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Social innovation in early childcare. Does it really empower women?



UAB's researchers had analyzed diverse social innovation projects in early childhood education and care (childminders, care groups and free-education nurseries) to study if they benefit women's empowerment. Their results: the socioeconomic bias and the under-regulation only benefit their users, though partially, and not all the community as a whole.

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Social innovation (SI) and citizens' empowerment are frequently seen as two sides of the same coin. SI includes practices that aim to satisfy basic human needs through horizontal cooperative relations that differ from institutionalized public or private arrangements. One explicit goal of SI is to empower communities, as well as the individuals within them, but this does not necessarily always occur. We address the question 'Does social innovation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) empower women?'

Access to ECEC intersects with aspects such as equal opportunities, gender equality, or the interplay between education, care and work-family balance. Unlike other welfare policies, ECEC is not provided on a free and universal basis in most welfare states, but through a mix of public, private, and subsidised private provision which only covers a small part of the demand, and which offers similar institutionalised models. In this context, social innovation services – characterised by horizontal and community-based governance and workings in which parents and educators are involved – have recently proliferated in this area as an alternative to market and public provision, offering a different approach to the education and care of the under-threes. In this article we explore currently active social innovation ECEC

projects (childminders, care groups and free-education nurseries) in Barcelona, where they began to emerge in the early 2000s as alternatives to existing regulated services. We first analyse whether these projects can be defined as social innovations and, second, to what extent they empower the mothers who choose them. Only if these projects enhance the capabilities of the women who participate in them, may that experience empower them.

The concept of capability refers to the power of a person to achieve its valued choices -that is, to fulfil what they have reason to value-. Thus, we analyse the type of empowerment sought by women participating in those projects by focusing on: i. why mothers choose the projects; ii. the costs of these options for both mothers and educators; iii. the profile of the women who opt for social innovation in ECEC. Our empirical material includes 37 interviews (with key informants, educators, and mothers involved in these non-institutionalised projects), collected 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 projects, as well as the costs (in terms of professional career or labour conditions, for example) for all participants (mothers and educators), and the social impact that stems from the projects being under-regulated by public authorities. When socially innovative projects are under-regulated, their possible benefits in terms of empowerment are mainly individual – that is, they only benefit those who participate in those projects– and do not spill over to communities as a whole.

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References

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