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Childcare arrangements and mothers' satisfaction with work-family balance

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Abstract

A rapidly growing literature has been focusing on the relationship between fertility and life satisfaction. One key and robust finding in this literature is that parents tend to be more satisfied than their childless counterparts, especially in the years around childbearing. It has also been found that men tend to gain more than women in terms of life satisfaction from being parent. In part this finding can be explained by difficulties in conciliation of work and parenthood, which especially weighs on mothers' shoulders. In this paper we focus on working mothers and argue that within this group there is a considerable degree of heterogeneity in work-family balance satisfaction that can be partly attributed to different childcare arrangements and difficulties that mothers can experience with them. We use random effects models on longitudinal data from the Household, Income and Labor Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey (2003-2013). Results show that a balanced mix of paid and unpaid childcare is associate to mothers' higher satisfaction with the work-family balance, while difficulties related to paid childcare - such as the affordability and the flexibility of the care – negatively impact on the satisfaction with work-family reconciliation.

Introduction

The idea that mothers are the “natural caregiver” of their children is rooted in the cultures of most of the present and past societies. Recently, this ideological construct has been downsized and women have been – at least partially – relieved by their irreplaceable role of caregiver within the family. Nevertheless, we are still far from appointing fathers and mothers with the same expectations regarding their involvement and responsibilities in caring their children, especially during the pre-school period. As carrying and giving birth, childcare is still more female’s than male’s prerogatives (Winefield *et al.*, 2011). This happens despite the increased proportion of women – and mothers among them – participating in the paid labour force during the last decades. Consequently, for working mothers doing the “second shift” – working women continuing to do the majority of housework and childcare – (Hochschild, 1989) often implies high level of work-family conflict – i.e. strains derived by pressures from work and family and role incompatibility (Kopelman *et al.* 1983). Work-family balance is the fulfilment of the role-related expectations in family and work, negotiating individual’s involvement in the two life spheres (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007). Being satisfied with work and family roles accomplishment underlies a cognitive and an affective evaluation of the individual’s work-family life: individual’s positively evaluation of her abilities to meet work and family demands results into positive feelings about this appraisal (Valcour, 2007).

The possibility to balance work and family roles does not depend only by individual’s abilities, but also by the partner’s work-family arrangements. Dual earner couples have usually less time to devote to household activities and among them to childcare. However, while individuals can manage housework tasks with flexibility, childcare puts more time constrains in parents’ – and especially mothers – daily life. That is still one of the reasons for which sometimes women exit the labour force when they have small children. As a consequence, outsourcing childcare should allow mothers to better cope with the competing time claims in family and work, at least partially releasing them from their caregiver tasks. At the same time, providing childcare services becomes one of the tools through which governments and markets support family needs for caring and encourage mothers’ attachment to the labour market. If mothers do not participate to the labour market because of parental responsibilities, the society loses contribution to the economic growth from a quite highly educated part of its population (Winefield *et al.* 2011).

Psychology literature has extensively address the implication of work-family conflict on parents’ subjective well-being in dual earner couples. There is also a sociology and economics literature on the effect of the availability and use of childcare services and supports on mothers’ and children’s

outcomes. For the formers, we know that accessibility to childcare services favour mothers' work attachment and fertility (Esping-Andersen 2009; Esping-Andersen & Billari 2012; McDonald 2000a, 2000b; Rindfuss & Brewster 1996; Matysiak and Vignoli, 2008; Baxter, 2004). For the latter, there is a literature highlighting how the use of childcare is positively associated to children's emotional and cognitive development. Nevertheless, we know very little about the effect of using different sources and combinations of paid childcare on mothers' satisfaction with the work-family balance (Brady, 2016). The use of different configuration of paid or unpaid external childcare is also related to parents' needs, children's age and the family policies system. Pre-school children not attending pre-primary school usually require more hours of external childcare and they are usually more demanding in terms of needs. Childcare-centres are often less expensive than other forms of formal childcare, especially where the welfare state provides free services or financial support, and guarantee continuity and higher quality. However, strict opening hours and the location of the centre may not perfectly match the parents' needs, especially for those working non-standard hours. In this case, the availability of unpaid help from relatives (e.g. grandparents) and the affordability of nannies allow more flexibility in childcare, eventually reducing work-family conflict. At the same time, relying only on informal childcare might raise problems of discontinuity and difficulties to obtain long hours.

Difficulties related to cost, time and location of external childcare can therefore reduce the positive return in terms of work-family balance. As a consequence, the possibility to combine different sources of paid and unpaid childcare might compensate the difficulties associated with relying on just one of these sources. Because stressful consequences can be more common among mothers, especially in a cultural context sustaining traditional division of gender roles after the transition to parenthood, our study specifically focus on working women. That is particularly interesting in the Australian case, where the government provides subsidies for private childcare but not public services¹, and mothers usually reduce their presence in the labour market after the arrival of their first child, relying on part-time contracts or abandoning paid work because of childcare. Australia has one of the highest proportions of couples in which only one partner works full time (i.e. 30%, while the OECD average is around 25%), and couples in which the other partner works part-time (i.e. 40%, compared to 20% among OECD countries). At the same time the proportion of working mothers is increasing over time, as the demand for childcare services (de Vaus, 2004). In Australia, the demand for childcare and women's employment are related also because women are still the primary childcare giver in the family (Cassells *et al.*, 2005). They are responsible in outsourcing it

¹ In Australia extra-school childcare services are provided by the private sector. For this reason, government's subsidies have been arranged since 1984 to reduce families' childcare expenditure proportionally to their income.

(Vincent et al. 2004), and they eventually reduce their involvement in the labour market whether working time and time for caring conflict. Consequently, family policy intervention for childcare works in favour of mother's participation to the labour force at an optimum level (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2006).

Background

The recent demographic and psychological literature has wildly shown that having children is far to be the most joyful event in our life. The arrival of a child, and especially the first one, is expected to bring happiness in the couple's daily life, while the difficulties of meeting the child's needs in the short run after the birth usually break the "parental dream". As evidence shows, the subjective well-being of the parents strongly decreases after the birth of a child, while tendencies to adjust are not always observable few years after the birth. Why subjective well-being decreases – on average – after the birth of a child is still a contemporary research issue. However, it is clear that one of the most challenging issue that parents face after the transition to parenthood is finding a satisfactory balance with their involvement in family and working tasks (Tausig and Fenwick, 2001). The new demanding role as parents subtracts time and energy to both paid work and leisure time. Strategy to reconcile childbearing and job-related tasks are especially important for mothers, which traditionally are the ones in charge of caring the child (Hill *et al.*, 2004; Sayer *et al.*, 2004). In other words, the fact that mothers are usually more involved in taking care of their children if compared to fathers is culturally rooted in the traditional division of gender roles (Craig, 2007). As a consequence, mothers more than fathers tend to renounce to work career and labour market participation, at least in a situation where they are not provided with external childcare supports or flexible working hours (Hill *et al.* 2004). Nevertheless, women are increasingly less disposable to accept the opportunity costs of leaving the labour market. First of all, because this means to lose the investment in human capital they made attending high level education. Moreover, nowadays withdrawing from paid work might become a risk for the couple's financial stability (O'Connor, Orloff, & Shaver, 1999). As a consequence couples usually prefer to find a way to reconcile instead of relying on one income.

Obviously, the possibility to reconcile depends at least on three factors: the family policy measures, the labour market regulation and the availability of a network of informal support. Family policies can provide support through public childcare services and financial support for making private services affordable by low income families (Gauthier, 1996; Esping Andersen, 2009). The availability of flexible working hours and part-time contracts can help parents to adjust the timing of childcare and work activities reducing the need for external support (Adserà, 2004; 2005).

Finally, the possibility to rely on relatives and friends represent an additional source of support, reducing the care burden of parents, the economic efforts for outsourcing childcare, and relaxing the time constrain linked to the opening hours of the childcare centres. At the same time, flexible working hours and social network support are not always the best solution to reduce the work-family conflict. On the one hand, part-time has been found associated with lower career prospects and increased level of stress related to the work-family reconciliation (Burchielli *et al.* 2008). On the other hand, support from family and friends might not guarantee continuity and high quality of the care.

The scientific interest on the effect of using formal care services rose clearly during the 70s, especially from psychology. The main question is whether and how outsourcing childcare might damage children's cognitive and emotional development (Scarr, 1993). During the 80s childcare studies start to focus on the quality of care and its effects on children, highlighting the possibility of positive return for children's development (Belsky, 1984). This goes hand in hand with results from studies providing evidence that parents participation to the workforce has positive effects for parents and children, because of the higher social and educational stimulation compared to children with at least one stay-at-home parent (Cass, 2007). Only starting from the 90s the researchers look at the effect of using childcare services on parents' well-being, in particular regarding the work-related stress and the marital quality (Hock *et al.* 1988). In particular, an additional question starts to be whether childcare services are enough flexible and affordable to meet parents' needs, and especially for those working non-standard hours (Baxter and Hand, 2016). This more recent perspective goes hand in hand with the development- in Western countries - of policies promoting the use of non-parental childcare, as one of the interventions to sustain mothers' attachment to the labour force. These policies differ according to the type of welfare state in which they are developed. In liberal countries – such as UK, US and Australia – the government's intervention sustains the development of a private sector of childcare services, through subsidies and tax allowances especially directed to low-income families (Crompton *et al.* 2005). On the opposite side, Scandinavian countries provide free public non-parental childcare plus long parental leaves, a mix that drastically reduces the use of other private/paid childcare forms. In Southern Europe, the common strategy is to rely on informal childcare provided by the enlarged family, because of the lack of widespread and affordable childcare services (Ferrera, 1996). In countries in which childcare services are limited (such as in the Southern Europe) and not universally guaranteed (as in the Anglo-Saxon countries), the matching between parents' working time and opening hours and flexibility of the service become crucial, at least as much as the affordability and quality issues (Brilli *et al.*, 2013). The topic is particularly relevant for parents working non-standard hours, a

common situation among young couples and for those earning lower salaries. On the one hand, they might have difficulties to find childcare centres open for all the time they need; on the other hand, they have few economic recourses for additional forms of childcare (such as a babysitter) to fill the time not covered by the formal childcare. The flexibility problem in using formal childcare seems to be the reason why low-income parents – largely working non-standard hours – have been found on average less satisfied about childcare services (Fuller *et al.* 1996; Curtis, 1997). An Australian study (Baxter and Hand, 2016), conducted on a sample of working parents, investigates to which extent childcare services are flexible enough to meet needs of parents working non-standard hours. Through some in-depth interviews, the authors find that [1] matching working time with opening hours, [2] affordability and [3] proximity of the childcare centre are the three aspects that weigh more on parents' judgment about the satisfaction with the childcare. In particular, using other forms of paid childcare (such as babysitters) in order to compensate for non-matching hours is too expensive for most of them. The proximity problems is often an issues in country where paid childcare is not diffuse. The availability of childcare services in Australia is very geographical-related issue: one third of the children under three years use centre-based childcare services (Breunig *et al.* 2011), but the proportion is lower in the rural areas and higher in the urban areas. That means availability is more a local than a national problem. Affordability and proximity are related also to the quality problem, at least in Australia (Mocan, 2007; Breunig *et al.* 2011): this means that areas in which parents experience difficulties to access paid childcare or low-income parents are usually less satisfied with the quality and the cost of the services. In Australia, difficulties related to childcare about accessibility, affordability and quality has been also found significantly negatively related to mothers' propensity to stay into the labour market (Breunig *et al.* 2011), confirming the policy relevance of the childcare issues.

Consequently, the use of unpaid childcare (relatives, friends) can become necessary to overcome the limited use of paid childcare because of availability, proximity, cost or time constrains. However, also cultural factors can lead working parents to prefer grandparents' help instead of paid childcare services: for example, individuals with traditional gender attitudes and values might think that grandparents can be trusted more in caring own children (Del Boca *et al.* 2005; El-Attar, 2007).

Sample, variables and method

The Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia is a panel survey carried on since 2001 a sample of households, representative of the Australian population. We use data from 10 waves (2003-2013) of the survey, selecting a sample of 1811 working partnered mothers – corresponding

to 5577 observations – with at least one child under 14 years of age. The sample is obtained after discarding cases with missing information on the satisfaction with the work-family balance, on the use of paid and unpaid childcare and on childcare difficulties and those respondents that do not use or intend to use paid childcare. In particular full-information on childcare related difficulties are available since wave 3 (year: 2003).

The dependent variable is the satisfaction with the work-family balance. It is asked every year as the level of satisfaction with the flexibility to balance work and family involvement, on a 11-points scale ranging from 0 (completely unsatisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied).

The two main covariates are the proportion of unpaid childcare used over the total amount of non-parental childcare, and the experience of a set of difficulties in using external childcare.

About the use of paid and unpaid childcare, HILDA reports the number of hours spent in various form of childcare², for all the children present in the household. We sum the total number of hours spent in unpaid forms of childcare (provided by relatives and friends) and the total number of hours spent in paid forms of childcare (in private centres or at home childcare provided by professionals). We generate a ratio calculated as the number of hours of unpaid childcare over the total number of hours spent in both paid and unpaid childcare in a week. The ratio values 0 when only paid childcare is used, and 1 when only unpaid childcare is used.

Regarding the difficulties associated with the use of external childcare, questions are asked only to individuals using or intending to use paid childcare. A filter has been created in order to identify individuals using or intending to use paid childcare, on the basis of the question “At any time in the last 12 months have you used, or thought about using, any of these forms of child care so you (or your partner) could undertake paid work? You only need to answer yes or no”. To this subsample of individuals, HILDA questionnaire asks to “Pick a number between 0 and 10 to indicate how much of a difficulty each of the following have been for you in the last 12 months”, where the difficulties are related to:

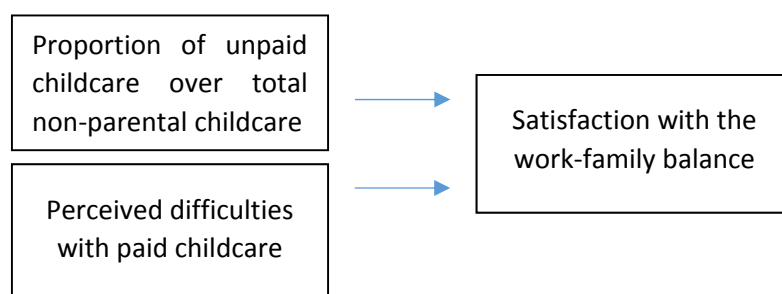
- a) finding good quality childcare
- b) finding a place at the childcare centre of choice
- c) finding care my children are happy with
- d) with the cost of childcare
- e) finding care during the school holidays
- f) finding care for a difficult or special needs child
- g) getting care for the hours needed

- h) juggling multiple childcare arrangements
- i) finding a childcare centre in the right location
- j) finding the right person to take care of my child
- k) finding care for a sick child
- l) finding care at short notice

The last difficulty – i.e. find care at short notice – has been introduced in HILDA survey since wave 3, representing the reason why we start to analyse HILDA data from that wave.

About the relationship between the work-family balance satisfaction, the proportion of unpaid childcare and the difficulties with paid childcare we hypothesize the model in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Hypothesized relationship between the proportion of unpaid childcare over the total childcare, the difficulties in using paid childcare and the satisfaction with the work-family balance.



In particular we expect that a high proportion of unpaid childcare and experiencing low level of difficulties related to the paid childcare would increase the satisfaction with the work-family balance. About the relationship between the proportion of unpaid childcare and the perception of difficulties in using paid childcare, we might assume that those perceiving high difficulties with paid childcare would reduce the amount of the latter. However, in our sample the amount of paid childcare shows small changes over time, keeping constant the number of children in pre-school and school ages. As a consequence, we can assume that parents tend to optimize the use of different sources of external childcare at the very beginning. Therefore, reported difficulties in using paid childcare seems not be related to substantial changes in the paid childcare arrangements. However, the adoption of different paid-unpaid childcare arrangements at the very beginning might be related

to the perception of difficulties in using – or intending to use – paid childcare. Because of the endogeneity of the relationships, our study does not assume any causal claims. Our aim is to provide evidences about the association between childcare arrangements and working mothers' satisfaction with their work-family balance, showing that what the literature suggests are the main difficulties in using paid childcare can influence the relationship.

We model these relationships using random effects³ regressions, controlling for some socio-demographic characteristics and other childcare related information. We model first [1] the relationship between the ratio of unpaid childcare over the total external childcare and the satisfaction with the work-family balance. In a second step, we model [2] the effect of the ratio on the perceived difficulties with paid childcare. Finally, we run a model for [3] work-family balance satisfaction including both the predictors.

The proportion of unpaid childcare over the total childcare is included both in linear and quadratic form. About the control variables, we include the classical socio-demographic information, such the age of the respondent, the highest level of education obtained - primary, secondary or tertiary -, the quartiles of income, the number of children - distinguishing between in pre-school and school age - and the fact that the respondent is married or living in de facto relationship. Because the outcome is the satisfaction with the work-family balance, we include also the controls for the number of hours of paid work, housework and childcare of the respondent and her partner. Finally, we control on whether the respondents live in rural or urban areas, as proxy for the availability of a number and close childcare services, and for the fact that they receive allowances and tax-benefits for childcare.

Results

According to the national statistics, part-time contracts are common strategy to reduce work-family conflict for Australian mothers with young children. Consistently with these results, mothers working part-time are the 64% of our sample, with a higher proportion among those have at least one child aged 0-1 (73%) and significantly increasing with the number of children, especially if they are in pre-primary school age. The fact that part-time is associated with the perception of a low work-family conflict is confirmed by our results. In fact, the average level of satisfaction with the work-family balance in the sample is 7.6, with part-time workers significantly⁴ more satisfied with the balance (8) compared to the full-time workers (7.1). The relationship might be spurious, because

³ Fixed effects regressions give same results than random effects. With Hausman test we cannot reject the null hypothesis that both fixed and random effects models are consistent, supporting the decision to take the most efficient between the two estimators – i.e. the random effects model.

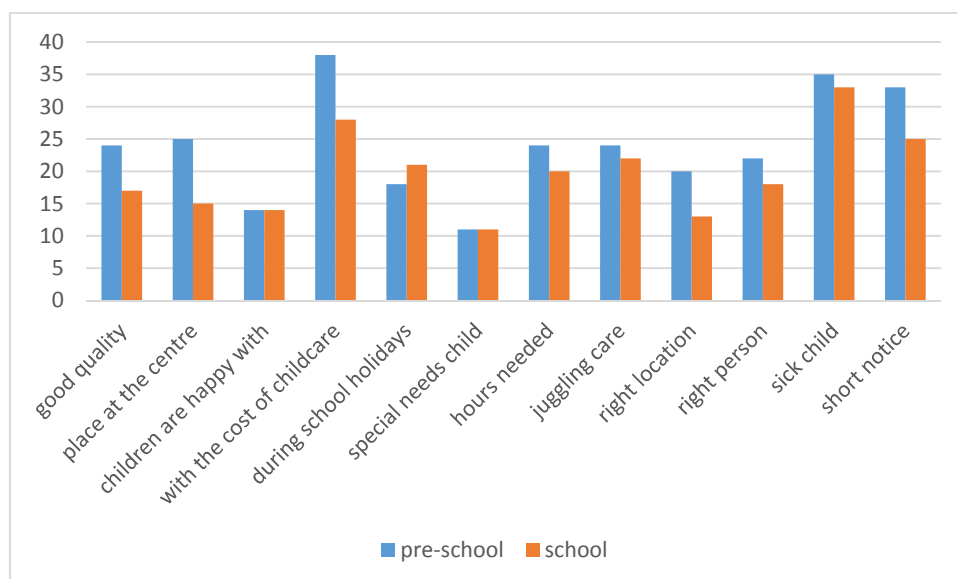
⁴ $p \leq 0.001$

women with more traditional gender attitudes and not experiencing financial strains might not perceive the reduction of the working hours as source of dissatisfaction.

The proportion of paid or unpaid childcare can be due to several factors, such as the availability of external help from family and friends, or the affordability of the private childcare services. In the total sample of observations, about 48% of mothers use only unpaid childcare, while 25% use only paid childcare. The remaining 27% use a combination of them. As expected, the proportion of families using only unpaid childcare is higher among those with only children at school age (88%) compared to those having only children in pre-school age (25%). Children at school age demand less in terms of both time and efforts, and sometimes they can look to themselves. Pre-school children with working parents needs more guarantees of continuity of childcare and longer hours, which usually are given by *ad hoc* care centres and services.

Regarding the difficulties in using or intending to use paid childcare, we can observe that, as expected, mothers with pre-school children declare more frequently to perceive difficulties in the use of paid childcare (see Figure 2). These are especially related to the cost of the service and the flexibility of the care, in particular when it is needed with short notice and when the child is sick.

Figure 2. Mothers perceiving difficulties with the use of paid childcare (%), with at least one school or pre-school child



The results from the random effects regression models shade light on the relationship between the use of paid and unpaid childcare, the difficulties in using paid childcare and the consequences in terms of mother's satisfaction with the work-family balance. As anticipated, we perform three models: [1] the first shape the effect of the use of different combinations of paid and unpaid

childcare on the satisfaction with the reconciliation; [2] the second model address the question of whether different combinations of paid-unpaid childcare are related to the perception of the difficulties in using paid childcare; [3] finally, the third model include the childcare covariates to explain differences in the level of satisfaction with the work-family balance.

The aim of the first model is to test whether the use of unpaid childcare reduces the difficulties to reconcile, consequently increasing mother’s satisfaction with the work-family balance. The results are reported in Figure 3 and Table 1. The highest level of reconciliation is experienced by mothers which can count on both paid and unpaid childcare. The possibility to combine different sources of childcare reduce the limits linked to rely on just one form: unpaid childcare brings usually more flexibility – e.g. the problem of opening and closing hours is not so prominent – while paid childcare assures more continuity. The “fifty-fifty” mixed seems to be the most comfortable for working mothers’ needs. Moreover, more time the mother and the father dedicate to childcare, higher is the satisfaction with the work-family balance. Nevertheless, while mother’s involvement in housework tasks is also related to higher satisfaction, this is not the case if the partner increases the time for domestic tasks. For both the partners, the time dedicated to work is negatively associate with mother’s satisfaction with the reconciliation, and in particular mother’s part-time increases the satisfaction with the work-family balance.

Graph 3. Effect of the proportion of unpaid childcare over the total outsourced childcare on the satisfaction with the work-family balance.

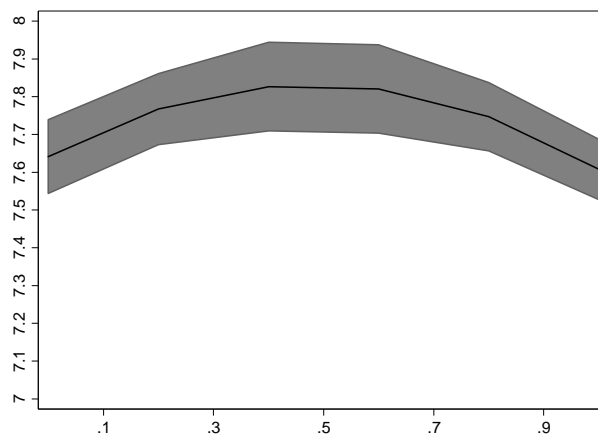


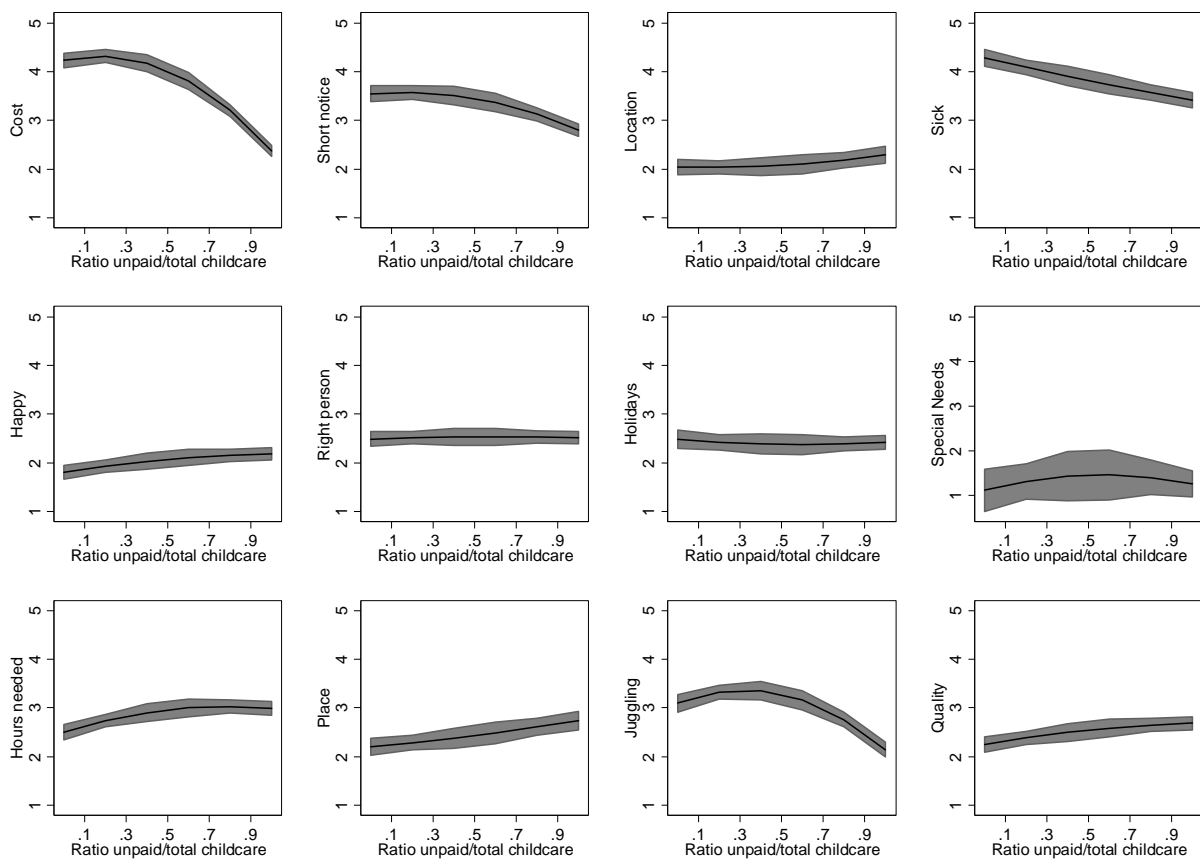
Table 1.

	<i>Coef.</i>	<i>Std. Err.</i>	
Ratio hours unpaid childcare over total			
Ratio unpaid/tot (linear)	0,796	0,396	**
Ratio unpaid/total (quadratic)	-0,804	0,376	**
<i>Control variables</i>			
Number of children in household			
number of pre-school children	0,026	0,069	
number of school children	0,023	0,049	
Age			
	0,013	0,008	
Education			
secondary level of education	-0,076	0,127	
tertiary level of education	-0,288	0,133	**
Household equivalent income			
household eq. income - 2nd quartile	-0,218	0,088	***
household eq. income - 3rd quartile	-0,328	0,093	***
household eq. Income - 4th quartile	-0,451	0,103	***
Marital status			
cohabiting	0,061	0,121	
Living in rural or urban areas			
living in rural area	0,011	0,091	
Tax benefits			
childcare allowances	-0,091	0,071	
Hours spent in activities			
hours paid work	-0,001	0,000	
hours paid work (partner)	-0,001	0,000	
hours of childcare	0,007	0,002	***
hours of childcare (partner)	0,008	0,003	***
hours of housework	0,007	0,003	**
hours of housework (partner)	-0,026	0,006	***
hours of household herrands	0,008	0,006	
hours of household herrands (partner)	0,003	0,009	
constant	7,223	0,340	***

We can suppose that the use of unpaid childcare can compensate and reduce the negative effects of the difficulties related to paid childcare, such as the flexibility and the cost of the service. In the second step of the analysis we aim to test this eventuality. We find that the effect is present for some difficulties, especially those related to the flexibility and cost (see Figure 4). About the cost, using only paid care or more paid than unpaid care is associated with higher perception of difficulties related to the affordability of childcare. Similar paths are observable for the difficulties

related with care needed with short notice or when the child is sick. In this last case the effect is much more linear than in the other two, with a constant effect of the unpaid care over the reduction of the perception of the difficulty. The difficulties with juggling multiple forms of childcare are stronger perceived by those using both paid and unpaid care, where the proportion of unpaid care is smaller than the paid care. All the other paths are almost constant or not significant.

Graph 4. Effect of the proportion of unpaid childcare over the total outsourced childcare on the perception of childcare difficulties.



Because affordability and flexibility seem to be related to the configuration of childcare arrangements, we can expect that the experience of such difficulties plays a role in determining the level of mothers' satisfaction with the work-family reconciliation. For this reason, we decide to include two indicators – one for the difficulty related to affordability and one for the difficulty related to flexibility of the care – in the analysis of the relationship between the configuration of paid/unpaid childcare and the satisfaction with the work-family balance. In particular we include the

difficulties related to the cost of the care and the availability of care with short notice. The choice has been made on the base of the number of available observations on these variables (see Table 2).

Table 2. Frequencies of observations and missing values for each difficulty with paid childcare.

	Observations	Missing
good quality	4580	997
place at the centre	3810	1767
children are happy with	4590	987
with the cost of childcare	5497	80
during school holidays	3597	1980
special needs child	858	4719
hours needed	4702	875
juggling care	3500	2077
right location	3875	1702
right person	4657	920
sick child	4424	1153
short notice	5506	71

The inclusion of these two covariates partially changes the results of the first model (see Figure 5 and Table 3). We can observe that while the “fifty-fifty” mix of paid and unpaid childcare is still the best option in terms of mother’s reconciliation satisfaction, relying only on unpaid childcare is associated with the lowest level of satisfaction with the work-family balance. This means that formal childcare can really help mothers to achieve a more satisfying balance with family and work involvement if a more affordable and flexible service is provided. On the contrary, relying on relatives and friends’ for sure help to overcome difficulties related to the cost and the strict opening hours of the care service, but it probably leads mothers to ask for the minimum time needed. If finding a balance between work and family mostly depends on the availability of external informal helps, this require to juggle with less structured care availability that does not guarantee continuity. In this sense this might increase the stress and insecurity related to work-family reconciliation.

Graph 5. Effect of the proportion of unpaid childcare over the total outsourced childcare and perceived difficulties in using childcare on the satisfaction with the work-family balance.

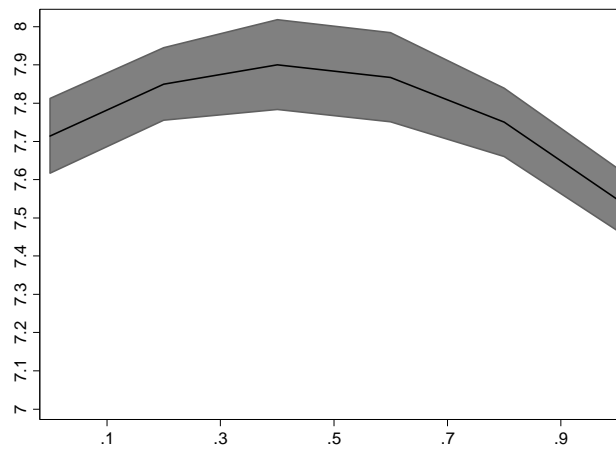


Table 3.

	<i>Coef.</i>	<i>Std. Err.</i>	
Difficulties with childcare			
Difficulties with cost	-0,034	0,012	***
Difficulties with short notice	-0,034	0,011	***
Ratio hours unpaid childcare over total			
Ratio unpaid/tot (linear)	0,865	0,395	**
Ratio unpaid/total (quadratic)	-1,020	0,378	***
Control variables			
Number of children in household			
number of pre-school children	0,046	0,069	
number of school children	0,039	0,049	
Age	0,011	0,008	
Education			
secondary level of education	-0,056	0,126	
tertiary level of education	-0,248	0,132	*
Household equivalent income			
household eq. income - 2nd quartile	-0,207	0,087	***
household eq. income - 3rd quartile	-0,308	0,093	***
household eq. Income - 4th quartile	-0,446	0,102	***
Marital status			
cohabiting	0,062	0,120	
Living in rural or urban areas			
living in rural area	-0,006	0,090	
Tax benefits			
childcare allowances	-0,092	0,071	
Hours spent in activities			
hours paid work	-0,001	0,000	
hours paid work (partner)	-0,001	0,000	
hours of childcare	0,008	0,002	***
hours of childcare (partner)	0,008	0,003	***

hours of housework	0,007	0,003	**
hours of housework (partner)	-0,025	0,006	***
hours of household herrands	0,009	0,006	
hours of household herrands (partner)	0,003	0,009	
constant	7,538	0,344	***

Conclusion

Which combination of paid and unpaid childcare allows mothers to reach a satisfying flexibility in balancing family and role involvement? At the very beginning of the paper, we argued that the relevance of answering such question lies in its policy implications. Providing parents with childcare services that adequately match their care needs means to sustain women's presence in the labour market. This because mothers are the primary caregiver for their children, and the parent that are more prone to abandon the work career for caring reasons. Past and present studies show that flexibility, affordability and availability of external childcare are important prerequisites for mothers' full employment in labour market. Unpaid helps by friends and relatives (usually grandparents) does not suffer for the affordability and – often – flexibility problems. But unpaid childcare is not always available, and it does not guarantee continuity, that might represent a problem especially for grandparents at certain ages. Another reason for why parents might prefer paid childcare is the quality of the care, which is usually higher if provided in care centres and by professionals. Taking everything into account, there are reasons for thinking that turning to paid childcare might not be parents' last chance when unpaid childcare is not available. In this case, offering high quality services, with flexible opening hours at low costs, can be an incentive to mothers for working full time.

Our results support the argument for improving childcare services supply. Under the same conditions, working mothers that enjoy more work-family balance are those that can access a fifty-fifty combination of paid and unpaid childcare. This configuration represents the optimum in our model, if we do not consider the possible difficulties associated with the use of paid childcare – i.e. scarce flexibility, availability, accessibility and quality. In particular, the lack of flexible and affordable care services are the difficulties that negatively affect the use of paid childcare. At the net of these difficulties, mothers that use more paid childcare than unpaid are often more satisfied with the work-family arrangements compared to those that rely mainly on unpaid childcare.

Therefore, improving the flexibility and the affordability of paid childcare services seems to be a way to increase mothers' satisfaction with the work-family balance, that might bring as a consequence an increasing presence and stability of women in the labour market. The issue might become even more urgent if we consider that grandparents proximity is not so expected in a context where young people work and live at long distance from their original family, and when age at first parenthood is increasing.

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