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The right to work-life balance in Portuguese cooperatives. A legal and empirical analysis

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to assess whether cooperatives are the ideal setting for promoting the work-life balance, a right whose protection has been built in close connection with the promotion of gender equality. To this end, we intend to answer the following questions: (i) What are the main dimensions of the right to work-life balance, and what is the relevance of protecting this right to promote gender equality? (ii) To what extent can the legal regime of cooperatives promote the right to work-life balance and, consequently, gender equality? (iii) What are the main facilitators and obstacles to work-life balance in cooperatives from the perspective of women and men?

From a methodological point of view, our study is based on a review of the literature, legislation, and an empirical study. The empirical analysis was based on the results of a questionnaire survey, which yielded 414 valid responses from employees of SEEs, including 62 from cooperatives. The statistical methods followed were descriptive statistics, non-parametric tests and post-hoc tests. The findings shed light on the specific challenges faced by employees in cooperatives regarding work-life balance and highlight the importance of open and supportive communication channels within the workplace and flexibility in time management. The results also suggest that cooperatives, according to the perception of employees, are the ones that promote more facilitators and that their organisational culture and climate are favourable to fostering a healthy work-life balance. The observed outcomes can be primarily attributed to the democratic and participatory management inherent in cooperative structures.

KEYWORDS: Work-life balance, decent work, gender equality, cooperatives.

ECONLIT DESCRIPTORS: K20, K31, L30, M50.

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RESUMEN: Este artículo tiene como objetivo evaluar si las cooperativas son el entorno ideal para fomentar el equilibrio entre el trabajo y la vida personal, un derecho cuya protección se ha desarrollado en estrecha conexión con la promoción de la igualdad de género. Con este fin, pretendemos responder a las siguientes preguntas: (i) ¿Cuáles son las dimensiones principales del derecho al equilibrio entre el trabajo y la vida personal, y cuál es la relevancia de proteger este derecho para promover la igualdad de género? (ii) ¿En qué medida puede el régimen legal de las cooperativas promover el derecho al equilibrio entre el trabajo y la vida personal y, en consecuencia, la igualdad de género? (iii) ¿Cuáles son los principales facilitadores y obstáculos para el equilibrio entre el trabajo y la vida personal en las cooperativas desde la perspectiva de mujeres y hombres?

Desde un punto de vista metodológico, nuestro estudio se basa en una revisión de la literatura, la legislación y un estudio empírico. El análisis empírico se basó en los resultados de una encuesta de cuestionario, que arrojó 414 respuestas válidas de empleados de SEEs, incluyendo 62 de cooperativas. Los métodos estadísticos seguidos fueron estadísticas descriptivas, pruebas no paramétricas y pruebas post hoc. Los hallazgos arrojan luz sobre los desafíos específicos enfrentados por los empleados en las cooperativas con respecto al equilibrio entre el trabajo y la vida personal, y resaltan la importancia de canales de comunicación abiertos y de apoyo en el lugar de trabajo y la flexibilidad en la gestión del tiempo. Los resultados también sugieren que, según la percepción de los empleados, las cooperativas son las que promueven más facilitadores y que su cultura y clima organizacional son propicios para fomentar un equilibrio saludable entre el trabajo y la vida personal. Los resultados observados pueden atribuirse principalmente a la gestión democrática y participativa inherente a las estructuras cooperativas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Equilibrio entre trabajo y vida personal, trabajo decente, igualdad de género, cooperativas.

Resumen amplio

El derecho a la conciliación de la vida laboral y personal en las cooperativas portuguesas. Un análisis jurídico y empírico

Objetivos

El objetivo de este artículo es evaluar si las cooperativas son el entorno ideal para fomentar la conciliación entre el trabajo y la vida personal, entendiendo esta conciliación como un derecho en estrecha conexión con la promoción de la igualdad de género. Siguiendo este propósito, pretendemos responder a las siguientes cuestiones: (i) ¿Cuáles son las dimensiones principales del derecho a la conciliación entre el trabajo y la vida personal, y cuál es la relevancia de proteger este derecho para promover la igualdad de género? (ii) ¿En qué medida puede el régimen legal de las cooperativas promover el derecho a la conciliación entre el trabajo y la vida personal y, en consecuencia, la igualdad de género? (iii) ¿Cuáles son las principales fortalezas y debilidades que encontramos en el equilibrio entre el trabajo y la vida personal en las cooperativas desde la perspectiva de género?

Desde un punto de vista metodológico, nuestro estudio realiza una revisión de la literatura y la legislación, así como un estudio empírico. Respecto a este último, cabe destacar que basa sus resultados en una encuesta que arrojó 414 respuestas válidas de empleados de SEEs, incluyendo 62 de cooperativas. Además, los métodos estadísticos seguidos han sido estadísticas descriptivas, pruebas no paramétricas y pruebas post hoc.

El concepto de trabajo decente, sobre el que destacan las aportaciones de la OIT, es un concepto ético-jurídico que pretende establecer un modelo de relaciones laborales capaz de erradicar la precariedad en el trabajo, reducir el desempleo, garantizar la igualdad de oportunidades entre hombres y mujeres, así como unos ingresos justos por el trabajo realizado, unas condiciones de trabajo adecuadas, perspectivas de desarrollo personal, una organización equilibrada del tiempo de trabajo que permita a los trabajadores conciliar su vida profesional con su vida personal y familiar, entre otros aspectos. Diversos documentos internacionales han destacado que los modelos empresariales centrados en las personas, como las cooperativas, son, desde el punto de vista jurídico, el escenario ideal para promover el trabajo decente, inclusivo y sostenible. En efecto, la cooperativa es un modelo empresarial caracterizado por la primacía del individuo y de los objetivos sociales sobre el capital, la gobernanza democrática y participativa de los socios, la propiedad colectiva y la autogestión, la creación de empleos estables, la equidad económica para los socios, así como en la distribución de los resultados y por la misión estratégica de educar y formar a sus socios (Mazzucato, 2023).

El análisis de las fortalezas y debilidades en la conciliación dentro de la organización, así como su grado de facilitación y obstaculización, sugiere algunas conclusiones interesantes.

Los resultados para las cooperativas revelan que las mujeres consideran que la dificultad para acceder al tiempo libre y para ajustar los horarios de trabajo para el cuidado de la familia son los principales obstáculos para lograr la conciliación, aunque este grado de dificultad es relativamente bajo. De hecho, las mujeres perciben que la comunicación efectiva, la opción de elegir días libres y vacaciones, y la facilitación en las ausencias laborales relacionadas con compromisos familiares son aspectos cruciales en la cooperativa que favorecen la conciliación. En cambio, los hombres priorizan cuestiones como el acceso a la ausencia laboral y el cambio de horario para el cuidado de la familia, la falta de disponibilidad de un banco de tiempo y los problemas de comunicación como los principales obstáculos en su organización para la conciliación de la vida laboral y familiar. Sin embargo, los hombres destacaron la importancia primordial del acceso a las ausencias laborales para el cuidado de la familia, el apoyo a la comunicación y la flexibilidad en los horarios de trabajo existentes en su cooperativa que impulsan la mejora del equilibrio entre la vida laboral y personal. A pesar de las ligeras variaciones en la priorización de fortalezas y debilidades entre mujeres y hombres, no existen diferencias estadísticamente significativas en el nivel de facilitación u obstaculización de los factores que influyen en la conciliación en función del género. Contrariamente a Durand-Delvigne et al. (2000), que postulan que los conflictos entre el trabajo y la vida familiar afectan predominantemente a las mujeres, nuestros resultados coinciden con los de Peeters et al. (2005), que indican no solo la ausencia de disparidades estadísticamente significativas entre hombres y mujeres en el grado de percepción de los facilitadores y los obstáculos relacionados con el equilibrio entre el trabajo y la vida familiar, sino también en la evaluación de las contribuciones de la organización al equilibrio entre el trabajo y la vida familiar o de los obstáculos que lo dificultan. El énfasis en la comunicación por parte de los trabajadores para lograr el equilibrio entre la vida laboral y familiar sugiere un reconocimiento de la importancia de un diálogo claro y abierto para abordar las responsabilidades familiares. Las posibles explicaciones de este resultado incluyen el deseo de una mayor comprensión y apoyo por parte de los superiores, la necesidad de flexibilidad en la organización del trabajo para adaptarse a las necesidades familiares, o la percepción de que la mejora de los canales de comunicación puede contribuir a un entorno laboral más propicio. Esto refuerza la importancia de unas políticas receptivas en el lugar de trabajo y de una cultura que dé prioridad a una comunicación eficaz para mejorar el equilibrio entre la vida laboral y familiar de los trabajadores. Asimismo, la flexibilidad en la estructura de las jornadas laborales debería ser una prioridad, teniendo en cuenta las necesidades específicas y los retos a los que se enfrentan los trabajadores.

La investigación también analizó las percepciones del apoyo de la organización a la conciliación de la vida profesional y familiar y su repercusión en el desempeño profesional. Los resultados revelan diferencias estadísticas entre las cooperativas y otras EES. Los trabajadores de las cooperativas muestran una actitud más positiva respecto al compromiso de su organización con el fomento de la conciliación de la vida laboral y familiar y detectan menos obstáculos que sus homólogos de otras EES. La importancia de la cultura y el clima organizativos para facilitar la integración de los aspectos profesionales y familiares es especialmente evidente en las cooperativas. Las percepciones positivas entre los trabajadores de las cooperativas su-

gieren que un entorno organizativo propicio contribuye a una percepción más favorable de la conciliación de la vida laboral y familiar, lo que coincide con Arroyo (2011).

Este estudio ofrece importantes perspectivas sobre el fomento del trabajo digno e inclusivo en las EES, haciendo especial hincapié en las cooperativas. La investigación pone de relieve cómo el apoyo de la organización es crucial para ayudar a los trabajadores de las cooperativas y de otras ESS a lograr un equilibrio entre la vida laboral y personal. En primer lugar, aporta información sobre la dinámica dentro de las cooperativas que mejora la percepción de los trabajadores sobre un alto nivel de conciliación de la vida laboral y familiar. Destaca la importancia de los procesos democráticos y la participación de los socios en las cooperativas para crear buenas condiciones de trabajo y promover el equilibrio entre la vida laboral y personal. En segundo lugar, el estudio ofrece recomendaciones prácticas a las organizaciones, especialmente a las cooperativas, para mejorar las iniciativas de conciliación de la vida laboral y familiar, reconociendo tanto las fortalezas, como la comunicación y la flexibilidad laboral, y las debilidades, como la falta de servicios de salud y bienestar. En tercer lugar, el estudio destaca la importancia de la cultura y el clima de la organización a la hora de influir en las percepciones sobre la conciliación de la vida laboral y familiar. Además, insiste en que el entorno organizativo de apoyo de una cooperativa puede influir positivamente en la forma de cómo los trabajadores ven la conciliación de la vida laboral y familiar.

Una limitación del estudio es el tamaño y la composición de la muestra, con un predominio de trabajadoras en las cooperativas. Este desequilibrio de género puede introducir sesgos, limitando la generalización de los resultados. Futuras investigaciones deberían incluir muestras más amplias y equilibradas para proporcionar una comprensión global. Aunque no se encontraron disparidades significativas basadas en el género, podrían surgir diferencias con una muestra más amplia. Además, no se examinaron factores como el exceso de horas de trabajo y los entornos de alta presión, que deberían tenerse en cuenta en futuros estudios. Este estudio sirve como invitación empírica, acentuando particularmente la variable de género, para futuras investigaciones en contextos de Economía Social y Solidaria, especialmente en entornos cooperativos. Las futuras investigaciones sobre la conciliación de la vida laboral y familiar deberían examinar las prácticas específicas utilizadas por las cooperativas y otras EES para promoverla entre los trabajadores. Por último, queremos hacer especial hincapié en la necesidad de estudios comparativos entre la economía social y el sector privado lucrativo sobre estas cuestiones.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to assess whether cooperatives, as social economy entities, are the ideal setting for promoting the work-life balance, a right whose protection has been built in close connection with the promotion of gender equality and decent work.

The Decent Work Agenda has been taken up by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) as one of its priorities, based on a broad set of recommendations in employment, social protection, labour standards, fundamental principles and rights of workers and social dialogue (Fernandes, 2019). The concept of decent work synthesises the ILO's historic mission to promote opportunities for men and women to obtain productive and quality work and is considered a fundamental condition for an adequate work-life balance (Ghai, 2003; Fajardo, 2021).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in organisational models that prioritise social values and employee well-being, such as cooperatives and other Social economy entities (SEEs) (Meira, 2022; Arando et al., 2024). And at the centre of the discussion is the concept of work-life balance, one important dimension of decent work (Kabir et al., 2023). Work-life balance should also be analysed from the perspectives of women and men to highlight differences in experiences and requirements of each gender within the workplace (LeFrançois et al., 2017). However, the extent to which cooperatives and other SEEs stand out or not in promoting work-life balance is a subject that deserves further investigation and requires more empirical research that is very scarce in the literature, particularly in cooperatives (Serrano et al., 2024).

This study aims to explore how cooperatives play a crucial role in promoting work-life balance, which is closely connected to the progress of gender equality. To this end, we intend to answer the following questions: (i) What are the main dimensions of the right to work-life balance in the context of decent work and the promotion of gender equality? (ii) To what extent can the legal regime of cooperatives promote the right to work-life balance and gender equality? (iii) What are the main facilitators and obstacles to work-life balance in cooperatives from the perspective of women and men?

Examining the three main questions aims to uncover the fundamental aspects of balancing work and personal life, how this intersects with gender equality, and the role of cooperative frameworks in strengthening this important balance. From a methodological standpoint, the study relies on a comprehensive examination of the existing literature, relevant legislation, and the implementation of an empirical study. In answering the first two questions, the study adopts a doctrinal and legal perspective. To answer the third question, a quantitative approach is developed deriving from the outcomes of a questionnaire to employees within the domain of cooperatives and other SEEs, crafted in alignment with the existing literature. Knowing the enablers and obstacles encountered by workers offers crucial perspectives on how cooperatives can enhance their organizational culture and processes to effectively promote work-life balance. The comparison of the perspectives of workers from other SEEs seeks to discern whether cooperatives exhibit greater facilitators or barriers in fostering a conducive environment

for achieving a greater work-life balance. Thus, methodologically, the study utilizes a thorough strategy, incorporating a combination of literature review, laws, and real-world data.

The article presents a contribution to the scientific field by providing new perspectives on the connection between work-life balance, gender equality, and collaborative systems. By studying work-life balance in cooperative structures, the article advances the theoretical understanding of both work-life balance and cooperative studies. By connecting these two areas, the study broadens our theoretical comprehension of how organisational structures and practices impact individual experiences and results.

2. Work-life balance in the context of decent work and gender equality

The concept of “decent work” appeared for the first time in the Director-General’s Report to the 87th Session of the International Labour Conference, entitled “Decent Work” (ILO, 1999), and was subsequently taken up in various ILO documents, in particular the Report “Atypical Employment in the World. Challenges and prospects” of 2016, which states that “it is up to governments, as well as employers, workers and their organisations, through national, regional and international efforts, to come together to respond to the challenges in the world of work, with the aim of promoting decent work for all” (ILO, 2016).

This concept is the point of convergence of four of the ILO’s strategic objectives: respect for fundamental rights at work, with an emphasis on freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining; the elimination of all forms of discrimination in employment and the eradication of all forms of forced labour and child labour; the promotion of productive and quality employment; the strengthening of social protection; and the strengthening of social dialogue.

This is an ethical-legal concept, in the nature of soft law, which aims to establish a labour relations model capable of eradicating insecurity at work, reducing unemployment, ensuring absolute equality of opportunities between men and women, a fair income for the work done, adequate levels of hygiene, safety and health in the workplace, prospects for personal development, a balanced organisation of working time that allows workers to reconcile their professional lives with their personal and family lives, among other things.

The promotion of decent work for all is also reflected in the eighth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), called “Decent Work and economic growth”, of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015 by all members of the United Nations, including Portugal (UNGA, 2015). This SDG states that “sustainable economic growth can create the conditions that allow people to have stable and decent jobs that stimulate the economy and do not harm the environment. To this end, decent work opportunities and conditions should be promoted for the entire working-age population.” (López Rodríguez, 2021).

The eighth SDG thus highlights the importance of decent work in achieving inclusive and sustainable economic development. In the same vein, the 2019 ILO report entitled “ILO Cente-

nary Declaration for the Future of Work” (adopted by the ILO at its 108th session) recognises that work has a dual economic and social dimension, making it imperative to promote investment in decent and sustainable work by implementing a people-centred business model (ILO, 2019a).

At the European level, stand out the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council and the European Economic and Social Committee (SWD(2017) 200 final, 26 April 2017), which approves the creation of a European Pillar of Social Rights based on twenty fundamental principles and rights grouped into three thematic blocks: equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion. Among the principles and rights in each block, we will highlight those most closely related to promoting decent, inclusive and sustainable work. Thus, in the first block, we highlight the principles of education, training and lifelong learning, the principle of equality between men and women, the principle of equal opportunities and the principle of active support for employment. In the second block, we highlight the principles of secure employment that are adaptable to the changing economic and technological context, the principle of a fair wage that guarantees a decent standard of living, the right to information on employment conditions and protection in the event of dismissal, the promotion of social dialogue, worker participation, work-life balance and the right to a healthy, safe and well-adapted working environment and the right to data protection. The third block includes the promotion of adequate social protection and the right to unemployment benefits (Bonciu, 2018).

As has already been pointed out, work-life balance is part of decent work. Various studies point to the importance of work-life balance for people’s mental, emotional and physical health and for adequate recognition of gender equality (Verzosi & Carvajal, 2023). According to Albiol and Freixa (2007), professional life and family life are two of the areas that form part of people’s human and professional development and are fundamental factors in their lives, which is why a necessary balance is needed between the two areas: the professional and the personal and family (Hennessy, 2007). According to Chimote and Srivastava (2013), organisations benefit from promoting work-life balance because it reduces absenteeism, increases productivity, improves organisational image, promotes loyalty retention and reduces turnover.

The doctrine also emphasises the inextricable link between work-life balance issues and gender equality. Women’s massive access to the labour market since the 1960s has led to new needs to reconcile work and family life. In addition, a significant proportion of discrimination in work and employment between men and women stems from issues related to maternity, paternity and reconciling work and family life (Ramalho, 2003).

According to Article 33 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, “the family’s legal, economic and social protection must be ensured. In order to reconcile family and working life, everyone has the right to protection against dismissal for reasons connected with maternity, paid maternity leave and parental leave on the birth or adoption of a child”.

In the same vein, Article 59(1)(b) of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (CRP) states that: “All workers, without distinction as to age, sex, race, citizenship, territory of origin, religion, political or ideological convictions, have the right (...): b) To the organisation of

work in conditions that are socially dignifying, in such a way as to facilitate personal fulfilment and allow for the work-life balance.” In turn, Article 67(2)(h) emphasises that it is the State’s responsibility to protect the family by “promoting the work-life balance through the coordination of various sectoral policies”.

In the Portuguese Labour Code (Law no. 7/2009, of 12 February, as amended by Law no. 13/2023, of 03/04) we also find a wide range of rules protecting the right to work-life balance, in particular the following: the prohibition of discrimination against pregnant workers, workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding and workers or employees on the grounds of their family situation in access to employment (Article 24.1.); the outright ban on questions and medical examinations on the pregnancy status of job applicants (Article 19.2.); the guarantee of special working conditions during pregnancy, the puerperium and breastfeeding (namely about night work, dangerous work and overtime), the granting of various leave related to pregnancy, maternity, paternity, adoption and childcare (Articles 35 et seq.), enshrining the right of workers to take time off work to care for children and other members of the family (Article 249(2)(e)), the establishment of special arrangements for organising working time on the grounds of family care needs, as well as the right to be exempt from specific working time arrangements on the same grounds, the establishment of a presumption of unlawful dismissal of pregnant workers, workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding and workers on initial parental leave (Article 63), as well as the imposition of procedural requirements to justify the non-renewal of fixed-term contracts for these categories of workers (Article 144 (3)).

More recently, Law 13/2023 of 3 April was passed in Portugal in the context of the Decent Work Agenda, one of the objectives of which is to improve working conditions and the work-life balance. In order to achieve this goal, new measures stand out in terms of parental leave, teleworking and informal carers. The father’s exclusive parental leave is increased from 20 to 28 consecutive days. There is an increase in the allowance when parental leave is shared equally between father and mother, and from 120 days onwards, the leave can be used part-time by both parents, increasing the total duration. Exemptions and leave are extended to those who want to adopt or be a foster family. The right to telework is enshrined without the need for an agreement and is extended to parents of children with disabilities, chronic illnesses or oncological diseases. Non-primary informal carers will now have five days’ leave and the right to 15 days’ justified absence and will be entitled to teleworking, flexible working hours or part-time work.

3. Convergence between decent work, work-life balance and the cooperative legal form

3.1. International recognition of convergence

Several international documents highlight the convergence between decent, inclusive and sustainable work and the legal form of cooperatives.

First and foremost, ILO Recommendation 193 on the promotion of cooperatives, adopted in Geneva in June 2002 (ILO, 2002). The preamble to this Recommendation highlights the importance of cooperatives for job creation, emphasising that “cooperatives, in their various forms, promote the fullest participation in the economic and social development of all peoples”. Later in the Recommendation, States are encouraged to “take measures to promote the potential of cooperatives in all countries, regardless of their level of development, in order to help them and their members: (a) to create and develop income-generating activities and decent and sustainable employment.” (Fajardo, 2021; Henry, 2021).

On 11 September 2009, the ILO, in its Resolution “Overcoming the Crisis: A Global Jobs Pact”, stressed the importance of cooperation to “Establish a stronger and more coherent global regulatory and control framework for the financial sector, so that it can better serve the interests of the real economy, favour sustainable enterprises and decent work” (Point 21.1).1), as well as to reorient the economy so that it “accelerates the recovery of employment, reduces social divides” and supports “the achievement of development goals by making decent work a reality” (Point 21.3). In short, the “Global Jobs Pact” clarifies the close link between cooperation and promoting decent work. As we know, the cooperative legal form is based on the cooperation of its members to carry out an activity aimed at satisfying their needs (ILO, 2009). The value of cooperation is part of the cooperative identity and acts as an ethical framework for the cooperative principles, as we will see below.

In June 2019, at the 108th session of the International Labour Conference, the ILO approved the “Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work”, in which it commits to promoting the Social Economy and, in particular, cooperatives, to generate decent work, productive employment and better living standards. The ILO recognises that the world of work is undergoing significant changes and that, in this context, cooperation exercised through cooperatives and other social economy entities can adequately respond to these changes (ILO, 2019a).

Closely linked to this document, the World Commission on the Future of Work also published the “Working for a Better Future” report in 2019 (ILO, 2019b). This report is a people-centred agenda based on three main lines of action to generate growth, equality and sustainability for present and future generations. Specifically, the third pillar of this agenda is to increase investment in decent and sustainable work through, among other measures, the transformation of economies. In this context, the Commission recommends the adoption of

incentives to promote investment in key areas that promote decent and sustainable work, as well as investment in sectors of the economy that are of strategic importance for this promotion. Among these sectors, particular emphasis is given to the social economy sector, which is characterised by “prioritising people and social objectives over capital and economic profit.” (Canalda Criado, 2019).

Finally, on 10 June 2022, the ILO approved the Resolution on “Decent Work and the Social and Solidarity Economy”, which presents the Conclusions and Recommendations of the general discussion of the 110th International Labour Conference. In this resolution, the ILO recognises that the social and solidarity economy encompasses enterprises, organisations and other entities that carry out economic, social and environmental activities of collective or general interest, which are based on principles of voluntary cooperation and mutual aid, democratic or participatory governance, autonomy and independence, and the primacy of people and the social purpose over capital in the distribution and use of surpluses or profits, as well as assets, that social and solidarity economy organisations aspire to long-term viability and sustainability and to the transition from the informal economy to the formal economy, and that they operate in all sectors of the economy, that they put into practice a set of values that are intrinsic to their operation and that are in line with caring for people and the planet, equality and fairness, interdependence, self-management, transparency and accountability, and carrying out decent work that enables them to obtain decent livelihoods. This Resolution emphasises that, depending on national circumstances, the social and solidarity economy includes cooperatives, associations, mutual societies, foundations, social enterprises, self-management groups and other entities that operate according to its values and principles (ILO, 2022).

For its part, in 2018, the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) adopted the “Declaration on decent work and against harassment”, which it states that “the cooperative movement shares the approach of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, towards a world [...] where everyone can enjoy decent work and benefit from inclusive and sustainable economic growth”. As the international voice of the cooperative movement, the ICA “pledges to respect and promote the fundamental principles of decent work and to work diligently to support them”. This Declaration highlights the ICA’s clear commitment to promoting decent work (ICA, 2018).

At the European Union level, the European Parliament Resolution of 19 February 2009 on the Social Economy (2008/2250(INI)) stresses that the Social Economy, which includes cooperatives, plays an essential role in the European economy by creating quality jobs. The Resolution also recognises that the Social Economy is a crucial player in achieving the objectives set out in the Lisbon Strategy. In this regard, it is stressed that the Social Economy “contributes to rectifying three fundamental imbalances in the labour market: unemployment, job instability and the exclusion of the unemployed, both socially and in the labour market”. The Resolution emphasises that the Social Economy “has a role in improving employability and creating jobs that are not normally relocated”. In addition, the text points out that “employers in the Social Economy are important agents of reintegration”, recognising their efforts to create and maintain stable, quality jobs (European Parliament, 2009).

3.2. Reasons for convergence

The legal system of cooperatives is based on its logic, which the ICA calls the Cooperative Identity. In 1995, in Manchester, the ICA based this identity on a set of principles (the Cooperative Principles), a set of values (the Cooperative Values) that forms those principles and the Concept of the Cooperative (Fici, 2013).

In the Portuguese Cooperative Code (CCoop) the concept of a cooperative (Article 2 of the CCoop) is associated with the necessary obedience to cooperative principles, which have achieved legal-constitutional consecration. Article 61(2) of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (CRP) states that “everyone is recognised as having the right to set up cooperatives freely, provided that the cooperative principles are observed”. In turn, Article 82(4)(a) of the CRP states that the cooperative subsector “covers the means of production owned and managed by cooperatives, in compliance with cooperative principles”. Hence, in its operation, the cooperative’s failure to respect the cooperative principles will constitute grounds for its dissolution (Article 112(1)(h) of the CCoop). This is a cause for compulsory winding up by judicial means.

This very logic on which the legal regime of cooperatives is based demonstrates that cooperatives are atypical business organisations, as evidenced by the primacy of the individual and social objectives over the capital, by democratic governance by members, by combining the interests of members with the general interest; the defence and application of the values of solidarity and responsibility; the reinvestment of surplus funds in long-term development objectives or the provision of services of interest to members or services of general interest; voluntary and free membership; autonomous and independent management (Meira & Ramos, 2023).

By this very logic of their legal system, cooperatives can promote fundamental principles and rights at work, in line with the concept of decent, inclusive and sustainable work and the necessary reconciliation of work and family life, in the terms presented above (Gutiérrez Colomidas, 2021; Mazzucato, 2023).

Under the terms of the Portuguese Cooperative Code, cooperatives are “autonomous legal persons, freely constituted, with variable capital and composition, which, through the co-operation and mutual help of their members, in compliance with cooperative principles, aim, on a non-profit basis, to satisfy their economic, social or cultural needs and aspirations” (Article 2 (1) of the CCoop).

The cooperative is constituted “by and for the members”, with whom it operates within the framework of the activity addressed to them and in which they participate by cooperating (called cooperativised activity by Spanish legislation and doctrine) (Vargas Vasserot, 2006). This participation will form a reciprocal exchange of services between the cooperative and the co-operators, services specific to the cooperative’s corporate purpose.

The fact that the primary purpose of the cooperative is not to make profits and then share them out, but to provide its members with direct advantages in their economy through their economic participation in the cooperative’s activity strengthens its potential to promote de-

cent, inclusive and sustainable work. In the specific case of labour activity, the cooperative's purpose will be to provide jobs for cooperators under appropriate working conditions and with respect for labour rights (Meira & Fernandes, 2021).

The cooperative is a collectively owned company, which is that it is owned by those who provide the resources (labour/services) that enable it to function. A cooperative is a company managed by cooperators because cooperators staff their bodies. Article 29(1) of the CCoop states that the "members of the governing bodies are elected at a general meeting from among the cooperators". Consequently, the bodies are staffed by cooperators. In addition, each co-operator must hold the social positions for which they have been elected unless there is a justified reason for excusing them (Article 22(2)(b) of the CCoop). This requirement that the members of the organs be cooperators will allow the interests of the cooperators to be directly represented in its organs, with the advantage that the leaders of the cooperative, guided by their own experience, will constantly have the interests of the co-operators in mind, without deviating from the primary purpose of the cooperative, which is, as we have seen, to satisfy the needs of its members (Münkner, 1982), which, in the specific case of labour cooperatives, will be to provide members with decent, inclusive and sustainable work (Henrj, 2016).

It should also be noted that a cooperative is a company that is organised and run in a democratic and participatory way by the cooperative principle of democratic management by the members. This principle particularly values the participation of cooperators in the running of cooperatives and emphasises the responsibility of managers towards the co-operators who elect them. It follows from this principle that the members democratically control the cooperative and must actively participate in formulating policies and making fundamental decisions based on the rule of one member, one vote (Article 40 (1) of the CCoop).

The fact that worker cooperators can actively participate in the running of cooperatives and in the decision-making process strengthens cooperatives' commitment to promoting decent, inclusive and sustainable work (Henrj, 2016).

The cooperative is also a business organisation based on the desire to serve the community. This stems from the necessary observance of the Cooperative Principle of voluntary and free membership in terms of the admission and departure of cooperators. Voluntary membership means that, given the cooperative's mutualist purpose, any interested person - who fulfils the admission requirements - should be able to join the cooperative as a member and benefit from its services. This means that to become a cooperative member, it is not necessary to acquire the shareholding of another cooperator or wait for the cooperative to carry out a capital increase (Article 19 of the CCoop).

This principle results in the cooperative's permeability when it comes to incorporating new members, which is justified by the desire to serve the cooperative's community. The incorporation of members from the area in which the cooperative mainly operates has been a constant in this type of organisation, whose ultimate goal would be to satisfy the needs felt by the community, with the cooperative thus appearing as an entity that generates stable jobs (mainly because cooperatives, due to their strong local roots, carry out activities that, by their very nature, cannot be relocated) and fosters an entrepreneurial spirit. From this comes the

close link between the principle of voluntary and free membership and the principle of community interest, which states that “cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by the members”. Thus, while centred on the needs of their members, cooperatives work to achieve the sustainable development of their communities according to the criteria approved by these (Hernández Caceres, 2023). This proximity to the community with the stability of cooperative employment fosters decent, inclusive and sustainable work (Mazzucato, 2023).

This admission is based on a principle of economic equity that stems from the cooperative principle of the economic participation of members, which speaks of an equitable contribution to the capital of cooperatives that falls on all members (art. 3 of the CCoop). This economic equity must be observed when defining the economic requirements for acquiring the status of co-operator, which include: (i) the main economic requirement imposed by law, in the form of subscribing to share capital (Article 83 of the CCoop); (ii) the statutory economic requirement, in the form of making an admission fee (Article 90 of the CCoop). As for the capital contribution, each cooperator’s contribution can be any amount decided by the cooperators as long as it is equitable. Furthermore, the capital brought in by the members is instrumental. The cooperator’s participation in the cooperative’s activity is essential (Meira, 2023). This means that we are dealing with a business organisation characterised by a balance in its members’ economic power, which fosters decent, inclusive and sustainable work (Filippi et al., 2023).

Sharing ownership of the cooperative, based on democratic and participatory management, will allow for a fairer distribution of the value created, which will remain in the hands of the people who generated it and not a small group of investors.

As has already been pointed out, unlike a commercial company, the primary purpose of a cooperative is not to make profits and then share them out but to maximise the advantage that members derive from the operations they carry out with or through the cooperative. In return for their participation in the cooperative activity, the cooperator will receive economic advantages, which the doctrine calls surplus. In the case of labour cooperatives, these will translate into more significant and fairer remuneration for the work done. The return distribution among the cooperators will then be proportional to the transactions made by each of them with the cooperative in that financial year. Since the surplus is the result of the cooperative’s transactions with its cooperators, it is understandable that when the return occurs, it will correspond to the volume of these transactions and not to the number of shares each cooperator holds (Meira, 2023). These criteria for participation and the return of surpluses enhance the ability of cooperatives to provide their members with a fair income for their work (Pérotin, 2014).

Finally, it should be noted that in their organisation and operation, cooperatives must observe the principle of education, training and information, which is a strategic principle and a factor in the social legitimacy of cooperatives, showing that the cooperative is not only an economic organisation but also an organisation with educational and social purposes. Education and training aim to make an effective contribution to the development of the cooperative by providing members, elected representatives, managers and employees with skills and knowl-

edge that reinforce its organisational culture based on cooperative principles and values, as well as appropriate technical and professional tools and skills (Meira, 2020). This principle is reflected in the status of cooperators, recognising their right to participate in cooperative education and training activities (Article 21(1)(f) of the CCoop), with the consequent obligation for cooperatives to organise such education and training activities, and to this end to set aside a reserve “for the cultural and technical education and training of cooperators, cooperative workers and the community” (Article 97(1) of the CCoop)(Meira, 2020).

Education and training, by providing access to resources and skills, are essential in promoting decent, inclusive and sustainable work and creating favourable contexts for effectively reconciling work and family life (Rodríguez González, 2018). These favourable contexts for conciliation can be provided by the statutes, the internal regulations or by resolutions of the general meetings of the cooperatives.

4. Methodology

The empirical study aimed to identify and assess the main facilitators and obstacles to achieving work-life balance in cooperatives, emphasising the analysis by gender, and comparing to other SEEs. Additionally, the study sought to assess employees’ perceptions regarding the promotion of facilitators and the presence of obstacles in their organisation and whether the organisation where they collaborate fosters the work-life balance, and to what degree, as well as the relevance of this reconciliation for professional performance.

To attain these objectives, a quantitative methodology was adopted based on the results of a questionnaire designed to evaluate the complex connection between professional commitments and familial responsibilities. In the initial phase, the objective was to assess how work and family life affect each other, and two questions were formulated using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strong disagreement) to 5 (strong agreement). To identify the main obstacles and enablers of work-life balance, a list of 15 options each was provided, based on CITE (2025), Costa (2012), Guerreiro et al. (2006), and Sirgy and Lee (2017). Participants were tasked with identifying the most salient factor among these options. Subsequently, the same statements were presented in the context of a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very difficult) to 6 (very easy), allowing for an assessment of the perceived influence of each of these obstacles and enablers on work-life balance within the social economy organisation where the respondents were employed. Further, four further questions were developed to assess employees’ perceptions of the extent to which their organisation fostered the balance between work and personal life, as well as their satisfaction with the organizational culture and climate. These questions utilised a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (strongly). Finally, the survey included questions focused on describing the participants, thus supplying important demographic information necessary for analyzing and interpreting the collected data.

For the application of the questionnaire, it was elaborated a list of social entities belonging to NUTS II of Portugal to ensure geographical diversity. After conducting a pre-test to refine

the questionnaire, it was disseminated by email between April and June 2022, which yielded 414 valid responses from employees of SEEs, including 62 from cooperatives. According to data from the Satellite Account of the Social Economy for 2016, cooperatives employed 10.6% of social economy workers (CASES, 2019), so the number of responses from cooperative employees in the sample is an appropriate proportion to the Portuguese reality. The statistical methods followed were descriptive statistics to summarise and describe the key features of the dataset; Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric tests to assess differences in work-life balance perceptions among different organisational forms, work arrangements and demographic characteristics of the employees, namely gender groups; and post-hoc tests to further explore significant findings. IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0 was used for data analysis, and a significance level of 5% was employed throughout the analysis to determine the statistical significance of the findings.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Sample characteristics

The sample comprised 414 employees from SEEs, of which 62 were affiliated with cooperatives. Respondents were predominantly female (90.3% in cooperatives and 85.2% in other SEEs). In cooperatives, respondents were primarily within the age range of 40-49 years (45.2%), followed by 50-59 years (22.6%) and 30-39 years (21%). In contrast, other SEEs had a relatively younger demographic: 31.8% were between 40 and 49 years, 28.7% were between 30 and 39 years, and 11.9% were between 18 and 29 years. The educational attainment level was predominantly at a higher level: 64.5% of cooperative employees held a bachelor's or master's degree, compared to 52% in other SEEs. Most were married or in a domestic partnership, with 22.2% being single in other SEEs compared to 14.5% in cooperatives. About 64.5% of cooperative employees and 61.9% of other SEEs belonged to households with three or more individuals. Half of the cooperative employees had dependents (32.4% in other SEEs), with 22.6% having 2 or 3 dependents (28.7% in other SEEs). More than 70% had no dependents, while 21% of cooperative employees and 25.3% of other SEEs had 1 to 3 dependents. In terms of professional experience, cooperative employees had longer tenures in their current social economy organisation: 65.2% had been working for 11-40 years, while in other SEO, this percentage was lower at 46.6%. The majority had permanent employment contracts (slightly over 70%), with a smaller proportion on fixed-term contracts (about 20%). Flexible working hours were more prevalent in cooperatives (43.5%) compared to other SEEs (17%), where rigid working hours were predominant (55.4% as opposed to 35.5% in cooperatives). The legal forms of the organisations in which the respondents were employed were diverse, including Private social solidarity institutions (37.4%), Mercies (18.6%), Cooperatives (15%), Foundation (8.7%), Mutual Aid Association (8.5%), Association with altruistic purposes (5.8%), and

Other (6%). In cooperatives, the predominant branch is social solidarity in service provision (69.4%), so the respondents are primarily worker-cooperators.

5.2. Work-life balance

5.2.1. Reciprocal influence of professional and family life: an examination of individual perspectives

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) characterise work-family conflict as the discord between work and family requirements, such that fulfilling responsibilities in one role creates challenges in fulfilling obligations in the other. The findings derived from the sampled data indicate a generally elevated perception of work-life balance within the social economy, whether within cooperatives or other SEEs (Table 1). However, the Mann-Whitney test (MW test=12567.5, $p=0.03$) reveals a statistically significant distinction in employees' perceptions between cooperatives and other SEEs regarding the impact of professional life on family life. Further analysis, based on the mean values, suggests a more favourable conciliation of professional life with family life within cooperatives.

Table 1. Influence of professional life on family life and vice-versa

	Type	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean
My professional life allows me to reconcile it with my family life	Coop.	4.8	12.9	1.6	45.2	35.5	3.94
	Other SEEs	2.6	15.3	3.4	61.4	17.3	3.76
My family life allows me to reconcile it with my professional life	Coop.	3.2	6.5	4.8	58.1	27.4	4.00
	Other SEEs	1.4	7.7	8.5	64.5	17.9	3.90

Source: Own elaboration based on the sample. Note: Coop.- Cooperatives.

5.2.2. Obstacles and facilitators

In the first step, efforts were directed toward the identification of major obstacles and facilitators of work-life balance. For all employees within all the SEEs, the absence of services and/or protocols for physical and mental health and well-being was identified as the primary obstacle. Employees in cooperatives emphasised the lack of services and/or support protocols for workers' children as the second most significant obstacle, followed by rigidity in the selection of work schedule modality. Conversely, employees in other SEEs highlighted inflexibility in the selection of work schedule modality as the second most prominent obstacle, followed by restrictions in accessing telecommuting (Table 2).

Table 2. Obstacles to work-life balance

	Cooperatives			Other SEEs %
	F %	M %	Total %	
Absence of services and/or protocols for physical and mental health and well-being	16.1	0.0	14.5	17.0
Absence of services and/or support protocols for the children of employees	14.3	0.0	12.9	6.0
Inflexibility in the selection of the work schedule modality	12.5	0.0	11.3	11.6
Difficulty in communicating with the team/superiors at work regarding issues related to family commitments/obligations	7.1	16.7	8.1	8.2
Inability to access the time bank	7.1	16.7	8.1	6.8
Rigidity in the selection of days off and vacations	7.1	16.7	8.1	5.7
Inability to assign the birthday day	7.1	0.0	6.5	6.8
Absence of services and/or protocols for employee's children's vacation programs	5.4	16.7	6.5	4.8
Inflexibility in access to teleworking	5.4	16.7	6.5	10.5
Difficulty in accessing work absence for family caregiving	5.4	0.0	4.8	4.5
Difficulty in accessing the change of working hours for family care	3.6	16.7	4.8	6.0
Absence of training licence	3.6	0.0	3.2	2.3
Absence of services and/or protocols for the support of the elderly and dependents of the workers	3.6	0.0	3.2	2.8
Rigidity in scheduling vacations between couples/family members	1.8	0.0	1.6	4.5
No priority in accessing the organisation's services to support children, the elderly, and other dependents of workers	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.3

Source: Own elaboration based on the sample. Note: F-Female; M-Male.

In cooperatives, the analysis by gender reveals that women perceive the lack of services and protocols for physical and mental health and well-being as the greatest obstacle to achieving work-life balance (Table 2). Women also identify the nonexistence of services or support protocols for their children and inflexibility in choosing working hours as significant barriers, and this last one may point to challenges in adjusting work schedules to accommodate personal or family needs. On the other hand, men are divided, considering the following the primary obstacle: difficulty in communicating with the team/superiors at work regarding family commitments/obligations, difficulty in accessing schedule changes for family assistance, inability

to access a time bank, lack of offers for services and/or vacation program protocols for employees' children, inflexibility in choosing days off and vacation, and inflexibility in accessing remote work. These outcomes align with several research findings emphasising the relationship between the importance of harmonising work and family responsibilities with the overall mental, emotional, and physical well-being of individuals (e.g.: Conte, 2003; Haar & Brougham, 2022; Pace & Sciotto, 2021). Pace and Sciotto (2021) found gender disparities, noting that women's perspectives on work-life balance have a more pronounced impact on well-being than their male counterparts. Also, according to LeFrançois et al. (2017), the difficulty of reconciling in women tends to have a greater impact on their physical and mental health when there are dependent relatives in the ascending or descending line.

Table 3 reports the results for the facilitators. As the principal catalyst for attaining a harmonious equilibrium between personal and professional domains, employees within cooperatives and other SEEs prominently identify the streamlining of communication with their team or superiors concerning familial commitments and obligations. Subsequently, within the cooperative sector, emphasis is placed on the importance of flexibility in determining working hours and the availability of a time bank. Conversely, within other SEEs, the focal point shifts towards flexibility in selecting days off and vacation periods. The third facilitative factor, as discerned by cooperative employees, is the ease of accessing leave for family assistance, while employees in other SEEs attribute significance to the flexibility in choosing the modality of working hours.

Within cooperatives, female employees have pinpointed optimising communication channels with the team or superiors concerning familial matters as a paramount factor in facilitating work-life balance (Table 3). Subsequently, they emphasise the flexibility inherent in selecting the working time mode, along with the availability of a time bank as crucial contributors. Conversely, male employees within cooperatives also accord precedence to the seamless communication with their team or superiors at the workplace and facilitation in work absence for family caregiving, considering them the primary facilitator. Additionally, they assign equal significance to the ease of accessing schedule changes and remote work, particularly in the context of providing family assistance. This result suggests that employees consider effective communication channels with their team or superiors regarding family-related matters as a critical factor for achieving a balance between work and personal life. This insight implies that improving communication in this context is perceived by employees as instrumental in fostering a work environment that accommodates and supports their family responsibilities. The emphasis on communication highlights the importance of a supportive workplace culture where family commitments are acknowledged and effectively addressed. Also, flexible work arrangements allow employees to adjust their time at work and reconcile it with family responsibilities (Dulk et al., 1999). This flexibility also helps to promote equal opportunities between the sexes, as they can adjust their schedules without threatening their professional careers (Kovács, 2006). Several studies recognise that flexible working hours and working patterns help to balance employees' work and life (e.g.: Arshed et al., 2016; Russel et al., 2008; Shagvaliyeva & Yazdanifard, 2014). According to De Menezes and Kelliher (2016), organisations have a major challenge in implementing flexible working arrangements, and they also find it difficult to balance the interests of their workers with those of the organisation.

Table 3. Enablers to work-life balance

	Cooperatives			Other SEEs %
	F %	M %	Total %	
Facilitation in communication with the team/superiors at work on issues related to family commitments/obligations.	28.6	33.3	29.0	25.9
Flexibility in the selection of work schedule modalities	16.1	0.0	14.5	12.5
Availability of access to the time bank	16.1	0.0	14.5	4.8
Facilitation in accessing work absence for family caregiving	8.9	33.3	11.3	7.7
Flexibility in the selection of days off and vacations	10.7	0.0	9.7	13.6
Facilitation in accessing work schedule changes for family caregiving	7.1	16.7	8.1	8.0
Flexibility in accessing remote work	7.1	16.7	8.1	11.6
The flexibility of booking vacations between couples/family members of the same organisation	1.8	0.0	1.6	2.6
Provision of services and/or protocols for the support of employees' children	1.8	0.0	1.6	1.1
Provision of services and/or protocols for physical and mental health and well-being	1.8	0.0	1.6	4.0
Existence of a training licence	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3
Provision of services and/or support protocols for the elderly and dependents of workers.	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Provision of services and/or vacation program protocols for employees' children.	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.3
Availability of assigning the birthday day	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.0
Priority access to the organisation's services to support children, the elderly, and other dependents of workers	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.7

Source: Own elaboration based on the sample. Note: F-Female; M-Male.

It was also examined the level of challenge or ease associated with primary barriers and enablers in harmonising work and family responsibilities within the cooperative workplace and gender-based variations in these aspects. Table 4 highlights the two obstacles and facilitators existent in cooperatives that make it most difficult/easy to reconcile personal and professional life by gender. For women, effective communication and flexibility in scheduling related to family commitments, along with flexibility in select days off and vacations, are key factors in reconciling personal and professional life in the cooperative where they work, followed by fa-

Table 4. Degree of influence of obstacles and enablers to work-life balance in cooperatives, by gender

	Female				Male			
	NA %	Makes it difficult or very difficult %	No opinion %	Facilitates or greatly facilitates %	NA %	Makes it difficult or very difficult %	No opinion %	Facilitates or greatly facilitates %
Facilitators								
Facilitation in communication with the team/superiors at work on issues related to family commitments/ obligations	5.4	5.4	8.9	80.4	0.0	0.0	16.7	83.3
Facilitation in accessing work absence for family caregiving	5.4	8.9	8.9	76.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
Facilitation in accessing work schedule changes for family caregiving	14.3	10.7	3.6	71.4	0.0	0.0	16.7	83.3
Flexibility in the selection of days off and vacations	3.6	8.9	7.1	80.4	16.7	16.7	0.0	66.7
Obstacles								
Difficulty in communicating with the team/superiors at work regarding issues related to family commitments/ obligations	33.9	32.1	10.7	23.2	0.0	83.3	16.7	0.0
Difficulty in accessing work absence for family caregiving	26.8	37.5	5.4	30.4	0.0	83.3	0.0	16.7
Difficulty in accessing the change of working hours for family care	28.6	37.5	10.7	23.2	0.0	83.3	0.0	16.7
Inability to access the time bank	44.6	26.8	14.3	14.3	16.7	83.3	0.0	0.0
Absence of services and/or protocols for physical and mental health and well-being	42.9	35.7	12.5	8.9	16.7	50.0	33.3	0.0
Rigidity in scheduling vacations between couples/family members	33.9	26.8	17.9	21.4	33.3	66.7	0.0	0.0
Rigidity in the selection of days off and vacations	26.8	32.1	12.5	28.6	33.3	66.7	0.0	0.0
Inflexibility in the selection of the work schedule modality	33.9	35.7	14.3	16.1	0.0	66.7	16.7	16.7
Inflexibility in access to teleworking	33.9	35.7	8.9	21.4	0.0	66.7	16.7	16.7

Source: Own elaboration based on the sample. Note: NA-Not applicable.

cilitated access to work absence for family caregiving. For men, unanimous agreement points to the primary importance of access to work absence for family caregiving, followed by communication facilitation and flexibility in addressing family commitments.

The obstacles in cooperatives identified by women that make it most difficult to reconcile personal and professional life include difficulties in accessing time off and altering working hours for family care (37.5% consider that it makes difficult or very difficult). Subsequent barriers involve inflexible working hours, limited telecommuting options, and insufficient services/protocols for physical and mental well-being (35.7% each). Conversely, men prioritise issues such as accessing time off and working hours change for family care, the unavailability of a time bank, and challenges in communication with team/superiors regarding family commitments (83.3% each). Secondary concerns encompass inflexibility in coordinating vacations among family members, selecting days off and vacations, rigid working hours, and in access to telework (66.7% each).

The results of the non-parametric test revealed no statistically significant differences in the extent of impediment and assistance provided by obstacles and facilitators in cooperatives when analysed by several demographic characteristics of employees, including gender, several organisational features and work arrangements.

5.2.3. Work-Life perceptions: assessing organisational support, impediments, and cultural influences in cooperatives and other SEEs

The employees of all SEEs were also asked whether the organisation where they collaborate fosters the reconciliation of professional and family life, and to what degree, as well as the relevance of this reconciliation for professional performance. The findings are reported in Table 5, differentiated by cooperatives and other social entities.

Facilitators

Data suggest that employees in cooperatives tend to have a more positive view than those in other SEEs. This is reflected in the mean and median values within cooperatives, surpassing those in other SEEs. These higher values signify a more robust conviction among cooperative employees regarding their organisation's active promotion of mechanisms to support work-life balance. Specifically, 51.6% of employees within cooperatives express a substantial belief that their organisation extensively promotes facilitators for work-life balance, encompassing responses categorised as "quite a lot" and "strongly." In contrast, only 37.5% of employees in other SEEs share this viewpoint. This discrepancy emphasises a disparity in the perceived emphasis on work-life balance support mechanisms between employees in cooperatives and those in other SEEs.

The outcomes derived from the Mann-Whitney U (MW) test afford the conclusion that statistically significant differences exist in the perceptions of employees within cooperatives as compared to those in other SEEs regarding the promotion of facilitators within their respective organisations (MW=13148, $p=0.007$), pointing to cooperatives as the entities that most prominently foster facilitators.

Table 5. Organisational support, impediments, and cultural influences in cooperatives and other SEEs

	Organi- sation type	Not at all %	A little %	To some extent %	Quite a lot %	Stron- gly %	Mean %	Median %
Do you believe your organisation actively fosters mechanisms to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life for its workforce?	Coop.	3.2	9.7	35.5	33.9	17.7	3.5	4.0
	Other SEEs	11.9	11.9	38.9	29.0	8.5	3.1	3.0
Do you perceive impediments to the reconciliation of family and professional life within your organisation?	Coop.	44.0	19.4	30.6	3.2	3.2	2.03	2.0
	Other SEEs	27.6	26.4	35.5	6.8	3.7	2.33	2.0
Does the current culture and organisational climate of your institution facilitate the promotion of work-life balance?	Coop.	8.0	8.1	33.9	29.0	21.0	3.47	3.5
	Other SEEs	11.6	12.2	38.6	28.1	9.4	3.11	3.0
Do you believe that the promotion of work-life balance can be beneficial to your professional practice?	Coop.	0.0	4.8	12.9	32.3	50.0	4.27	4.5
	Other SEEs	2.3	5.1	12.8	42.6	37.2	4.07	4.0

Source: Own elaboration based on the sample. Note: Coop.-Cooperatives.

A more detailed analysis, conducted with a breakdown by legal form, suggests that there are differences in the perceptions of the employees of the different SEEs (Kruskal-Wallis test (KW)=21.172, df=6, p=0.002) and post-hoc tests show statistically significant differences between the perceptions of employees of cooperatives with those of foundations (p-value adjusted, $p^* = 0.048$), and with those of mercies ($p^* = 0.01$) and it is the employees of cooperatives who consider that these organisations promote conciliation more. The values and principles of these organisations potentially positively affect the right to reconciliation and are a powerful model for equal rights at work (Antunes, 2022). Subsequent post-hoc tests indicate statistically significant differences, particularly between the viewpoints of employees in cooperatives and those in foundations ($p^* = 0.048$), as well as with those in mercies ($p^* = 0.01$). In particular, employees within cooperatives believe that these organisations are more proactive in promoting work-life balance.

When the analysis focuses on cooperatives, the results reveal that there are no statistically significant differences in the opinions of employees within these organisations based on gender (MW test=0.045, df=1, p=0.832), marital status (KW test=6.98, df=4, p=0.137), household size (KW test=6.767, df=4, p=0.149), number of dependents (KW test=2.913, df=3, p=0.405), number of ascendants (KW test=3.223, df=3, p=0.359), educational level (KW test=3.687, df=5, p=0.595), seniority in the organisation (KW test=2.381, df=5, p=0.794), employment

contract type (KW test=1.267, df=3, p=0.737), working hours arrangement (KW test=10.637, df=5, p=0.059), field of activity (KW test=14.510, df=9, p=0.105), or dimension of the organisation (KW test=7.197, df=3, p=0.066). These findings suggest a high level of uniformity in employee perspectives across diverse demographic and organisational parameters within the cooperative context.

Obstacles

Either cooperatives and other SEEs perceive some impediments to work-life balance, but employees in cooperatives, on average, perceive slightly fewer impediments compared to those in other SEEs. While 44% of the employees of the cooperatives report that there are no obstacles in these organisations, in the other SEEs only 26.7% are of this opinion, and the differences between the perceptions of the employees of the cooperatives and the other SEEs are statistically significant (MW=4.377, df=1, p=0.036). When the other SEEs are disaggregated by legal form, there are statistically significant differences (KW test=24.703, df=6, p<0.001) between cooperatives and mercies, with fewer obstacles in cooperatives (p*=0.033). The post-hoc tests also suggest differences between the mercies and private social solidarity institutions (p*=0.008), with lesser obstacles in the latter. The average value in the private social solidarity institutions is 2.06 against 2.03 in the cooperatives, suggesting that the obstacles are slightly lower in these organisations, although there are no significant differences between cooperatives and private social solidarity institutions.

In cooperatives, employee opinions about obstacles show no significant differences based on the various demographics and organisational factors, except for organisational size (KW test= 14.248; df=5; p=0.003). Larger cooperatives (51-250 employees) are associated with a higher perception of obstacles to work-life balance compared to smaller ones (3-10 workers and 11-50 workers). Post-hoc tests suggest that in cooperatives with 51 to 250 employees, employees perceive more obstacles than in smaller dimensions with 3 to 10 workers (p*=0.05) and those with 11 to 50 workers (p*=0.009).

Organisational culture

Within the context of cooperatives, the organisational culture and climate play an important role in facilitating the harmonisation of professional and familial spheres. Notably, a substantial proportion of cooperative employees (50%) perceive that the prevailing organisational culture and climate significantly promote work-life balance. In contrast, a mere 16.1% express discordant views, asserting that the organisational environment exhibits negligible or limited support for this reconciliation. Comparatively, within other SEEs, the corresponding figures reveal a distinct pattern. In this context, only 37.5% of employees attest to a conducive organisational culture and climate, while 23.8% express an opposing opinion, denoting a diminished inclination towards fostering work-life balance.

The results of the Mann-Whitney test confirm that there are differences in the perceptions of employees of cooperatives and other SEEs (MW=12819.5, $p=0.022$), attesting the varying degrees of emphasis placed on and efficacy in achieving the reconciliation of professional and family life within these distinct organisational frameworks.

Within the cooperatives, the favourable opinion is shared by all employees, regardless of their socio-demographic characteristics, except age (KW test=11.53, $df=5$, $p=0.042$). Younger people (aged between 21 and 31) have a more favourable opinion than employees aged between 31 and 40.

Professional practice

However, it is noteworthy that employees affiliated with cooperatives, as well as those associated with other SEEs, converge in their opinion that the promotion of work-life balance can be beneficial to the professional practice (MW=12240.5, $p=0.101$, thus rejecting the hypothesis that there are differences), which shows the importance of SEEs to promote this conciliation, which boosts the overall performance and efficacy of SEE personnel.

6. Conclusions

The concept of decent work, on which the ILO's contributions stand out, is an ethical-legal concept that aims to establish a model of labour relations capable of eradicating insecurity at work, reducing unemployment, ensuring real equality of opportunities between men and women, a fair income for the work done, adequate working conditions, prospects for personal development, a balanced organisation of working time that allows workers to reconcile their professional lives with their personal and family lives, among other aspects. Various international documents have emphasised that people-centred business models, such as cooperatives, are, from a legal point of view, the ideal scenario for promoting decent, inclusive and sustainable work. Indeed, the cooperative highlights a business model characterised by the primacy of the individual and social objectives over capital, democratic and member-involved governance, collective ownership and self-management, the creation of stable and non-displaceable jobs, economic equity for members, equity in the distribution of results and the strategic mission of educating and training its members (Mazzucato, 2023).

The analysis of the facilitators and obstacles to work-life balance within the organisation and their degree of facilitation and hindrance suggests some interesting findings. The results for cooperatives reveal that women consider the difficulty in accessing time off and in adjusting working hours for family care the main hindrances in achieving work-life balance, but the degree of difficulty is relatively low. Indeed, women consider that effective communication, the option to choose days off and vacations, and facilitation in work absence related to family commitments, are crucial aspects in the cooperative they work that foster work-life balance. Men prioritize issues such as access to work absence and changing working hours for family care,

the unavailability of a time bank, and communication challenges as the main hindrances in their organisation to work-life balance. Nevertheless, men emphasized the paramount importance of access work absence for family caregiving, communication support, and flexibility in working hours existing in their cooperative that drives to improved work-life balance. Despite slight variations in the prioritization of facilitators and obstacles between women and men, there is an absence of statistically significant differences in the level of facilitation or hindrance in the factors influencing work-life balance based on gender. Contrary to Durand-Delvigne et al. (2000), who postulate that work-life conflict predominantly affects females, our findings align with Peeters et al. (2005), indicating not only a lack of statistically significant gender-based disparities in the degree of perception of facilitators and obstacles related to work-life balance, as well as in the evaluation of organisational contributions to or hindrances of work-life balance. The emphasis on communication by employees in achieving work-life balance suggests a recognition of the significance of clear, open dialogue in addressing familial responsibilities. Potential explanations for this result include a desire for increased understanding and support from superiors, the need for flexibility in work arrangements to accommodate family needs, or a perception that improved communication channels can contribute to a more supportive work environment. It reinforces the importance of responsive workplace policies and a culture that prioritises effective communication to enhance the work-life balance for employees. Also, flexibility in the structure of working hours should be a priority, considering the specific needs and challenges faced by employees.

The investigation also explored the perceptions of organisational support for reconciling professional and family life and its impact on professional performance. The findings reveal statistical distinctions between cooperatives and other SEEs. Employees in cooperatives demonstrate a more positive outlook regarding their organisation's commitment to fostering work-life balance and perceive slightly fewer obstacles than their counterparts in other SEEs. The significance of organisational culture and climate in facilitating the integration of professional and familial aspects is particularly evident in cooperatives. These findings highlight the importance of organisational culture in shaping perceptions of work-life balance. The positive views among cooperative employees suggest that a supportive organisational environment contributes to a more favourable perception of work-life balance, which is in accordance with Arroyo (2011).

This paper provides important perspectives on encouraging decent and inclusive work in SEEs settings, specifically emphasizing cooperatives. The research highlights how organisational support is crucial in helping employees in cooperatives and in other SSEs to achieve a work-life balance. First, it sheds light on the dynamics within cooperatives that enhance the employees' perception of a high level of work-life balance. It highlights the importance of democratic processes and member participation in cooperatives in creating good working conditions and promoting a balance between work and personal life. Secondly, the study provides practical advice for organisations, especially cooperatives, to improve work-life balance initiatives by recognising both facilitators such as communication and flexible work arrangements, and barriers like the lack of health and well-being services. Thirdly, the study highlights the importance of organisational culture and climate in influencing views on work-life balance.

It indicates that a cooperative's supportive organisational environment can positively impact how employees view work-life balance.

One limitation of the paper is the dimension and composition of the sample. Future research focussed on cooperatives should use bigger samples of workers. Although women predominate in the social economy (INE, 2018; Martinho & Parente, 2018), in cooperatives are skewed towards the female gender. This imbalance in gender could potentially introduce bias into the results, limiting the generalizability of the findings to the broader population. While the insights obtained from the predominantly female sample contribute to the understanding of gender dynamics within cooperatives, future studies should have a more representation of males to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Although the findings indicate no statistically significant gender-based disparities, this does not exclude the possibility of differences that could be detected with a larger or more varied sample. Some other facilitators or obstacles were not included such as excessive work hours or high-pressure environments with intense workloads that could be analysed in further investigation. This study serves as an empirical invitation, particularly accentuating the gender variable, for future investigations within Social and Solidarity Economy contexts, especially in cooperative settings.

Future research in the field of work-life balance should focus on examining the specific practices that cooperatives and other EESs implement to promote work-life balance among their employees. Furthermore, there is potential for comparative studies between the promotion of work-life balance in the social economy sector and the profit private sector. Additionally, research with a focus on gender equality within credit cooperatives is recommended, given the discrepancy between the number of workers by gender and those who make up the administrative/directorial bodies of this particular branch of cooperatives.

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