

The International Corner

Work and Family in Spain

By Elena Stepanova



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Bio: Elena Stepanova is PhD Candidate at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and holds a Master in Psychology of Intercultural Actions (University of Nancy 2, France). She graduated in Psychology after studying in the Ukraine and the US. She has worked in a personnel consulting company and collaborated with various academic and social institutions. Currently she is working as Research Assistant at the Managing People in Organizations Department at IESE Business School, University of Navarra. Her research focuses on organizational culture and subculture, work-life integration, work-life policies, organizational development and coaching.

In the last decade, Spain has made advancements in work-life integration. The first law concerning work-life conciliation for employees was adopted in 1999 (Law 39/1999). It facilitated the management of family responsibilities through working time reduction with a proportional salary decrease, extended leave days for adoption or illness of a close relative, and offered fathers the opportunity to share maternity leave, among other changes. Nevertheless, it did not alter the traditional roles of women and men, thus making women the primary users of these policies (Cánovas, Aragon, & Rocha, 2005).

Consequently, between 2001 and 2005, a series of laws were introduced that provided more support for the family and culminated in the adoption of the law "For Equal Opportunities for Women and Men" in 2007 (Law 3/2007). Besides focusing on equal opportunities for both women and men, this law aimed to achieve a more balanced distribution of family obligations with a focus on equal labour prospects, increased presence of women in organizations and managerial positions, reduced harassment and sexist attitudes, improved work-family and life balance, and better physical conditions at the workplace. The law allows for collective bargaining on measures of equality between the employer and employee, defends the parity of men and women on company boards, protects against unfair dismissal for maternity reasons, and promotes wage equality. All companies with more than 250 workers have to develop an equality plan, while it is voluntary for smaller organizations.

Work Context

A five-day work week is standard in Spain, and most working days are divided into two parts with a two-hour lunch break in between (Martin, León, Masuda, & Chinchilla, 2010). Besides the long daily schedule, Spanish

organizational culture is characterized by long working hours—38.4 hours per week, which is 2 hours longer than the EU average (Eurostat, 2006).

The participation of Spanish women in the labour force has increased considerably over the last decade from 35.8% (in 1998) to 52.8% (in 2009), though it still lags behind other EU countries (Eurostat, 2009). Women's work involvement is widely determined by the age and number of children, marital status, and educational level (European Commission, 2005). Child-care subsidies, paid parental leave and part-time work opportunities increase the participation of women. Interestingly, female workers have a higher proportion of part-time employment (22% in 2006) compared to men (4.3% in 2006), which could be explained by the need to manage professional involvement and personal needs as well as by the increase of workplace flexibility (European Working Conditions Observatory, 2009). Also, the number of dual-earner families has also increased considerably, which affects work-family integration (Chinchilla, Poelmans, & León, 2003).

The culture of long working hours makes the integration of life demands (e.g., child care, home chores, bank visits) more difficult and requires additional arrangements with family members or babysitters. However, work-life integration is challenged by several other factors: traditional gender role division, expectations that women are primarily responsible for the family and household duties (Cánovas, Aragon, & Rocha, 2005); the importance of being physically present at work, and finally, companies' fear that work-life initiatives will undermine performance and competitiveness (European Working Conditions Observatory, 2009). A survey conducted of 124 companies from various economic sectors showed that almost half do not have a specific work-life reconciliation plan, but 60% report the availability of reduced working time and flexible working hours (European Working Conditions Observatory, 2008).

Work-Family Arrangements

Legislation provides a wide range of initiatives that facilitate the integration of work and family, including hour and place flexibility, social provisions, and so forth, but the level of implementation depends on the company. On the other hand, leave policies, child-care services, and financial allowances are guaranteed by law.

Leave policies. Maternity leave is 16 weeks, up to 10 of which can be transferred to the father. Additional maternity leave is granted in cases of multiple births, and unpaid parental leave can be extended for up to 3 years. Some companies extend paid leave beyond the time stipulated by law.

With the Law of Equality, paternity leave was extended from 2 to 15 consecutive fully paid days that can be used on a full-time or part-time basis, depending on the agreement with the company. As of January 1, 2011, this leave will be extended to 28 days. Moreover, parental leave for both parents can be extended for a longer period of time, if they renounce their salary, for either child care or elder care. Their job is preserved until they return. Furthermore, both fathers and mothers can use the 9-month breastfeeding permit either by taking a leave of one hour during the working day, or by reducing the working day by a half-hour at the beginning or end, or by accumulating hours of breastfeeding and adding them to the maternity leave (14 days in total).

Child-care services. Child care is divided in two cycles: first, for children between ages 0 and 3, and second, for children ages 3 to 6. The first cycle is not free and there is a lack of administrative centers, while the

second cycle is free and widely available. There is an estimated shortfall of 400,000 spots in (semi-) public preschools. Therefore, parents with children under age 3 often invest in private preschools or rely on relatives for help. An abundance of statutory provisions exist for children from the age of 3 to 6 (Martin et al., 2010; EU 2005).

Financial allowances. Spain is among the countries that spend the least on family services, including child-care services (OECD, 2007). Working mothers with children under 3 years old that contribute to Social Security can ask for a monthly benefit of 100 Euros (around \$125) that can be paid monthly or deducted from yearly income tax. Since 2007, the government provided financial allowances of 2,500 Euros (approximately \$3,150) for every newborn or adopted child for all Spanish families. Unfortunately, due to the financial crisis and in order to reduce the budget deficit, this allowance will be discontinued in January 2011.

To conclude, the legal work-family arrangements in Spain provide more opportunities for employees to integrate different aspects of their lives, which are particularly important with the demographic changes at the workplace, higher participation of women in the workforce, and the changes in responsibility for caring and household responsibilities. Even so, it is essential that work-life initiatives within today's workplace go beyond availability and ensure that the organizational culture and supervisors encourage their use.

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