilities (i.e. resources and agency) to achieve livelihood outcomes.

Both processes outcomes are multidimensional and relational: as well as affecting different capabilities in different ways, they may also generate cross-impacts between those capabilities. Ziegler (2018) argues that capability conversion factors –namely, institutional, social, economic, policy, and other aspects– are contextual and, therefore, changing them may improve citizens' capabilities. In this sense, the studies that have investigated the relationship between women's empowerment and involvement in social innovation have obtained contrasting results (BLINDEDFORREVIEW, 2017, Lindberg et at. 2015, Andre 2013, Cukier, 2018), highlighting that mere involvement in social innovation is not enough to generate empowerment if it is not accompanied by a systemic change in the underlying social structures that create inequality. An explanation is required, on the one hand, as to why some women choose social innovation experiences –child-minders, care groups, and free education nurseries-, instead of traditional, institutional pre-school education, be it public, private or subsidised private. On the other hand, despite the increasing interest in these projects, research on their implications and unintended consequences are scarce, not only in the Spanish context (Subirats and García-Bernardos 2015; Keller-Garganté 2017), but also at the international level (Brennan 1998, Findlay 2015, Mahon y Jenson 2006). Recent comparative studies have analysed the impact of ECEC policy design features on capabilities conversion factors, particularly on gender and class dimensions (Yerkes and Javornik 2019). The research we present here will contribute to providing evidence about such implications from the field of social innovation in ECEC. In addition, the results may help identify the changes that these social innovations are in effect attempting to achieve, and help investigate the capability conversion factors that could be at play.

Methodology

The goal of this article is to investigate to what extent social innovation in 0-3 childcare is able to trigger empowerment in women who access it. As a second goal, we would also like to find out what type of empowerment these women are looking for.

Empirical results presented in the next sections are part of a wider project [information BLINDEDFORREVIEW]. The aim of this project is to study the participation in the labour market of women in Barcelona who have children younger than three, and to determine to what extent childcare services can favour their participation in the labour market. The fuzziness of social innovation poses a challenge for the operationalization of this concept. For this research piece, we selected projects that respected the following criteria: initiatives that i. were led by citizens; ii. fostered cooperative and horizontal relationships among participants; iii. generated alternatives to childcare services offered by the state or the market, following previous definitions of social innovations (Blanco and León, 2017). This selection yielded three types of projects: *childminders [llars de criança]*, *care groups [grups de criança]* and *free-education nurseries [espais de criança]* (see the next section for more details about the projects involved). Although childminders have a long-standing tradition in other European countries (e.g. *tagesmutter* in Germany or *assistante maternelle* in France), all three are relatively new projects in Barcelona (the oldest project in the city was founded in 2000).

The data collected come from three different types of sources: 4 exploratory interviews with representatives of associations and activists in the field, and 15 interviews with educators (only one man participated in the 19 interviews). In both cases, we used semi-structured interviews that mostly focused on the socially innovative elements of the project, on how the projects functioned, and the extent of parents' participation. The last group of interviews was made up of 18 interviews with mothers who participated in one of the aforementioned projects. In this case, we used biographical interviews in order to reconstruct the decision-making process behind their childcare choices and their participation in the labour market. The guide for the interviews mostly asked about the past, current and future plans of the women in terms of children; relationship with her partner; participation in the labour market and professional career path; the type of current involvement in the social innovation project, and the motivation for this choice. A few mothers (5 out of 18) had already finished their experiences in the 0-3 projects, as their children were now older.

All interviews were transcribed in full and analysed using Atlas.Ti 8, and a content analysis carried out. The most important codes used in the following sections are: the socially innovative elements of the projects, the functioning of the projects, work-family balance strategies, and women's empowerment. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes; the fieldwork was conducted between May 2019 and January 2020, prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown that closed all childcare facilities in Spain. The project has received ethical approval from the "Comissió d'Ètica en l'Experimentació Animal i Humana" of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Representative association names are disclosure as they have a public role and fight for the acknowledgement of their services, so they explicitly gave us the permission to cite them in this research.

Socially innovative childcare in the context of Barcelona

In the last two decades, Barcelona has experienced a strong growth in the offer of institutionalised ECEC services. The model that has been developed is the "escola bressol", based on the construction of municipal public nurseries, which over the years have won a consolidated reputation for offering high quality service. There are now 102 of these nurseries distributed evenly in the city, serving 8,500 children. This is only just over half of those who currently apply for the service (around 14,000) and about the 21% of the total children under three who are resident in the city (38,377 children in 2020). Around 24% of under-threes attend private nursery schools (195 schools) and the rest are either not in education or attend non-institutionalised forms of childcare services, in socially innovative projects that are similar to others that exist in other countries (Barcelona City Council, 2021). The municipality itself, in its last strategic plan for early childhood education and care (dated April 2021), recognises the increasing multiculturality and diversity of the families applying for the service, as well as the growing differentiation of needs that can only be partially covered by such a rigid, institutionalised model of care (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021).

Citizen-led, socially innovative projects started to emerge in this context at the beginning of 2000s. Some families chose these projects as their first option; others, because they were not able to access public nurseries (unfulfilled demand for them has oscillated between 35% and 50%). Educators and families chose these options because, while their prices were similar to those of private nurseries, they offered: lower ratios than both the public and private institutionalised services; a non-school environment with a flexible adaptation process that was more like home care or a playgroup; innovative education models; and a social community network (other families, educators, etc.) that gave them support in their parenting experience (Zechner 2020).

Non-institutionalised pre-school projects can be broadly divided into two main groups: 'parent-led' groups (*care groups*) and 'educator-led' groups (*childminders and free-education nurseries*). All share some characteristics such as a low adult/child ratio, free-education pedagogical principles and a non-schooling environment (see Table 1), but each has its specific functioning in terms of social innovation.

Childminders (llars de criança) are especially appropriate for very young children. One or two educators open up a private home and look after children from 4 months up to three years old, in a family-style environment. They have usually studied pedagogy and specialized in free education; most of them have also participated in the course offered by the "Llars de Criança" association, which began fighting a few years ago for these projects to be officially acknowledged and professionalized. Parents usually have a one-on-one relationship with the educator, although some projects organise events or encounters among parents.

Care groups (grups de criança) are mostly bottom-up arrangements in which parents participate. They usually stem from childbirth and breastfeeding groups, one of the services offered within the public health services in Catalunya. In these care group projects, mothers self-coordinate, taking the lead to organise groups in which parents participate actively to help a professional educator in the day-to-day childcare activities. The educational project is decided collectively between parents and educators, through assemblies. Most of these

projects are informal and self-managed; some are also anti-system, i.e. their activities are held in squatted spaces. A few groups manage to evolve and consolidate into free-education nurseries.

Free-education nurseries (espais de criança) are the most formal and stable of the three projects. They are usually run by two or three educators that take the lead, although parents are required to participate regularly by attending assemblies and helping with logistics (i.e. communication, financial management, organisation of open-days and fund raising, cleaning and food preparation). The educational project is decided by the educators, although parents are required to contribute with their opinions and ideas. Most of the free-education nursery projects that we examined are the evolution of previously established care groups, although this is not always the case. Once the original children are older, and enter the public pre-school or primary school system, the educators look for new families to enrol in the nursery. A few free-education nurseries have already been functioning for over five to ten years; despite this, the working conditions of the educators and the financial balance of these projects tend to be very precarious.

People who run these projects are reluctant to define them as innovative, although they provide alternatives to the dominant models of childcare services provisions (Blanco and León, 2017). In line with previous empirical investigations on social innovations (Sinclair *et al.*, 2018; BLINDEDFORREVIEW, 2019), participants argue that the cooperative practices at the basis of their projects are contemporary reinterpretations of pre-industrial habits in which children were raised in extended families of relatives and neighbourhoods. The real innovation is that that those who run the projects are now professionals, specifically trained to promote free-education principles.

Table 1 – How the non-institutionalised pre-school projects work.

	Childminders	*Care Groups*	*Free-education nurseries*
Governance	Educator-led	Parent-led	Educator-led
Organization	Self-employed professionals	Informal groups/Associations	Associations/Cooperatives
Decision-making	Educators	Assembly	Assembly
Age of children	0-3	1-5	2-5
Calendar and Schedule	Flexible	Variable, depending on the project	Rigid
Full-time fees (6 hours/day service) *(fees do not include sign-up fees, food and nappies)*	500/600 euro	300/400 euro	350/400 euro

Capacity	3-8 children	6-12 children	15-25 children
Ratio of children to adults	3-4/adult	3-6/adult	4-6/adult
Parents' participation in activities	Parents can access	Equal to educators	Limited to organizational tasks
Physical space	Private apartments	(Association/public) rented or occupied space	(Market) rented space
Association of reference	Llars de Criança	Xell Network	Xell Network

Source: Interviews and analysis of documents

Apart from being novel, social innovations must be social in their means and ends (BEPA, 2010). In terms of being social in their means, these projects respect the principle of free education and, thus, children are accompanied carefully along the path of the first separation from their parents; this requires a gentle process of adaption to the project that lasts several weeks. This might constitute a barrier to access for working mothers, because not all parents can afford longer unpaid leave or several weeks of the required flexibility in their schedules. A second element of the social nature of their projects' means regards the participation required of the parents.

As for the social nature of the projects' ends, the majority of our interviewees, no matter if they were association representatives, educators or mothers, agreed on the fact that the primary beneficiaries of these activities are the families that participate in them, i.e., the children and their parents. In contrast to traditional childcare services, these projects offer the possibility of maintaining a constant relationship with the educator and of being involved in a community of peers, learning and receiving help from them when needed. A second social end promoted by these projects is to foster new pedagogical practices, generating beneficial impacts on the environments of children and their families. Although most of the educational methods used in the projects belong to well-known and established pedagogies such as Montessori, Waldorf or Pikler, only a minority of institutionalised childcare services follow these same practices.

On the other side of the coin, there are the costs associated with these innovative projects. They do not receive public funding for their functioning, and in the majority of cases they have to rent a space on the private market to carry out their work, increasing their fixed costs. For parents, being part of this social innovation implies paying a monthly fee that is higher than in public nurseries, although it is in line with private day cares. These costs exclude people on lower incomes from accessing these initiatives. Apart from the financial costs, choosing this type of education requires the families taking on a deeper involvement: the opening times are shorter compared to other more institutionalised alternatives and, especially in the case of nurseries and care groups, parents put in time and effort organizing the projects, as well as preparing the children's food. Many

of the mothers involved in these projects opted for a reduction in working hours or for taking leave in order to ensure their contribution to their functioning (see next section).

In order to reach an equilibrium between viability and accessibility (Keller-Garganté, 2017), most professionals and workers employed in the provision of these services suffer unsatisfactory labour conditions, in a context of under-regulation or no regulation at all. In order to keep these projects going, almost all the professionals we interviewed receive informal payment for part or all their working hours, and the projects are not recognised as schooling activities but as childcare (with no educational tasks). Thus, their conditions suffer from the lack of acknowledgement given to them by the educational authorities.

> *"It's a temporary, discontinuous contract. And it's the lowest category that exists, it doesn't even represent what ... I mean, it's like the minimum salary and category, I think it's something like admin assistant category, although it's a teaching assistant job. It's the closest, let's say. There are also other reasons, added to the fact that we haven't yet made it financially. Legally we are in a ... we are in an alegal situation."*
>
> *P0, free-education nursery, 46*

These projects face acute economic strains, leading to many of them struggling to keep their activities afloat or even to comply with standard labour market regulations. Since most of these professionals and workers are female, it is clear that these social innovations place a costly burden on women.

Women and Empowerment: the role of social innovation in childcare

The women we interviewed for this research chose these projects because: i. they offer a non-schooling environment, more similar to a family than an institution; ii. they wanted to be empowered in their process of becoming mothers (especially if this is their first child); iii. they were looking for a community of peers, with whom they could share their ideal model of parenting and childcare, based on affection, free education and low adult-children ratios. Many mothers had tried to access public childcare because of the lower cost compared to the projects we have researched. Although the majority of them opted for these projects as their second choice, they did not consider them a fall back, but an informed choice that allowed them to carry out their first years of mothering with more freedom.

Surprisingly, the motivation behind their choices is not to achieve an easier work-family balance with a full-time job: shorter opening times and constant involvement during the adaptation period and in the cooperative organization require a degree of participation which is not easy to juggle with a full-time job. Although the majority of the mothers interviewed were highly educated and employed, the main priority for them was the possibility of enjoying their first years of fully involved mothering with their children. They want to have a

primary role as educator in the first years of their children's lives and are willing to pay the price in terms of their careers.

> *"When we were looking for a nursery school, there were some that made everything easy for you. "If you want to bring the baby at 7 in the morning you can; you can leave the child from 7 in the morning until 6 in the evening if you pay extra and you can bring them before 9". That's really good if you want to go out to work and forget that you have a child. I didn't have a child for that."*
>
> *M1, free-education nursery, 38*

Social innovations step in when institutionalised solutions are not able to respond adequately to a social need (Moulaert *et al.*, 2016). In this case, the need is a childcare service which does not prioritise the practical needs of a working mother, but instead, the welfare of the child. Social innovations offer a type of care which is similar to a mother's in terms of protection and respect for the development of children; families that have these needs accept paying more for existing services or actively create a new project. Social innovation adds the value of them finding a group of peers with whom they share these needs.

> *"I think it's a community and it definitely feels like one, nobody comes in a rush. We're always outside chatting to other parents after nursery. Many days we will meet when we pick up the kids and go to the park or just outside and I mean it is like a community in that… we all have to be involved in running of *project*. Cleaning, looking after the place, helping organize things; I also think that kind of school attracts the kind of people who are interested in being part of the community, not just dropping the kids off and then picking them up. It's not like a babysitting service, you like that kind of place and choose it because you want to be involved."*
>
> *M5, free-education nursery, 38*

Mothers who participate in the social innovative projects are also very keen to highlight that they have chosen these projects because they are against such young children attending an institution. They favour the loving environment which these experiences are all based on, which is sustained by professionals who are capable of creating strong bonds with the children and of helping to build a community with the parents. In fact, the projects offer an open environment for parents to participate in the care of their young children: they reduce the distance between car in the home and care in institutions, thanks to the possibility of *caring-with* offered by the community that sustain these projects, composed of both parents and educators (Tronto, 1994).

> *"I wouldn't want my son to go from being with us all day to going to an institution with a headteacher, teacher, cook, cleaning lady. It's a huge system that he can't understand; it's better to first go through something in between before he gets to something more institutional, corporate, school."*
>
> *M12, free-education nursery, 35*

These social innovations also allow mothers to fully engage in the education of their children, actively participating in the co-production of the service they access (Grimm *et al.*, 2013): helping organize the nurseries/care groups, or staying longer with their children at the childminder's. This possibility of participating is valued for several reasons: to learn more about how to educate their children, to be there more for their children in those important first years of their development, and to feel less alone in the endeavour of parenting, thanks to the community of care composed of educators and other parents.

> *"And I also liked the idea of being able to spend time in the space and get to know it and see the routine. […] And I wanted to know what went on, and I saw that. And I shared this experience with other parents… So there is a relationship created there. I think I wanted to know what went on, yes. When I understood that it was a safe place, I felt free to look for a job. And I found one."*
>
> *M14, Care Group, 40*

What can mothers do in order to meet their wish to carry out their first years of mothering in a fulfilling way? The institutional context does not make it easy for these women to act according to their values. The current statutory maternity leave in Spain is 16 weeks from the birth of a child, which is paid at 100% of the mother's salary. Additionally, fathers can take up to 8 weeks of paternity leave; this is an individual and non-transferrable right of the father. Since 2019, it has been compulsory for fathers to take at least 2 weeks leave, and this will be extended progressively to six weeks in 2021. In 2021, when the reform will be fully in place, mothers' and fathers' leave will be equal, although the 16 weeks for fathers will only include six compulsory weeks. The father's leave is not cumulative with the mother's, and must be taken simultaneously with the mother's leave. But no paid extension is foreseen for maternity leave, not even in the case where the father does not opt for his entire 16-week period. In addition, there is an option for both parents to request unpaid parental leave until a child is three (Koslowski *et al.*, 2020). The mothers interviewed said that the 16-week maternity leave is not enough to fully experience mothering in the early months of a child's life and that they could not bear to leave their child in an institution such as a kindergarten at 16 weeks old. And extending the father's leave does not respond to their wish for more active, present mothering, at least over the first two years of their children's lives.

To fulfil their desire to spend more time with their young children, some mothers decided not to return to work until their children reach three years of age, opting instead for unpaid leave, despite the consequences: economic dependence on their partner, damage to their careers and less income for the household. Some mothers opted to extend their maternity leave with some unpaid leave, but only for few months or at most, until the child was one year old.

> *"I really like my job. The truth is that I like it, but right now, on my scale of priorities, my daughter comes first. Work is very important, but… I don't want it to be… Because in the end, if the day has 24 hours and I work 8 of them, I'm with her 2 to 3 hours. And it seems very unbalanced. OK, she goes to sleep at 8 in the evening, she*

*doesn't have our schedules, it's not like *partner*, who I see for more time. I think that at this moment in her life… 3 or 4 years from now, I think it'll be different, but at this moment I feel that I have to be there for her more."*

M1, free-education nursery, 38

Some mothers decide to use their unemployment benefit strategically to have an income while caring for their children. This implies practices that are bordering illegality, such as asking a complicit entrepreneur to sign a contract with them and paying the social contributions themselves in order to reach the level of contributions required for claiming unemployment benefit, or asking their previous employer to dismiss them instead of them resigning.

*"In order to bring up *child*, I was working with my sister-in-law, and since I had accumulated unemployment benefit from previous jobs, I took it. It's a way of looking for some income while I raise him. […] The last 7 months of working with my sister-in-law, I paid the social security expenses myself; on top of the twenty hours I worked, I paid twenty more of social security, to have 40 hours paid up and have the option of unemployment benefit."*

M7, free-education nursery, 39

"So I found a job for a month or 2 months and with that I was able to claim unemployment. Now I am running out, and now that I have one child at school and the other at nursery, I am looking for work again. But I decided to put my working life on hold to be able to spend at least the first year, the first 2 years with the children."

M9, free-education nursery, 32

When their leave came to an end, the majority of the mothers interviewed went from full-time to part-time work in order to participate more in the care of their children and to combine their working activity with their involvement in the projects. But the implied risk of such a decision is to become increasingly economically dependent on one's partner and to narrow one's career possibilities (and salary prospects) in the future.

"It is true that it is a break in my professional career, I mean, there have been things that happened while I was on leave of absence, promotion possibilities that I could not opt for, because I was on leave. But of course, um,... that's like not being in the right place at the right time. So, yes, perhaps I would have had internal promotion opportunities that I could not take due to this leave of absence."

M17, free-education nursery, 40

The choice of putting work on hold to have a primary role as carer is also a privilege of class and economic possibilities. Mothers who can choose this option have a family situation that can uphold them in their choices: their partners or their families. In other cases, working from home or being self-employed allows them the flexibility and the reduction in hours needed in order to participate in caring for their children. Many of the

participants in these projects are expats: they often have international salaries that are higher than Spanish salaries and more flexible schedules, allowing them to access and participate in these types of projects without putting the economic security of their household at risk.

> *"Well, of course, first, you need to be a family with a decent income; second, you need to have a job that allows you to do fewer hours because with an 8-hour workday you can't take part in a project like that. So it is elitist, really, if you have those two conditions. So it's like that, you don't need to be rich, but you have to earn enough to say: well, 70 euros more doesn't matter, it won't change my life... But of course 70 euros for some families is a lot..."*
>
> *M6, Childminder, 41*

These projects are only accessible to the families that have a high enough income. But some middle-class families decide to reduce other types of consumption (e.g. travel, cars, houses) in order to afford the increased costs of the childcare incurred by these types of projects.

> *"I don't think everyone can afford it, but a lot more people could, really. Because it depends on your values and your priorities. You can have a very old car; we have a crappy car that we can't even use now, with this new pollution thing, you know? We go on holiday to the family village in Spain; it's a question of values and priorities. There are families of four who fly off on holiday every year. Well, we don't like that kind of tourism anymore; also, we use the money for other things. For education."*
>
> *M18, Childminder, 41*

In sum, access to social innovation is not available to everyone. In sum, socially innovative projects are only available to those who can opt for them because they have no financial constraints, or to those who opt for them by paying high prices: individual-level sacrifices for mothers (in terms of career) or sacrifices at the family level (in terms of total household income).

Discussion

Our results show that the 0-3 pre-school projects we have analysed can be defined as social innovations both in terms of their means and their ends. On the one hand, they are processes that are built upon the collaboration, collective strengths and participation of their members (Tiwari, 2017). On the other hand, these projects can also be conceived of as forms of empowerment since, through these processes, participants can acquire agency, that is, the ability to act according to their own values (Sen 1985; Gangas, 2015). However, the study reveals a surprising kind of individual empowerment: rather than allowing mothers to further their careers, these projects allow mothers to experience fully involved mothering, learn mothering in a community and participate in the care of their children. This is their main reason for choosing these innovative experiences, and it is in this sense that they feel empowered.

In the light of this study's analysis, some professionals and workers –most of them female– that decide to engage in these innovative collaborative projects could be said to be exercising agency, because of their commitment to these innovative projects. The mothers who choose these projects are highly educated –they all hold university degrees. They value their jobs, but are willing to sacrifice their careers (at least partially) to spend time with their children during their early years.

The need for social innovation in childcare arises because the institutional context does not allow for prolonged maternal care, with the state not funding parental leave up to three years. In fact, the projects studied here fulfil mothers' (or parents') needs and demands that are not covered either by the market or the public sector. These demands concern their wish to be involved in the highly time-consuming activities of caring for and educating their children in their early years. The process of empowerment cannot occur merely at an individual level: a favourable institutional context may act as a facilitator (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007), or when institutional support is lacking, as we argue in this paper, the role of facilitator can be triggered by social innovation (Ziegler, 2018). Citizen engagement in these social innovations in public policy is high: in the case of *care groups,* they actively work to ensure the provision of the services they need, with the risk of (self-) exploitation that co-production might imply. Community participation in these initiatives may palliate the risks derived from re-privatization of the responsibilities for social reproduction.

As we point out above, these innovative experiences not only have costs for mothers, in terms of their careers and the corresponding loss of economic and personal autonomy, but also for the professionals involved. An overwhelming majority of childminders, care group teams, and professionals leading free education nurseries are female; in addition, their field is under-regulated and suffers far from satisfactory labour conditions. Thus, these social innovation projects do not empower the women that work in them.

This situation deepens both the traditional gender divide and inequalities in society. Our analysis shows that these social innovation projects may contribute to keeping social reproduction tasks both gendered and invisible –those traditionally performed by women in the household are thus transferred to the community, where other women continue to perform them. This reinforces conclusions from the existing literature (Bezanson and Carter 2006, Keller-Garganté 2017). But because there is little or no policy frame of reference for these kinds of social innovation initiatives as models of service provisions, these projects find it hard to become resilient and viable. Thus, while these arrangements favour individual empowerment (achieved by those mothers), organizational and community empowerment are not clearly promoted (Haugh and O'Carroll 2016); workers are not empowered and there seems to be no impact on social structures of inequality.

Even though we see capabilities developing on the basis of the relationship between resources, agency and achievements (Gangas 2016), these socially innovative projects reveal a clear socio-economic bias. The lack of institutional support may not only involve individual costs but also social ones, as society as a whole is precluded from potential benefits –namely, enhancing women's capabilities irrespective of their socioeconomic level. Empirical studies are challenging the rhetoric of social innovation (Pol and Ville, 2009): more than democratizing services, they generate a Matthew effect for which only certain mothers – the ones who

were initially more empowered, active and well-off – access these projects and benefit from them. Furthermore, the most innovative and disruptive cases – such as the care groups – are only able to involve a very small number of participants, thus showing limited capacity for scalability (Cukier, 2018). This puts into question whether the proposed solutions can be implemented to meet the needs of the proposed targets on a wider scale.

The idea of *social innovation* in turn stresses the involvement of multiple actors and the participation of citizens in the definition of social policies and delivery of welfare services, especially at the local level. The rhetoric of social innovation has loudly promised the democratisation of welfare through the increased engagement and participation of recipients, but has also been applied instrumentally in the context of retrenchments to mask the progressive de-responsibilisation of public actors in the provisions of goods and services (Oosterlynck *et al.*, 2013). The support that municipalities give to innovative welfare provision experiences is usually accompanied by a reduction in direct public investment in public childcare solutions. The reduced role of the state is supposedly partially compensated by civil society and private actors, but as we see in this paper, it comes at the price of favouring those who are already well-off.

In conclusion, in a context of absence of institutional support, our analysis shows that these services can be chosen only by mothers who have the opportunity to enjoy flexible working times or extended leave, those who can afford to have a break in their careers, and those can pay the high prices charged. This situation reproduces and deepens social inequalities.

Conclusions

Social innovation in 0-3 pre-school care and education is on the rise in the city of Barcelona, in a comparable way to similar but longer-standing projects in other cities across different countries. Although these initiatives differ in some of their characteristics, they all offer mothers who choose them a way of fulfilling needs and demands that institutionalised (public and private) services do not fulfil –namely, they allow mothers to become highly involved in the early care and education of their children. In that sense, these women are empowered because their capacities to pursue their values are enhanced –namely, through the virtuous resources-agency-achievements circle. However, we should also highlight that the empowerment offered by these projects remains at an individual level: in line with previous research, participation in social innovation is not enough to generate a systematic change that transforms the underlying social structures that create gender inequality. Women are still the ones who take care of their children, reproducing the model of male breadwinner/female carer, and the vast majority of professionals involved in the project are women, in unsatisfactory working conditions.

However, because these innovative projects have no public or institutional support, women wanting to participate in them face a trade-off between pursuing their values regarding their children's early care and education and the high costs for their professional careers and economic autonomy. Thus, the socio-economic profile of parents involved in these experiences is biased, as only those who can afford to choose may end up participating in social innovation. Socio-economic and gender inequality is also deepened because not only

are most professionals and workers in these services women, but also because they carry out their activities in unstable, under-regulated contexts. All these individual costs are also costs for society as a whole, since they reduce the capacity of women to contribute to economic growth, and they maintain traditional gender inequities in unpaid work.

The 0-3 pre-school social innovation projects studied in this research could be understood as pursuing change within the individual sphere and through informal channels. Self-selected citizens who participate in them see their capacities to pursue their values concerning 0-3 care and education enhanced because they already have resources and capacities to do so, and can afford to bear the high costs incurred to their careers.

Keeping these innovative experiences within an individualized sphere makes them invisible to society as an alternative that could potentially question some aspects of current institutionalised models of care and education, and could ultimately influence public policy. Some of these aspects include participation, democratization and empowerment regarding public and private services. Thus, change at the formal/institutional level may increase women's resources and opportunities, as triggers that enhance their capacity to pursue their diverse values –as individuals and as a collective–. Of course, such formal changes would have to include a problem-based policy design, namely, an approach that is multi-sectoral. In this sense, changes in 0-3 care and education regulation cannot empower women if no changes are made in labour market regulations and in many other areas where gender inequalities are particularly acute.

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