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(Un)doing gender in female breadwinner households: Gender relations and structural change

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Abstract

The paper explores working class couples' experiences of female-breadwinning during the Great Recession in Spain. It examines the extent to which couples' adaptations to these gender-atypical work-family arrangements have led to processes of (un)doing gender. The study is based on the analysis of 24 semi-structured biographical interviews and life history calendars with men and women in 12 heterosexual couples who have gone through different breadwinning statuses during their trajectory. Findings show that men whose partners were primary breadwinners for a period make the greatest effort to preserve the male-breadwinner illusion. In contrast, female breadwinners identify with a co-breadwinner model and do not understate their own economic contribution. Men's insufficient participation in housework and child care is experienced by women with disapproval, which turns into open conflict when the women perform the bulk of such work. The paper concludes that adaptation to unconventional arrangements can constitute a catalyst for processes that undo gender, but more qualitative longitudinal research is needed to determine how economic and normative factors interact dynamically across different countries and social groups in shaping these processes.

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KEYWORDS

(un)doing gender, breadwinning, co-breadwinner, female breadwinner, housework and child care, male breadwinner

1 | INTRODUCTION

Work-family arrangements are often viewed as the result of negotiation between partners embracing different gender role attitudes and drawing on different levels of resources. However, the allocation of labor and resources does not merely respond to forces within the household, but depends on what occurs outside. Labor divisions are the result of continuous negotiations that occur within structurally constrained environments, shaped by public policies and labor market conditions (Haas et al., 2006; O'Reilly & Nazio, 2014). The changing panorama of work-family arrangements across Europe must be understood as the intersection of the transformations of the household, the state and the economy. In a context of growing employment insecurity and women's rising educational attainment and labor force participation, dual-earner arrangements are becoming the norm. Women's earnings are increasingly important for household economies, and the proportion of female-breadwinner households, where the woman is the sole or main earner, is rising in many countries in Europe (Vitali & Arpino, 2016). This household type became most evident during the 2008 economic recession, particularly in Eastern and Central European countries and in Southern Europe (Dotti Sani, 2018; Sánchez-Mira & O'Reilly, 2019). The growing importance of female breadwinning has raised questions about its potential for transforming gender relations. Both quantitative (Kramer et al., 2013; Vitali & Arpino, 2016; Winslow-Bowe, 2006) and qualitative (Chesley, 2011, 2017) studies have shown that the increased numbers of female-breadwinner couples are due mostly to men's weakened employment position rather than to the diffusion of gender-egalitarian attitudes. We know little about the consequences of this type of arrangement for gender relations in the long term. A handful of qualitative studies have looked at situations of "forced" female breadwinning in the US (Chesley, 2011, 2017; Legerski & Cornwall, 2010). This paper contributes to this literature by examining the meanings attributed to breadwinning and the (re)negotiation of labor divisions in a sample of households affected by job loss during the Great Recession in Spain.

Scholars have argued that periods of economic or social disruption are potential sites for change in gender relations (Deutsch, 2007; Risman, 2009). Changing structural conditions can push couples into gender-atypical work-family arrangements. This may lead individuals to adopt gender-flexible domestic practices, which may in turn favor the adoption of more flexible attitudes (Chesley, 2011). The paper explores these hypotheses, focusing on a sample of working-class households composed of manual and construction workers, and semi-skilled and unskilled services employees, during the Great Recession in Spain. This country suffered severe (male) job losses and a notable increase in female-breadwinner households during the crisis, particularly among the working class (Sánchez-Mira, 2020). The paper considers the extent to which non-conventional work-family arrangements triggered a change in gender roles, by looking at couples' everyday practices (Sullivan, 2004). It examines the meanings attributed to women's breadwinning role and analyses the extent to which there was a renegotiation of the division of housework and child care. The paper considers the interactional level as a potential site for change in gender norms and practices, and for resistance and challenge to the gender order (Lyonette & Crompton, 2015).

2 | BREADWINNING, HOMEMAKING AND GENDER BOUNDARIES IN THE HOUSEHOLD

Who in the household provides economically, and who is in charge of homemaking and caregiving, has been a fundamental distinction in the definition of gender boundaries in western industrialized societies (Potuchek, 1997). From a "doing gender" perspective, labor divisions and their gendered meanings constitute the symbolic expression of gender

differences in the household (Ferree, 1990). Women's recognition as breadwinners is not simply derived from their economic contribution, but is a matter of symbolic negotiation (Hood, 1986). Men often keep their provider role regardless of their earnings, while women are not always considered breadwinners, despite earning the same as or more than their partners (Potuchek, 1997).

Research on female-breadwinner couples has been particularly illustrative of the symbolic negotiation of the breadwinner role. Tichenor's (1999) US study showed that both men and women implemented strategies to preserve the illusion of the husband's economic responsibility, by underplaying the woman's role as economic provider. Jurczyk et al.'s (2019) German female-breadwinner couples also conducted "normalization" practices to reassure themselves and others of their adaptation to gender norms despite their gender-atypical arrangements. Chesley's (2011, 2017) US research showed that men struggled with their identities as economic providers, while women downplayed their status as primary earners to avoid undermining their husbands' masculinity.

The other side of the coin to the construction of the provider role is the negotiation of the gender division of housework and child care. The value attached to men's and women's employment and earnings shapes power relations in the household, and is intimately related to how work and care are divided (Nadim, 2016). Studies on the divisions of housework and child care offer contrasting hypotheses derived from "relative resources," "time availability" and "doing gender" theories (Fauser, 2019). The "relative resources" explanation argues that the division of housework and child care is the result of a process of negotiation, and posits that the spouse who brings more resources to the partnership will have more power to induce the other partner to perform more housework and child care. According to the "time availability" approach, the partner who has lower labor-market involvement, and thus more time available, will also perform more housework and child care. Finally, the "doing gender" perspective argues that the division of housework and child care is central to the construction of masculinities and femininities, and that couples "do gender" as they carry out gender-differentiated divisions of these tasks (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

A growing body of longitudinal research has supported the "relative resources" and "time availability" hypotheses to different degrees. In Germany, the division of housework and child care becomes more unequal over the course of a marriage and during the transition to parenthood, mostly regardless of the spouses' relative contribution (Kühhirt, 2012; Nitsche & Grunow, 2016). In Sweden, by contrast, if a woman's economic dependency on her partner decreases over time, her share of housework will decrease too (Evertsson & Neramo, 2007). Similar support for the "relative resources" hypothesis has been found in the US (Fetterolf & Rudman, 2014). Concerning the "time availability" explanation, Gough and Killewald (2011) showed that the increase in housework by unemployed women was double that of unemployed men in the US. In Germany, the increase in housework by unemployed individuals is gendered, with women increasing their investment in female-typed tasks and men in male-typed tasks (Fauser, 2019).

In Spain, studies based on cross-sectional data from the Spanish Time Use Survey (2002–2003 and 2009–2010) have shown that men are likely to be more involved in child care when they are unemployed, when they earn less than their female counterparts, when they have non-traditionally-masculine jobs, when they have more time available, and when their spouses are not available after 5 p.m. (Fernandez-Lozano, 2019; Flaquer et al., 2019). Bueno and Grau-Grau (2021) showed that some men who are willing to take unpaid part-time parental leave do so because their partners have better career prospects or less schedule flexibility. Although female-breadwinner couples are more egalitarian than other household types, women continue to perform more housework and child care (García Román, 2020).

On the whole, although relative resources and time availability do matter, studies show that gender norms remain salient for explaining the gender division of housework and child care in households with gender-atypical arrangements. Rather than being mutually exclusive, these explanations should be regarded as interacting with each other (Lyonette & Crompton, 2015).

Qualitative research has revealed varying degrees of conflict concerning these unequal divisions. Jurczyk et al. (2019) showed that inequalities in the division of domestic labor were often accepted or tolerated by female breadwinners, and found evidence of "gender display," with women performing disproportionate amounts of domestic labor as compensation for "being allowed" to work. In contrast, Lyonette and Crompton (2015) found that UK women who out-earned their husbands actively challenged their partner's insufficient contribution to housework. In turn,

Legerski and Cornwall's (2010) study of former workers of a US steel manufacturing plant who were now among the long-term unemployed found that their wives were unwilling to press for more equitable labor divisions out of concern for their husbands' emotional state. No studies so far have explored female breadwinning in Spain using a qualitative approach.

The latter two studies remind us of the importance of considering class differences when analyzing labor divisions. Hochschild (1989) found that working-class couples underestimated men's participation in housework and child care to comply with hegemonic gender norms, while middle-class men would overestimate their involvement. In a similar vein, Lyonette and Crompton (2015) argue that the outsourcing of domestic work allows the "spoken egalitarianism" of middle-class couples. Despite holding more traditional gender norms, working-class men are often forced to engage more in housework, resulting in a "lived egalitarianism" (Usdansky, 2011). Fernández-Lozano's (2019) quantitative evidence from Spain supports the questioning of the egalitarian "myth" of the highly educated.

In general, the literature suggests that the negotiation of employment and household responsibilities is distinctly different in working-class families, which tend to embrace more traditional gender norms, but which suffer from limited employment opportunities and low wages (Legerski & Cornwall, 2010). These households are in turn more likely to be affected by economic downturns (Sánchez-Mira & O'Reilly, 2019).

3 | STRUCTURAL CHANGE AND (UN)DOING GENDER IN FEMALE-BREADWINNER COUPLES

Despite the theoretical calls for more research on the individual and interactional processes that may "undo gender" (Deutsch, 2007; Risman, 2009), few empirical studies have explored this research avenue. Qualitative studies looking at (un)doing gender processes in households with non-conventional arrangements have used information about only one couple member (Jurczyk et al., 2019; Lyonette & Crompton, 2015) or are somewhat dated (Tichenor, 1999). Few studies look at both members of the couple to examine the interactions leading to diminished or reinforced gender differences, and it has been even less common to pay attention to the centrality of structural change for understanding such processes. Notable exceptions are the cited papers looking at female-breadwinner situations triggered by unfavorable employment conditions in the US (Chesley, 2011, 2017; Legerski & Cornwall, 2010). Structural change, such as economic shifts, is relevant to the undoing of gender for two main reasons. First, it can disrupt the ability of many individuals to enact "appropriate" gender displays, thus weakening gender accountability. Second, it may diminish or strengthen the links between gender differences and power and resource differentials (Chesley, 2011).

Moreover, previous studies on breadwinning roles and the renegotiation of household responsibilities have not always yielded consistent findings, suggesting that the processes whereby gender is (un)done differ according to national and temporal context, social class or race. Therefore, there is a need for more research that explores the effects of structural changes on (un)doing gender processes across countries with different gender regimes and labor market conditions, and across social groups with different gender norms and degrees of economic need and opportunity. This study looks at Spain as an interesting case in which men's breadwinner status is increasingly challenged in an insecure labor market with high unemployment, particularly among working-class couples during the economic crisis.

4 | THE GREAT RECESSION AND CHANGING WORK-FAMILY ARRANGEMENTS IN SPAIN

Spain's welfare regime has often been characterized, alongside those of other Southern European countries, as familialist in its reliance on informal care provided by the family, and marked by high gender inequalities in the labor market and the domestic sphere (Bettio & Plantenga, 2004; Ferrera, 1996). However, several voices have argued for a need to nuance and complexify this picture, considering the social and institutional changes that have occurred in Spain over

the last 3 decades and the growing heterogeneity within the Southern European group (Doblytė & Tejero, 2021; León & Migliavacca, 2013; Naldini & Jurado, 2013).

The participation of Spanish women in the labor market has increased continuously since the mid-1990s, alongside their educational levels (León & Migliavacca, 2013). Between 1992 and 2007, the proportion of dual-earner couples almost doubled from 31 to 57 percent (Franco & Winqvist, 2002; Sánchez-Mira, 2016). Policy transformation has also been notable, particularly with respect to the development of early childcare services (León & Migliavacca, 2013) and there is growing support for work-family reconciliation policies (Doblytė & Tejero, 2021). Moreover, there has been a consistent change toward more gender-egalitarian attitudes regarding women's employment and the division of housework and child care (Naldini & Jurado, 2013; O'Reilly et al., 2014), although egalitarian ideals bend in favor of gender-conventional arrangements when new parents are faced with the difficulties of reconciling work and family demands (Abril et al., 2015). Work-family arrangements in Spain reflect a polarization according to couples' socioeconomic backgrounds, with most households falling either into a dual-full-time or a male-breadwinner arrangement (Dotti Sani, 2018; Sánchez-Mira & O'Reilly, 2019). Before the Great Recession, the dual-earner model expanded as the difference between the employment patterns of middle-class and working-class women diminished with the increasing labor-market attachment of the latter (Sánchez-Mira, 2020).

The onset of the financial crisis had a severe and gendered impact on employment. The unemployment rate climbed from 7.93% in the second quarter of 2007 to 26.94% in the first quarter of 2013 (INE, 2021). The country is a paradigmatic example of the dynamics of so-called he-cession and sh(e)-austerity (Karamessini & Rubery, 2014). Job losses during the first recessionary period were particularly severe in male-dominated sectors, and were followed by austerity policies that had a greater effect on the female-dominated public sector (Pérvier, 2018). From 2010 to 2014, 233,000 public sector jobs were lost, exceeding job losses in the private sector (Gálvez & Rodríguez-Modroño, 2016). The gender gap in unemployment rates prior to the crisis (6.15% for men, 10.35% for women in the second quarter of 2007) quickly narrowed, and male and female unemployment rates converged at around 18% in 2009 (INE, 2021). The effects of austerity policies on female employment became apparent from 2010 onwards, and both curves evolved in parallel thereafter until peaking in 2013 (INE, 2021). Female activity rates actually increased during the recession, despite the growing levels of unemployment, which speaks to the important labor-market attachment of Spanish women (Naldini & Jurado, 2013). Such increase was partly the result of an effort to compensate for the loss of male earnings, resulting in a significant added-worker effect (Addabbo et al., 2015). Dual-full-time and male-breadwinner arrangements decreased most during this period, while there was a notable rise in female-breadwinner and workless households, among which working-class couples were over-represented. The percentage of female-breadwinner households, which had remained stable at 2.7% between 2005 and 2007, rose to 7.6% in 2010 and 9% in 2012. Workless households, representing 1.9% in 2007, rose to 6.6% in 2010 and 10% in 2012 (Sánchez-Mira, 2016).

The implications of the Great Recession and austerity policies for gender inequalities have been manifold. First, they resulted in an intensification of women's paid labor and a reinforcement of their contributions to household income, particularly among the low-educated (Távora & Rodríguez-Modroño, 2018) and immigrant population (Bueno & Vidal-Coso, 2019). The paradigm of the female-breadwinner household in Spain is one composed of a male industrial or construction worker and a female semi-skilled or unskilled services employee (Sánchez-Mira, 2020). Relatedly, the gender gap in overall workload increased, because although male employment decreased, men did not take on a corresponding amount of domestic work (Gálvez & Rodríguez-Modroño, 2016). Third, with the signs of economic recovery in 2014, male unemployment declined faster than female unemployment (INE, 2021). Moreover, the effects of austerity policies on job losses, pay cuts and deteriorating working conditions in the public sector affected women disproportionately for two main reasons: first, they make up the majority of the labor force in the sector; second, women perform most the care work transferred to families when state provision is reduced (Gálvez & Rodríguez-Modroño, 2016; Lombardo, 2017).

In short, Spain constitutes an interesting case of study, as a context undergoing substantial and rapid shifts in gender norms, policies and patterns of labor market participation. The Great Recession, with its strong and gendered

impact on employment, may have fueled these changes by preventing many couples from conforming to gender-appropriate work-family arrangements, due to pressing economic needs and the decreased availability of employment.

This article explores whether and how couples' experiences of a female-breadwinner arrangement may have led to processes of (un)doing gender. The focus on working-class households is relevant due to the strong incidence of female-breadwinner situations in this social group, where gender norms have been found to be more traditional. The article analyses to what extent such unconventional arrangements challenged established gender norms and practices. The article aims to answer the following questions: How do couples who have been in a female-breadwinner situation interpret the women's breadwinning role? Do the meanings associated with the women's economic contribution differ between men and women? Does female breadwinning trigger a renegotiation of housework and child care divisions? How are such divisions perceived by men and women?

5 | DATA AND METHODS

This study is based on 24 semi-structured biographical interviews (and life-history calendars) with men and women in 12 heterosexual, working-class couples, with at least one child under 14 years old. Both partners in all selected couples were members of the working class, which was defined on the basis of their occupational categories, including industrial workers and semiskilled or unskilled services employees. In order to limit sample heterogeneity, participation was restricted to individuals with primary and (post)secondary education, native-born and living in urban areas. The biographical interviews addressed the interrelationships of the partners' trajectories retrospectively, focusing on major work and family events, over the periods of economic growth and recession. To guarantee that trajectories were sufficiently long, both members of each selected couple were at least 30 years old, and they had been living together for at least 5 years. Couples were recruited through convenience sampling, drawing on secondary networks. Nine primary ties provided the contacts of the 12 couples included in the study. A first telephone call provided participants with details of the study and addressed possible doubts, while checking that they met the sampling requirements.

The sample included couples with diverse *breadwinning* statuses throughout their trajectory, distinguishing between *male-breadwinner*, *co-breadwinner* and *female-breadwinner* situations on the basis of the partners' relative economic contributions at different stages. In most couples, the relative contribution coincided with their employment status (an unemployed person brought less income than an employed person; a partner employed part-time earned less than a partner employed full-time). However, this was not always the case. Therefore, *male-breadwinner* situations included couples whose man earned more, either because the woman was unemployed, because she worked shorter hours, or because, although both worked full-time, she earned less than 55% of the household income. Second, *co-breadwinner* situations were those in which both partners contributed similarly to household income (45–55%). This included arrangements where both were employed full-time, where the woman was employed part-time but earned a significant amount, or where the woman's unemployment benefit was equal to the man's wage. Third, in *female-breadwinner* situations women contributed more than 55% of the household income, either because the man was unemployed, or because he had a part-time job, or because both partners were unemployed but only the woman had access to unemployment benefit. Table S1 presents the sample's main characteristics, including a description of the couples' different *breadwinning statuses* throughout their trajectory. Half the couples were in a *female-breadwinner* situation at some point, but then moved to *male-breadwinner* or *co-breadwinner* status. The duration of *female-breadwinner* situations ranged from 2 to 4 years. The fact that none of the couples were *female breadwinners* at the moment of the interview was not an intended goal of the research design, but a result of the sampling process. The main goal of the study was to address the impact of the economic shock on gender relations in the household more generally, for which couples with diverse *breadwinning statuses* during their trajectory, regardless of their current situation, were included in the sample. This article focuses on the processes of (un)doing gender in couples who had experienced a *female-breadwinner* situation, using the remaining types as references for comparison.

We interviewed both members of the couple to capture the interactive nature of doing gender processes. Each partner was interviewed separately to allow informants to express themselves more freely, and to facilitate the emergence of delicate or contentious issues (Valentine, 1999). Interviews were conducted between December 2015 and March 2016 by the author and a graduate assistant. Whenever possible (eight out of 12 cases), male participants were interviewed by the male graduate assistant, and female participants were interviewed by the female author. The gender correspondence of interviewer and interviewee appeared to generate a climate of complicity, which is likely to have facilitated a more open and sincere conversation. Interviews were generally conducted at the couple's residence, either simultaneously or consecutively, to prevent the partners from discussing the interview content. In both scenarios, we made sure that the other partner was absent from the room where the interview was conducted.

After collecting the informant's sociodemographic characteristics, interviews began with a general question about the informant's life history. We then introduced the life history calendar, which was divided into three themes: personal-family trajectory of the informant, employment trajectory of the informant and employment trajectory of the partner. The aim of the life history calendar was to favor processes of recall and reflection, to facilitate the identification of main events and to highlight the interrelationships between family and employment events across both partners' trajectories. The second part of the interview addressed current and past employment situations, the meanings of one's employment and economic contributions and those of the partner throughout the trajectory, and the desired breadwinning situation in the household and society. The final part focused on the division of housework and child care, redistributions linked to changes in employment situations, perceptions of suitability for given household tasks, and perceptions of fairness around existing divisions and desires for change.

Interviews lasted between 50 and 138 min. They were recorded and the analysis was conducted directly onto the audio files by means of Atlas.ti software (version 8.2.4). The analysis followed a constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), whereby the hierarchical coding was generated inductively during the analysis, based on flexible theoretically derived guidelines. Interviews were first coded and analyzed vertically (each case being an entity). Cross-sectional analyses were then conducted to compare the experience of each participant with that of their partners. Finally, similarities and differences among the couples were identified. Interviews were conducted in Catalan or Spanish. Excerpts in the article were translated from the original.

6 | FINDINGS

The economic crisis negatively impacted the living conditions of every couple in the sample, either through job losses, wage cuts or the deterioration of employment and working conditions. The larger male job losses during the recession and the wider employment opportunities for women in a service-based economy restricted the ability of many households to adjust to "gender-typical" work-family arrangements (Chesley, 2011). Several couples in the sample went through involuntary female-breadwinner situations, where the woman was the sole or main economic provider for a time. These were unexpected and undesired situations, particularly for men, and were due either to employment loss or to the impossibility of finding a full-time job. Jorge and Julia were in a dual-full-time arrangement before he lost his job. Judith and Lorenzo met when he was employed part-time; he found a full-time job only 4 years later. In other cases, both partners lost their jobs during the recession, but only the woman had access to unemployment benefit and she returned to employment before the man (Miguel & Cristina; Julio & Montse). Finally, there were couples who exemplified the added-worker effect: María went back to work when Pedro lost his job; Marina increased her working time from 75% to 85% when Rafael became unemployed. All female-breadwinner situations were transitory. As soon as the man found a full-time job, most couples moved to co-breadwinner status, but some adopted a male-breadwinner arrangement, with women reducing their working time (Judith & Lorenzo) or becoming unemployed (Pedro & María) for care reasons. The first section addresses how meanings around the breadwinner role were symbolically negotiated in female-breadwinner households. The second section addresses the extent to which the division of housework and child care was renegotiated and whether this was challenged by female breadwinners.

6.1 | Doing gender: Men's adjustment to the male-breadwinner ideal

Consistently with previous research (Chesley, 2011, 2017; Jurczyk et al., 2019), the findings show that men's identities remain significantly bound up with employment and their role as economic providers. Most men in the sample appear to have assumed a "politically correct" gender egalitarian discourse, whereby it is not acceptable to identify with a male-breadwinner model. Either out of conviction or social desirability, most say that both partners should provide economically for the household, and some stress the importance of their partner's employment for their partner's professional development or economic independence. However, there are important contradictions in the accounts of over half the men in the sample, suggesting that the male-breadwinner ideal is still deeply rooted in their identities. Such contradictions are most evident among those who have been in female-breadwinner situations, whose identity as male breadwinners has been most directly challenged:

'If they now tell my wife [...] that they are going to give her 2,500€ per month but she needs to be in the shop all day... Well, maybe I would tell them "Hey, leave me my 20 hours..." [...], I would be in charge of some things, and she would be in charge of others. Bringing in the money? Yes, she would bring in the money... I mean... You always enjoy... I would like to be the man... Yes, I'm not going to lie... You always like to be, but it's not a macho thing... [...] I mean, to be the head of the household, you know? [...] But well, if it weren't like this, it's like this, and that's all, nothing happens, she works and... well, in fact she has worked for much longer than me... [...], I don't have a problem...' (Pedro, 4 years in a female-breadwinner arrangement, currently male breadwinner).

It is among men in female-breadwinner couples that we find *doing gender* mechanisms, whereby reality is deformed to adjust to the male-breadwinner ideal. These include undervaluing the woman's economic contribution or overvaluing that of the man. Evidence of the latter is found by comparing Lorenzo and Judith's accounts, a couple who were in a female-breadwinner situation for over 3 years, before moving to their current male-breadwinner status. Lorenzo spontaneously mentioned how much his income has increased since, and emphasized in several occasions that he now earns more than his partner. However, there are some contradictions in the couple's accounts about Lorenzo's earnings on a regular month, which suggest that he might be overvaluing his income to adjust to the male-breadwinner ideal and symbolically compensate for the lack of correspondence during the previous period:

"I am earning, it depends on the month, but... I am taking [home] about 1,600, 1,700, 1,800, 1,900[€]... it depends" (Lorenzo, 3.5 years in a female-breadwinner arrangement, currently a male breadwinner)

And now, well of course, since he is [working] eight hours, now he earns a bit more... and after [paying] the mortgage, there is a bit more left to do the shopping, or to do other things [...]. It depends on the month [...], between 1,200€ and 1,800€, it depends... This month maybe he earns a bit more because he has worked many hours. But... but well, a regular month, of only 8 hours, without extra hours, its 1,200€ (Judith, 3.5 years a female breadwinner, currently in a male- breadwinner arrangement).

In other cases, men recognize that the woman contributed more income for some time, but they tend to downplay the importance of this by omitting significant details from their descriptions (the duration, details of the economic hardship, the importance of the woman's income in ensuring they pulled through). This is Miguel's case, who, despite adhering to a co-breadwinner ideal, downplays the importance of his partner's income while he was unemployed and did not have access to a benefit, a period during which they drew on her severance to pay off debts:

In some way she contributed economically so that things were in equilibrium while I was unemployed and... the fact that the apartment was paid off [...] and that it was of our property, well it also gives one peace of mind (Miguel, 2 years in a female-breadwinner arrangement, currently co-breadwinner).

An even most obvious case is that of María and Pedro. Pedro was unemployed for over 4 years, during which time María had a full-time job and was, by and large, the main financial provider. However, Pedro's 4 years of unemployment appear as a somewhat incidental episode in his account, and he plays down his partner's contribution by presenting it as equivalent to the small amounts he earned occasionally in the black economy:

'Well... a little bit of my mother's pension, my father's work, what my wife earned, what I was getting [in the black economy] besides the [unemployment] assistance... Whether you think so or not, it's a lot...' (Pedro, 4 years in a female-breadwinner arrangement, currently male breadwinner).

This sort of *doing gender* mechanism was not observed in couples who were co-breadwinners for most of the trajectory. In fact, several interviewees spontaneously mentioned the primary-breadwinner role held by many women during the crisis:

'With the crisis, you now see the typical woman who works to exhaustion [...] and it is the man who does not have a job, and who is in charge of the house, and he is the one who takes the kid to school, [...] Before it was so [referring to the man being the main provider], or it had to be so, or they told us so... but things change more and more.' (José, co-breadwinner).

Such views are more common among men who were not in female-breadwinner situations, and whose identities as economic providers were less directly challenged. This evidence suggests that the rise in female-breadwinner households may have had some impact on collective imaginaries about who should provide for the household, although the extent of a potential "normalization" effect cannot be gauged with the available evidence.

The experience of a female-breadwinner arrangement did leave an imprint on women's perception of their role as breadwinners. Women who have been main providers acknowledge and value the importance of their economic contribution for important periods of their trajectory. This seems to be particularly the case for those who later moved to a male-breadwinner arrangement, much to their regret.

'Well, now economically [emphasis], [it's] him [who contributes more], [...] but for a long time it was me. So, well, now it's his turn, but maybe in a few years he will be unemployed or will work less, and it will be me who will have to contribute.' (Judith, 3.5 years a female breadwinner, currently in a male-breadwinner arrangement).

'For many years we drew on my salary... Of course, when he didn't work... we drew on my salary, [...] And now we contribute more or less ... well, I contribute a bit less because I am unemployed, but well, I do contribute... [...] maybe I have always contributed a bit more.' (María, 4 years a female breadwinner, currently in a male-breadwinner arrangement).

These women identify themselves with a co-breadwinner model in which both partners should equally provide for the household. Such an ideal differs from men's more general notion that their partners should also be economic providers, which does not contain a comparable sense of equivalence. Women also highlight the importance of employment as a source of economic independence and female autonomy, as opposed to an eventual dependence on their partners.

'If you are a woman and a man supports you, you are always tied to that. This is one of the reasons why I never want to stop working, because you always have the freedom to say: "look, I'm sick of you and I am leaving". I don't have to... be with this person despite... I don't want to because they support me economically [...] I think everybody should be able to support themselves'. (Judith, 3.5 years a female breadwinner, currently in a male breadwinner arrangement).

However, this does not mean that these women embrace the idea of being the sole or even main providers for the household. Such arrangements were viewed as temporary until conditions allowed both partners to secure gainful employment. For women, the perception of female-breadwinner situations as involuntary was related less to their unease with a gender-atypical arrangement than with the importance of having two incomes to guarantee a minimum living standard. While men also mentioned the need to have two salaries to draw on nowadays, female-breadwinner situations represented a more flagrant challenge to their gender identities, as previously shown.

An identification with a co-breadwinner model is also found among most of the other women in the sample, regardless of their breadwinning trajectory. Co-breadwinner women explained how the stability of their incomes was fundamental in protecting against the fluctuations of those of their self-employed partners (Silvia, Olaya). Even women in male-breadwinner arrangements did not perceive their income as a supplement, but deemed it necessary for the household economy. Most women understood employment to be a source of personal development, expressed notions of professionalism in performing their jobs and distanced themselves from the concept of "stay-at-home mothers." On the whole, we did not identify contradictions in the women's discourses comparable to the observed ambivalence in the men's breadwinning identities. Although many of these women's mothers were "housewives" for some time in their lives, their daughters do not reproduce these patterns, either materially or symbolically, which suggests a significant generational change among Spanish working-class women. Moreover, experiencing a female-breadwinner situation has made these women feel more entitled to challenge the unequal division of housework and child care.

6.2 | Trajectory matters: Women's challenge to the division of housework and child care

The findings show that the transition to a female-breadwinner situation does not necessarily entail an increase in male involvement in housework and child care, and in no case was an equitable distribution of the overall workload observed. Most men only increased their participation in housework to a limited degree, and task-segregation persisted. Men may have become more involved in meal preparation, but women remained in charge of laundry, cleaning and household management, which were the points that caused more tensions among these couples.¹ There was also some increase in men's involvement in child care, but women continued to perform most of it, notably in the organization of external childcare, in getting children ready for the day, or in managing school-related activities. The most blatant cases were those of Judith and Lorenzo, and Julio and Montse, where the women continued to perform the bulk of housework and child care, even though their partners were employed part-time for over 3 years and unemployed for 2 years, respectively. Judith was unsatisfied with the standard of care her partner provided to their daughter during the period he spent more time at home, which was one of the reasons that eventually led to her to reduce her working time. In other cases (Pedro & María; Rafael & Marina), the men increased their participation in housework while unemployed, namely in the kitchen. However, women continued to perform most of the remaining housework and child care and remained in charge of household management. For Miguel and Cristina, Miguel's unemployment made little difference to the division of housework and child care, to which he had already contributed significantly before, except that he assumed greater responsibility for preparing meals. Only in Jorge and Julia's case did both partners agree that Jorge took over the bulk of housework and the care of their four-month-old daughter for over a year. Julia was self-employed, working long hours and providing a significant income, and she seems to have taken a strong line re-

garding the division of housework and child care: "I wouldn't have stood being away [working] and coming home with him having done nothing [...] It didn't happen." In turn, Jorge acknowledges that "When I forgot to do certain things and I wasn't working she would remind me 'Hey, mate, you aren't working... okay?'"

Therefore, we do not find evidence of gender display as in other studies (Hochschild, 1989; Jurczyk et al., 2019). On the contrary, comparing men's accounts with those of their partners, in some cases an overestimation of their actual contribution is observed. Men appear to perform an exercise of adjustment of reality to a politically correct discourse of co-responsibility in housework and child care. For instance, Pedro argues that there is no specific division of tasks between him and his partner: "All tasks belong to all, it's not 'her' task. It's like with the children, it's not their children." At the same time, comparing his account with that of his partner, it becomes clear that he is mostly involved in cooking meals but largely absent from the remaining chores. The contrast between Judith and Lorenzo's accounts is even more glaring. Judith explains how she is in charge of all housework and child care:

'He does... well, what I tell him to [laughs]. He usually does the dishes... [...] sometimes I do it on purpose, huh?... I leave them there for him to do, because otherwise he wouldn't do anything... [...] Sometimes I tell him "do the dishes", and he only, exclusively, does the dishes. If there is a frying pan one palm away, he does not see it. [laughs]' (Judith, 3.5 years a female breadwinner, currently in a male-breadwinner arrangement).

In contrast, Lorenzo says haltingly:

'Doing the dishes, it's my deal. Hanging the clothes, I do it... very often... erm... sometimes... also... sweeping, mopping the floor [...] What she basically does is clean the living room...' (Lorenzo, 3.5 years in a female-breadwinner arrangement, currently a male breadwinner).

These mechanisms of overestimation of men's contributions are not specific to men in female-breadwinner couples, but can also be observed in other couple types, especially where the division is particularly unequal (Roberto & Lucía). Arguments legitimizing the unequal division of housework and child care are present, but infrequent, in men's accounts (Rafael, Julio). In contrast, most men in the sample appear to be aware that what is considered acceptable is to contribute significantly to housework and child care, just as they would also argue that both partners should provide economically for the household.

At the same time, conflict about the unequal division of housework and child care becomes explicit among female breadwinner couples only where inequality is particularly evident (Julio & Montse; Judith & Lorenzo). In the remaining cases, where men contribute to housework and child care beyond the anecdotal level (Pedro & María; Rafael & Marina; Jorge & Julia; Miguel & Cristina), we observe mechanisms such as Hochschild's (1989) "going rate," which mitigates perceptions of inequality. By comparing their partner's contribution with that of other men, women may feel satisfied if it is above average. Such mechanisms are also identified in women in other couple types where men contribute significantly to housework and child care. The idea of a "going rate" appears in Julia's account, currently a co-breadwinner after being a female breadwinner for about 4 years. Her partner Jorge acknowledges that the division of housework and child care is unequal, with Julia being mostly in charge of cleaning and laundry, and he recognizes the existence of conflict around certain issues. This contrasts with her account, where she does not mention conflict and she values his being in charge of the kitchen and being significantly involved in the care of their daughters:

'I don't complain... from what I hear, I can't complain [laughs]... because my co-worker has a husband... my gosh [...] I don't complain about what I have, not at all!' (Julia, 4 years a female breadwinner, currently a co-breadwinner).

Similar expressions are found in the accounts of other female breadwinners, whose partners are described as “helping a lot” (María), “more capable” than others (Marina) or contributing significantly because they have previously lived alone (Cristina). In all these cases, such remarks are accompanied by a more or less explicit sense of unease about the situation. María mentions that when she was working full-time and Pedro was unemployed, she would still spend all Sunday cleaning. Marina would like her husband to clean more often. Cristina says that on occasion she wonders whether Miguel should do more. Moreover, Marina and Julia’s partners (Rafael and Jorge) mention conflict about the division of housework and child care, suggesting that these women may have embellished the situation in their interviews.

In cases where women assumed housework and child care almost exclusively, their sense of unease was most evident and accompanied by accounts of explicit conflict (Julio & Montse; Judith & Lorenzo). Judith decided to reduce her working hours when her partner found a full-time job, after she had been a female breadwinner for about 4 years. Her decision was motivated by the lack of time with her daughter and a difficult situation at work. Since then, housework and child care have become less of a burden for her, but she does not tolerate her partner’s indolence, especially his argument that he works longer hours:

‘The bad side of this reduction [of working hours] is that [...] he sometimes throws it in your face: it’s because you only work three days and I work more... And that, pfff, when he says that to me... he drives me up the wall. Because I say: “I have been working every day for many years and you only worked three hours a day and I never said anything, did I?”’ (Judith, 3.5 years a female breadwinner, currently in a male breadwinner arrangement).

This shows that the experience of being the main breadwinner did leave a mark on Judith. Even after the couple’s transition to a new, male-breadwinner status, her previous trajectory as economic provider makes her feel entitled to challenge the unequal division of housework and child care, although with limited success.

7 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The paper has explored how couples’ experiences of female-breadwinner arrangements may lead to processes of (un)doing gender, focusing on working-class households during the Great Recession in Spain. This study contributes to the literature on gender relations in households with non-conventional arrangements, and particularly, to the sparse qualitative research on female-breadwinner situations triggered by undesired employment conditions (Chesley, 2011, 2017; Legerski & Cornwall, 2010). The analysis of the negotiation of labor divisions and meanings around breadwinning and homemaking in households where the woman was the primary breadwinner provides elements for answering the paper’s main guiding question: to what extent has a female-breadwinner situation challenged established gender norms and practices, leading to processes of (un)doing gender?

A first research question inquired about the gender differences in the interpretation of women’s breadwinning role. Men’s identities remain largely bound up with the male breadwinner ideal, although the recession deprived many of the ability to factually adjust to such ideal. Men in female-breadwinner couples, whose role as economic providers was called more into question, made a greater effort to build an account of reality that compensated for such a gap. These findings appear to contradict those of quantitative studies showing that men with a lower breadwinner status are more likely to embrace egalitarian ideologies (Cha & Thébaud, 2009; Zuo, 2004). However, such a pattern may reflect two different processes: men’s adaptation to their experience of a non-traditional breadwinning arrangement; and egalitarian men partnering with women with greater earning capacity and being more willing to share the breadwinner role (Cha & Thébaud, 2009; Zuo, 2004). Men in the study would hardly correspond to the second category, and it may be the case that we are not yet observing the longer-term effects of a female breadwinning experience. The literature also suggests that perceptions of female-breadwinner situations as

temporary rather than durable may influence the extent to which a gender egalitarian ideology is endorsed (Cha & Thébaud, 2009) or whether the woman is depicted as the main provider (Chesley, 2017). Following this argument, men in the sample seem to have regarded female breadwinning as a short-term contingency, and it was therefore possible for them to maintain the normative perception that men's earnings were primary, even when they earned less than their partners (Cha & Thébaud, 2009). In fact, despite the significant duration of female breadwinning, all couples returned to a co-breadwinner or male-breadwinner arrangement, findings that are consistent with studies in other contexts, showing the lack of stability over time of female-breadwinner arrangements (Drago et al., 2005; Winslow-Bowe, 2006). In contrast, female breadwinners valued the importance of their economic contribution and consistently expressed identification with a co-breadwinner model, evidence that is in line with Meisenbach's (2010) or Medved's (2016) findings for the US, where female breadwinners "naturalized" their role and significantly valued their independence and careers.

A second main question was whether female breadwinning would trigger a renegotiation of the division of housework and child care, and how this would be perceived by men and women. We saw small increases in men's participation in housework among some couples, namely in meal preparation, and some increased involvement in childcare, but no couple achieved an equitable division of the overall workload. When men's contribution went beyond the anecdotal, a perception of unease about this state of things coexisted with the satisfying notion that other men did less. Only when women performed the bulk of housework and child care did perceptions of unfairness lead to open conflict. In these cases, it became most evident that women had been empowered by their experiences as main economic providers. After their transition to a new status, they felt entitled to challenge labor divisions and were frustrated by their lack of success in changing the situation. In all, there is more ambivalence in women's perceptions about the division of housework and child care than there is for their breadwinning identities. Although women clearly identify with a co-breadwinner model, most do not seem to demand a 50–50% division of housework and child care.

The findings support the notion that there are complex interactions between relative resources, time availability and gender norms. These are best illustrated by the cases of Jorge and Julia and Pedro and María, who shared similar situations of relative contributions and working time, but exhibited very different outcomes in terms of the division of housework and child care. Julia's long working hours and primary breadwinning position, combined with her strong stance on Jorge's obligations regarding housework and child care and his willingness to fulfill them, resulted in his becoming the primary caregiver and homemaker for over a year. This case differed from that of Pedro and María, where Pedro's participation in housework and child care increased negligibly, even though María was the sole provider and was away from home all day. Pedro's deeply rooted male-breadwinner identity and María's reluctance to press for a more egalitarian division lie behind these dynamics. In all, the stronger bargaining position favored by larger relative resources and labor market involvement is more easily mobilized when women and men hold more egalitarian gender norms.

With the evidence at hand, it appears difficult to respond conclusively to the main question guiding this paper: whether the experience of an unconventional work-family arrangement would lead to processes of undoing gender and result in more egalitarian gender relations. On the one hand, there are signs of change in women's reduced willingness to underplay their economic contribution and their challenge to the division of housework and child care. On the other hand, all female-breadwinner situations were transitory and perceived as such. Moreover, there seems to have been more change in breadwinner identities than in housework and child care, where women had limited success in achieving egalitarian divisions, despite their increased resistance. On the whole, the findings underline the dynamic interaction of economic and normative explanations (Lyonette & Crompton, 2015). Relative resources and time availability intersect with gender norms and the stronger or weaker contextual pressures for gender accountability, and they do so over time.

Moreover, the lack of consistency between these findings and those of other studies (Chesley, 2017; Jurczyk et al., 2019; Legerski & Cornwall, 2010) suggests that the study's conclusions are specific to the context and the social group analyzed. Countries diverge in their policy frameworks, gender norms, and economic and labor market

conditions, all factors that may influence how work-family arrangements are shaped. (Un)doing gender processes are also likely to vary among social classes or ethnic groups with different gender norms, economic situations and employment opportunities.

This study of the Spanish case has the value of addressing a context of swift and profound transformation of gender norms, institutional frameworks and women's employment patterns. The Great Recession produced a shake-up of changing structures and social norms by weakening gender accountability. This was especially the case for working-class couples, characterized by more traditional gender norms and work-family arrangements. The findings support the idea that there has been significant generational change among working-class couples, particularly among women. The couples' economic need to secure two incomes has been a main driving force behind the dual-breadwinner model becoming normatively hegemonic, which explains the undesired character of female-breadwinner situations. Their sharp increase was basically due to the severe fall in employment during the recession, but it must also be understood as part of a broader context of transformation resulting in a greater employment insecurity, and hence an increased challenge to men's breadwinner status. Although female-breadwinning situations were perceived as transitory until the gradual process of economic recovery allowed both partners to secure gainful employment, they were empowering experiences for women, both in terms of the recognition of their role as providers and of their contestation of unequal labor divisions. These findings support previous evidence about the relevance of relative resources for labor divisions in Spain (Bueno & Grau-Grau, 2021; Fernandez-Lozano, 2019; Flaquer et al., 2019; García Román, 2020).

The findings also underline that work-family arrangements can vary significantly during a couple's trajectory, particularly for working-class couples and during a period of economic recession, highlighting the importance of incorporating longitudinal perspectives into studies of (un)doing gender processes. Too often the literature has analyzed work-family arrangements as stable constructions, reflecting voluntary choices that mirror couples' gender identities. In fact, these are generally dynamic situations, partly outside the individual's control and shaped by changing external circumstances, especially in the case of female-breadwinner arrangements. The extent and dynamics of (un)doing gender processes in these households will likely depend on the different characteristics of female-breadwinner arrangements: to what extent these are involuntary or desired; their duration and whether they are perceived as more or less temporary; or what the previous and subsequent arrangements were. We may expect to observe more change in couples with a lasting arrangement of female breadwinning, followed by a transition to a co-breadwinner arrangement, than in households undergoing brief periods of female breadwinning, after which a male-breadwinner arrangement is adopted. Moreover, the interplay between breadwinning trajectories and gender ideologies is likely to reflect complex and multidirectional processes. The experience of an (involuntary) female breadwinning situation may trigger an adaptation of gender ideologies and labor divisions, but it can also reflect the choices of couples with attitudes more prone to non-conventional breadwinning arrangements. Moreover, an increase in the importance of voluntary female breadwinning will not necessarily entail more lasting arrangements, as partners may choose to alternate in their caring roles over time, while situations of long-term unemployment can extend for years. An analysis of these different facets of the issue demands the future implementation of longitudinal research designs.

Such considerations bring us to the limitations of this study. First, its approach was based on an analysis of the couples' trajectories taken at a single point in time and hence based on retrospective accounts, which are prone to recall bias. Much could be learned by comparing the couples' accounts of their present and past experiences of female breadwinning within a prospective, longitudinal research design. This exercise would make it possible to examine whether female breadwinner situations are depicted as transitory at different moments in time, to identify possible adaptation effects, and to grasp the factors triggering moves towards other types of arrangements and their effects on (un)doing gender processes.

A second main limitation concerns the reduced sample size, which included 12 couples, six of which were female breadwinners at some point in their trajectory. A larger sample would have allowed us to examine a wider range of breadwinning trajectories, such as those of female-breadwinner couples who had previously been in a male-breadwinner arrangement, or couples currently in a female-breadwinning situation. It would have also been appropriate to

secure more cases of certain types (female breadwinners moving to male-breadwinner arrangements), to strengthen the sample's typological representativeness and maximize the saturation of the information obtained.

Third, the findings reflect the experience of working-class, Spanish couples in a context of economic crisis. The study's ability to establish specific interpretations about the relevance of class for (un)doing gender processes is limited by the fact that an empirical comparison with middle-class couples was not conducted. Moreover, the interpretations are also specific to a societal context with a given gender regime, labor market conditions and economic climate. Future research could fruitfully address the processes linking heterogeneous breadwinning trajectories and breadwinning identities, across social groups and contexts, on the basis of prospective longitudinal research designs.

Despite these limitations, this study offers interesting insights on the processes whereby gender may be undone through experiences of female breadwinning. The study has provided evidence of change at the level of identities, norms, interactions and practices in these Spanish, working-class households, particularly on the women's side. In this sense, the evidence supports the argument that adaptations to unconventional arrangements can constitute a catalyst for processes that undo gender (Chesley, 2011). The intensity of such change and the durability of its effects remain to be seen, however. This is especially the case as employment levels were still far from returning to pre-recessionary conditions in Spain when the COVID-19 pandemic struck in 2020. Spain has been one of the European countries most severely affected by the pandemic and its consequences on employment. The scarce existing evidence suggests that women were less sheltered from the impact of the Spring 2020 lockdown on employment than they were from the initial shock of the Great Recession, and that the increased burden of housework and childcare fell mostly on their shoulders (Borràs Català & Moreno-Colom, 2021; Farré et al., 2020). Future research could offer most interesting insights by comparing the effects of both crises, as they may have acted as opposing driving forces for gender (in)equality in household employment and labor divisions. One possible way forward would be to compare the experiences of women with different levels of skill and working in essential and non-essential sectors. From a life course perspective, and consistently with the findings of this study, it would be most pertinent to analyze the trajectories of women who may have gone through different breadwinning statuses across both periods, to examine the effects of those experiences on the (un)doing of gender over time. In all, although there are still many open questions about long-term developments, what is certain is that these are times of upheaval for gender relations in the Spanish context.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest declared.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ There is little outsourcing of housework in these couples, mostly because although some may want to they cannot afford it (Julio & Montse, Pedro & María; Cristina & Miguel). Some couples have hired help with housework only occasionally (Judith & Lorenzo; Rafael & Marina). Only Jorge and Julia outsourced some of the cleaning for a relevant period of time. This couple was significantly better off than the rest and she was working long hours.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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