



Work–life balance and firms: A matter of women? ☆



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ABSTRACT

The work–life balance (WLB) literature reports a positive relationship between the presence of female workers in firms and the implementation of WLB measures. Examining these findings from an alternative methodological perspective, this study adopts a fuzzy-set approach to analyze empirical data from 87 Spanish SMEs. The study's main finding is that the presence of women does not determine the level of implementation of WLB policies. Conversely, the absence of women does seem to determine the absence of such policies. Likewise, the absence of organizational commitment to WLB leads to the absence of WLB policies.

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1. Introduction and relevance of the topic

Scholars' interest in the use of work–life balance (WLB) as a human resources management tool is growing. Early studies on the topic focus on the conflict between family duties and professional demands (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Goff, Mount, & Jamison, 1990; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Netemeyer, Boles, & McMurrian, 1996). According to these studies, this conflict arises because some aspects of work and family roles are incompatible. Recent studies (from 2000 onwards) focus more on business. Research establishes the best practices in WLB, shows the importance of WLB in attracting and retaining talent within the firm (Cappelli, 2000; De Cieri, Holmes, Abbott, & Trisha, 2005; Dupre & Day, 2007; Nord, Fox, Phoenix, & Viano, 2002), and identifies relationships between the use of these policies and improvements in business performance (Adya, 2008; Bloom & Van Reenen, 2006; Dupre & Day, 2007; Giardini & Kabst, 2008; Ribeiro-Soriano & Urbano, 2010; Vuontisjarvi, 2006), thereby demonstrating this topic's importance.

Gender is a variable that appears repeatedly in research on WLB; although family–work conflict is a matter of both genders, literature focuses mainly in women. Women traditionally have more conflicts because of the amount of roles they perform (Carnicer, Martínez, Pérez, & Vela, 2004; Poelmans, 2001) and even nowadays, family commitments are a big obstacle for women's career development

(Cross, 2010; Emslie & Hunt, 2009; Grady & McCarthy, 2008). Despite the efforts of governments and organizations to achieve effective equality between men and women at work level, the International Business Report (IBR Grant Thornton, 2013), shows that the total number of women in management positions improves but women still represent only 24% of management positions. In Spain, the figure is 21%, lower than the previous year, and standing below the European and the world average.

Given the scarce evidence on the relationship between women's presence in the workplace and implementation of WLB policies, the present research analyzes from an alternative methodological perspective using fuzzy-set whether the presence of women in firms is a necessary and/or sufficient condition for the implementation of WLB policies in Spain.

2. Theoretical framework and research propositions

Two major groups of environmental factors draw scholars' attention to the topic of WLB. The first group relates to a series of sociocultural changes (i.e., new household profiles or more women with higher education) that lead to an increase in individual's responsibilities within and outside the home. Second, legislation on equal opportunities proliferates. In Spain, the Law for a Work–Life Balance among Workers (November 5, 1999: BOE 266 of 6/11/99) and the Organic Law 3/2007 of March 22 for effective equality between women and men seek work–family balance.

Studies such as Torns (2004, 2005) and Caballero (2000) summarize the status of research in this area in Spain. The most recent studies on WLB in Spain explore the perceptions and institutional pressures relating to the implementation of WLB policies (Pasamar & Valle, 2011), and also focus on the importance of organizational culture as

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an enabler to apply and use those policies (Adame-Sánchez & Miquel-Romero, 2012; Cegarra-Leiva, Sánchez-Vidal, & Cegarra-Navarro, 2012).

Some research reports that the presence of female workers in firms pressures the firms' management to implement WLB policies (Chinchilla & Poelmans, 2002; Chinchilla, Poelmans, & León, 2003; Chinchilla, Poelmans, García-Lombardía, & López, 2005; Chinchilla, León, Canela, Ariño, & Quiroga, 2006; Chinchilla & León, 2007; Pocock, 2003; Shenhav & Haberfeld, 1992; Wang et al., 2012).

Proposition 1. *The presence of women at all levels of a firm's hierarchy affects the level of implementation of WLB policies within the firm.*

However, a crucial element that repeatedly arises in the literature as a driver of WLB policy implementation is the existence of organizational support for this type of policies in terms of managers' commitment to achieving WLB for their workers (e.g. Thomas & Ganster, 1995; Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999). Managers play a key role in putting family-friendly work policies into practice (Darcy, McCarthy, Hill, & Grady, 2012). This consideration is relevant because according to Schein's (1995) reasoning about leadership and culture, a manager committed with WLB can act as a leader and a role model that encourages subordinates to identify with him, internalizing his beliefs and values. Therefore, the fact that women in management positions can be a determinant factor for establishing WLB policies in the firm is not surprising, as some studies report (Baek, Kelly, & Jang, 2012; Blum, Fields, & Goodman, 1994; Guzmán-Cuevas, Cáceres-Carrasco, & Soriano, 2009; Ingram & Simons, 1995; Milliken, Martins, & Morgan, 1998).

Proposition 2. *The presence of women in management positions within a firm affects the level of implementation of WLB policies within the firm.*

The commitment to workers' WLB stems from an organizational culture that fosters WLB. Corporate culture can either encourage or stifle the development and effectiveness of firms' WLB (Abbott & De Cieri, 2008; Nord et al., 2002; Starrels, 1992). In this context, some studies add that the firm's management should formalize and instill this corporate culture via the firm's human resources department. Accordingly, scholars cite the relevance of formal WLB programs (with human resources management as the driver), which may receive support from supplementary informal organizational processes (Behson, 2005). However, few studies show the convenience of having a human resources department to support and implement this type of policy.

Proposition 3. *A firm's commitment to WLB relates to the level of implementation of WLB policies within the firm.*

In this study, commitment to WLB equates to the firm's consideration of family and WLB in the firm's mission, vision, and values. Additionally, commitment to WLB also exists if the firm has a human resources department to manage WLB policies.

3. Method

A study using self-report questionnaires to human resources managers or general managers of Spanish SMEs with at least one female worker provided data to test the propositions in Section 2. The survey yielded 87 valid questionnaires. In addition to exploring other issues, the questionnaire collected data on variables, as Table 1 shows.

All scales came from the literature, particularly from Chinchilla and Poelmans (2002); Chinchilla et al. (2003, 2005, 2006).

3.1. fsQCA method

The data analysis method in this study is fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA), a set-theoretic analysis technique that analyzes in detail how causal conditions lead to a particular outcome.

Table 1
Measures used in the questionnaire.

Label	Measure	Type of scale
md	Number of women in management positions (board of directors or middle management)	Ratio
mo	Number of women in non-management positions (in the workforce)	Ratio
p8	Whether the concept of family, WLB, or similar appears within the firm's mission, vision, or values	Dichotomous (Yes/No)
p6	Whether the firm has a human resources department	Dichotomous (Yes/No)
p7	Whether the HR department manages WLB policies	Dichotomous (Yes/No)
p12	The level of implementation of WLB policies within the firm	Ordinal scale with 6 levels: 1.—Currently, developing WLB policies is not on the firm's agenda 2.—The issue is no longer on the firm's agenda, and the firm has implemented few policies 3.—The firm has implemented several policies, but managers and employees hardly use them 4.—The firm has implemented several policies that managers use but employees do not 5.—The firm has implemented several policies that employees use but managers do not 6.—The firm has implemented numerous WLB policies that both employees and managers use

FsQCA relies on a configurational understanding of how causes combine to bring about outcomes. The method can handle considerable causal complexity (Ragin, 2000, 2008). FsQCA describes cases as the combination of causal conditions and the outcome, rather than constituting just a single condition.

3.2. Calibration, recodification, and macro variables

The key stage of fsQCA is to transform variables into calibrated sets using (at least) three substantively meaningful thresholds: full membership, full non-membership, and a cross-over point (i.e., the point of maximum ambiguity) (Ragin, 2008). For the causal conditions relating to the presence of women in management positions and in the workforce, the current study uses a four-value scheme to indicate fully out, more out than in, more in than out, and fully in. The four-value scheme is especially useful in situations where researchers possess substantial information about cases but where the nature of the evidence differs across cases (Ragin, 2007). Because of the large variation for the conditions relating to the presence of women in management positions and in the workforce, the thresholds to assign each case to one of the four sets are as follows: For women in management positions (c_md), 7 women (1 = fully in), 5 women (.67 = more in than out), 2 women (.33 = more out than in), and 0 women (0 = fully out). For women in the workforce (c_mo), 20, 12, 5, and 0 women respectively.

Recodification of the outcome variable used three values (r_p12). On the six-point response scale, 1, 2 or 3 implies a low level of implementation, 4 implies an intermediate level of implementation, and 5 or 6 implies a high level of implementation.

Besides the specific causal conditions, the fsQCA analysis considers four additional conditions (macro variables) whose creation follows Ragin's (2000) procedure. These macro variables are women in management positions and in the workforce (md*mo), women in management positions or in the workforce (md + mo), women in management positions in a firm where WLB appears in the firm's mission (md*p8), and women in the workforce of a firm where WLB appears

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