



FEATURED SCHOLAR

Each month the Work and Family Researchers Network spotlights the contributions of a scholar who is making significant advances in understanding work-family concerns. We are delighted to present the following interview with María José González.



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Experts Panel Link:

<https://wfrn.org/expert/m-jose-gonzalez-phd/>

WFRN - *How did you first get introduced to work-family issues and become a researcher in this field?*

María José - During my undergraduate studies at the UAB (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), I was very lucky to have a professor who was a pioneer in geography and gender studies and who stimulated the curiosity of the students. Since this influential experience, my academic focus has been consistently drawn towards this field. Although, particularly during my doctoral studies, I encountered opinions that described it as a 'very feminized field' and arguably less prestigious than other branches of sociology - an attitude that reflected the androcentric perspective prevailing in the social sciences - I remained undeterred. Fortunately, such comments have never deterred me from passionately pursuing research in the sociology of the family and addressing gender inequalities.

WFRN - *How did you first get involved with the WFRN? What do you value most about the organization?*

María José - I first heard about the WFRN through a research colleague. This colleague spoke highly of the conferences, which led me to attend several times, and I plan to attend this year's conference. What attracts me to the WFRN are several distinctive aspects: (1) the internationalization: despite its American focus, I sense a growing openness to international and especially European contributions, which adds a valuable dimension to its scope; (2) Diversity of topics: the conference stands out for its comprehensive coverage of various topics within family, gender and diversity studies, offering a rich variety of discussions and perspectives; (3) Intimate and friendly atmosphere: despite its considerable size in terms of participants, I appreciate the intimate atmosphere it fosters. This sense of closeness facilitates meaningful exchange among participants and creates a conducive environment for networking and collaboration; (4) Authentic fusion of academia and policy: what sets it apart is the authentic blend of academic contributions and practical policy insights. This fusion enhances the authenticity of the conference and provides a holistic view of the field by bridging theory and practice.

WFRN - *Tell us about your current research, what are you studying?*

María José - As always, I am involved in several ongoing research projects. At the moment, my main focus is on three different areas, both of which focus on the Spanish context. First, I am involved in investigating the effectiveness of work-family balance policies in promoting more egalitarian relations regarding the division of domestic and caring responsibilities. Our unique approach is to examine this relationship through the

lens of social class - an often-neglected dimension in the sociology of the family. Social class serves as a crucial mediating variable between family policies and the division of unpaid work within couples. A clear example of this is the part-time parental leave policy in Spain, which is characterized by a social class bias (i.e. it is more common among workers with permanent contracts) and a gender bias (i.e. mothers are the main users of the policy). Ultimately, a well-intentioned policy ends up reinforcing traditional gender roles within families and, as a result, widening the gender pay gap. At the same time, I am actively involved in research on the challenges that children pose to mothers' careers. Finally, I am part of a collaborative research group looking at the impact of children on fathers' earnings. Our study uses registry data from 4% of the population registered with the social security system (the Spanish "Continuous Sample of Working Life" MCVL) and reconstructs the employment trajectories of men between 2005 and 2021. This approach allows us to quantify the impact of having one, two or more children on fathers' earnings by household type (i.e., men living alone, in heterosexual couples or in same-sex couples) and occupational status. We want to investigate whether there is a 'fatherhood premium' - that is, higher earnings after becoming a father - in the Spanish context.

WFRN - *What are your big findings? Did you make any unexpected discoveries?*

María José - In the area of work-life balance policies, our research shows a clear trend: individuals with higher occupational status and stable jobs have greater access to such policies. For these workers, work-life balance policies are often complemented by company incentives such as more flexible working hours or childcare subsidies. Interestingly, however, this increased access to work-life balance policies does not necessarily translate into the adoption of non-traditional childcare practices within couples, as men do not feel addressed. This raises the question of the extent to which work-life balance policies contribute to promoting gender equality, in addition to supporting the reconciliation of work and care responsibilities. The main conclusion is that policies that do not include financial compensation are highly ineffective in achieving the twin goals of promoting work-life balance and gender equality, as fathers' participation is very low. We cannot promote work-life balance at the expense of gender equality.

Our research also highlights the need to integrate social class considerations into analyses of the division of labor. It also highlights the key role of challenging traditional gender norms within firms in bringing about a substantial change in the expectations of male and female employees to make equal use of work-life balance policies. Finally, our research highlights the need for further research with longitudinal data that will allow us

to delve deeper into the complex relationships between gender ideology, workplace culture and unpaid work sharing practices of mothers and fathers across the life course.

WFRN - *How can your research guide the formulation of social policy?*

María José - The research that my colleagues and I have conducted over the years underlines the considerable progress that women have made in education and employment. However, there is still a significant imbalance in the distribution of unpaid work within couples, particularly in the area of childcare, which requires considerable time and daily availability, especially in the early years. Regrettably, the sharing of this responsibility remains disproportionately skewed. It is encouraging to note that work-family policies have played a key role in reducing the penalties associated with motherhood and that recent reforms have raised expectations. A significant step forward has been taken with the introduction of equal and non-transferable maternity and paternity leave in Spain from 1 January 2021. This ground-breaking policy, which provides for the same leave duration for both parents (16 weeks each), signals a clear public commitment to shared parental responsibility. It also sends a clear message to companies that statistical discrimination in recruitment and promotion on the basis of perceived family responsibilities should no longer make sense, as mothers and fathers take the same amount of leave when children are born. While the impact of this reform has yet to be fully assessed, early indications are promising. Historical data shows that men are more likely to take up work-family policies if they are given appropriate economic compensation, such as a 100% contribution base in this particular case. These developments mark a positive trend towards a fairer distribution of care responsibilities and a transformative change in social norms.

WFRN - *How do you integrate work-family topics in your teaching and/or training? Do you have an assignment or approach that is especially effective?*

María José - I feel very fortunate to have the opportunity to teach on topics related to my research and to engage students across generations, from undergraduates to masters and PhD students. In recent years I have observed a remarkably rapid development in students' awareness and sensitivity to issues of gender identity and family diversity. In particular, there has been a marked improvement in their prior education on these issues and a commendable embrace of diversity. I find that today's young university students have a remarkably unbiased and open perspective. Using a highly participatory approach in my teaching has proved effective in harnessing their receptiveness. I particularly enjoy linking class topics with non-academic resources such as gripping novels, films or graphic novels, which serve as accessible media to stimulate discussion and resonate with students. These creative materials often offer a nuanced perspective

that fosters a dynamic learning environment. With undergraduates, I use a 'problem-based learning' methodology, which provides students with a challenge to engage with and encourages them to generate research questions they wish to explore. This approach not only promotes critical thinking, but also empowers students to take an active role in shaping the direction of their academic enquiry. Overall, this interactive and interdisciplinary approach to teaching has proven to be not only effective, but also rewarding in fostering a rich and engaging educational experience for both myself and my students.

WFRN - *What advice would you give to graduate students or those early in their professional careers?*

María José - Navigating an academic career has become increasingly competitive and presents formidable challenges to advancement. It is crucial for young academics to be aware of the costs associated with this career path, particularly the arduous task of securing a stable position. It is also important to keep an open mind, given the unpredictability of where one might end up working, be it in another country or at another university. From my point of view, collaborative publishing is paramount for postdoctoral academics in the super-competitive context of academia. Collaboration not only facilitates substantive learning, but also ensures exposure to different perspectives. I also find it especially beneficial to work with academics who share a personal affinity, who are friends or who can develop into lasting friendships. Beyond academic/career rewards, it is equally important to emphasize the joy of the process, to practice generosity and to foster a sense of community. The academic journey is inherently challenging, so it is imperative to cultivate an environment that mitigates rather than exacerbates the difficulties of academic life. For women in academia, identifying and developing relationships with established female mentors is invaluable. These female mentors can provide crucial guidance at critical junctures, offering insights into how to publish in high-impact journals and how to effectively manage an academic career. Sharing wisdom and experience with mentors can make a significant contribution to the professional development and success of early career researchers, ensuring a smoother transition into the competitive landscape of academia.

ABOUT THE WFRN

The Work and Family Researchers Network's mission is to facilitate virtual and face-to-face interaction among academic work and family researchers from a broad range of fields as well as engage the next generation of work and family scholars. The WFRN welcomes the participation of policy makers and workplace practitioners as it seeks to

promote knowledge and understanding of work and family issues among the community of global stakeholders.

To learn more about the WFRN, please visit our website [WFRN.ORG](https://wfrn.org). To become a member, please click on this link <https://wfrn.org/become-a-member/>.