

The International Corner

Work-Life Balance in Chile

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Bio: María Paz Lagos is founding and leading the Centre for Family-Work and Public Policies at University of Desarrollo in Chile. Her research focuses on family and public policies, work-family integration challenges, parental leaves and the impacts of women's employment in low birthrates and childcare. At the University she created during 2008 a new academic program about family and work balance practices. She is journalist and have a master in political sciences. For 11 years she wrote for El Mercurio's newspaper about Women's Employment, family changes and work-life balance and now she continued to write editorials about this issues for different newspapers. Her publications include a guide about the best work family practices in Chile (2007), the challenge of family and public policies (2008), and the impact of work-family issues in low birthrates (2009). In addition she is private consulting in implementing work and family practices inside the organizations.

Chile has adopted various family welfare systems. Some private companies follow the North American liberal model and develop programs to help employees balance their personal lives with work. Following this approach, some Chilean companies, especially banks, have developed flexible working schedules, parental leave, and child care, among other benefits. In that same line, some multinationals such as HP, IBM, and Unilever have established flexible work arrangements with different start/finish times and the option of working from home. This type of flexible work and the benefits it entails are mostly found in larger companies.

Compared to the U.S., Chilean labor laws are rigid. Consequently, this is holding back the expansion of the labor force. Women and younger people, in particular, are looking for flexibility. There are few part-time jobs available; as a result, this option is not publicized, rarely offered, and badly paid. Most of the female labor force works full-time or does not work at all. Only 22% of the total labor force works part-time, even though statistics show that part-time employment is highly desired, especially among women. Although Chilean women's participation in the labor force is increasing, it is still low, with 41% of women working. This is lower than the average in other South American countries, where women's participation ranks between 45% and 50%.

Chile, a slim, southern country with a population of 16 million has been a role model for its neighboring countries' economies. However, not everybody enjoys the benefits of its prosperous development. Chile suffers

from high levels of social inequality. For example, women with higher levels of education are more likely to be part of the labor force than the ones with less education. Just 30% of women in the lowest socioeconomic group participate in the labor force, while the highest socioeconomic level has an 80% rate of participation. Another explanation of this phenomenon may be attributed to cultural factors, such as *machismo*, where men do not always approve of or allow their wives to engage in employment outside the home. Some women themselves seem to be in agreement with this arrangement and do not show interest in pursuing employment. Statistics also show that there is an existing 30% salary difference between men and women. For those with lower incomes, there is a trend to find more informal and temporary work. The task of seeking employment outside the household is too daunting; they are discouraged to do so by a lack of job training as well as the lack of available child care. Recently, the Government of Michelle Bachelet has addressed this problem and started opening new child-care centers, aiming to have 4,000 centers open by the end of 2010.

It is worth mentioning the growing number of micro-businesses starting within the low-income sectors. These businesses are funded by private and not-for-profit foundations that provide small grants for women to start their own business close to home and generate an income while managing their traditional roles as housewives. In the higher-income sectors, women more easily combine work and family responsibilities, as they are able to hire nannies to assist them with child care. However, most women do not have this option. With more demand for child care and fewer available candidates, Chilean women need more flexible work arrangements and child care facilities in order to pursuing a career.

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