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women transforming culture

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Managing the Changing World of Work and Family
An interview with Nuria Chinchilla, author of *Masters of Our Destiny*

Nuria Chinchilla, a professor at the business school IESE in Barcelona, Spain, has been influential in promoting greater workplace flexibility in Spain and throughout Europe. During a recent trip to the US, she joined us at Murray Hill Institute for an Evening of Conversation and informal book signing. Alice Trimmer, of the MHI Board, interviewed her about her current work and her opinions on progress that has been made in helping women and all employees achieve more balanced lives.

In the years since 2008, when the first edition of "Masters of Our Destiny" was published, what overall progress has been made in helping women achieve life balance?

Laws have improved some women's rights. But laws, as well as flexible corporate policies, are dead if they are not applied. In some cases, protectionist laws have resulted in a backlash for women. Work-life balance is a daily challenge. To make it real, we have to start by identifying our mission and priorities and to save some space and time in the agenda for the activities that will bring that mission forward. Balance depends on:

People: Try to become "Masters of Your Destiny."

Family: Work-family balance is not "just for one." It is a matter for the entire family: spouses, children, grandparents, and others. Time management within the family is very important.

Companies: Many companies are becoming more conscious of corporate family responsibility and the need to attract and retain the best talent–talented men as well as talented women–and to help them gain trust in the company and be loyal to it. Corporate executives also want to have more balanced lives, and not only those of the Y Generation.

Society: We need legislation and budgets to support families and companies with corporate family responsibility.

Do we as women hold ourselves back by our own behaviors or reluctance to seize opportunities?

As we wrote in *Female Ambition* (Ed. Palgrave 2005), women meet two kinds of ceilings:

The Glass Ceiling: Men unconsciously choose and promote the persons most similar to themselves, in other words, other men (women do the same).

The Concrete Ceiling: Women themselves establish a ceiling, which can hinder them from seeking more power and accepting promotions. The concrete ceiling is not a result of lack of ambition, but rather a wider ambition to reach success in all spheres: professional, personal and social. Not every offer is seen as an opportunity by women. Personal costs are, sometimes, too high when companies are mechanistic and focus too much on short-term goals.

What is the best way to promote the self-awareness needed to set realistic goals for oneself?

The best way to promote self-awareness is by doing at least two exercises:

To know yourself: Reflect in order to gain insights and ask for feedback in order to discover your skills, competencies and potential. Having a good coach helps you to understand your abilities and capabilities and develop them.

Identifying your unique mission: This mission will be put into practice to meet needs in the professional, family, personal and social spheres. The better we know our competencies, skills and potential, the more realistic we will be about identifying our mission and reaching our goals.

Women often feel guilty taking time for themselves, even when such time would result in long-term improvements in work, social life, and family life. How can one balance one's own need for development with those of the workplace and family?

Many women do feel guilty about taking time for themselves. This is an emotional problem, the result of a non-integrated heart, a lack of rationality and a short-run vision. Saving time for personal development, meditation, prayer, gym, or the hairdresser is very important in order to be more useful, and to better serve our family, colleagues, and friends.

How can one become more cognizant of the need to re-prioritize responsibilities in families before some need reaches the crisis stage? Sometimes changes are so slow that they are hardly noticeable (for example, when a family member becomes more and more withdrawn, or family customs drop away because of scheduling challenges).

We become aware of the need to re-prioritize responsibilities in the family by investing time in family communication. This means identifying in a family session our mission as a family and revisiting it from time to

time to see how all the members of the family are carrying out our internal and external family mission on a daily basis.

What areas are you currently focusing on in your own research and why?

Currently, I am working on the following topics:

Corporate Family Responsibility (CFR): We are studying ways to diagnose the degree of CFR in different environments within the same organization/enterprise in more than 20 countries. Corporate environments can be: enriching, intoxicating or something in between. In a company, you have different micro-cultures depending on how policies are applied by different management styles and values. Leadership has become more and more important, because every day supervisors are the ones deciding the time and energy left for our lives after work. Have they a realistic, fair and balanced vision both of business needs and of our needs as human beings?

Women's Advancement in Organizations: We are studying obstacles and boosters that women encounter in their professional, family and personal trajectories.

Boards: I am a member of Vivianne Reading's GBRW (Global Board-Ready Women) Advisory Board of the Commission of Human Rights in the EU. We have identified that the problem is not securing board positions (starting from the roof), but reaching top management positions from the middle management in organizations. The most important hindrances on the part of the corporation are the lack of responsible flexibility and not taking into account the needs that come with motherhood.

How does one plan a stable career in a workplace environment that is constantly changing and is becoming less and less secure?

I prefer to talk about "trajectories" rather than "careers"—professional, family, social, life trajectories —because in Spanish the word "career" means to run against someone. In a changing world, stability is inside us and springs from knowing ourselves, our limits and our potential. One hundred per cent security doesn't exist. We can achieve some security through our own values, competencies, having a purpose and a clear mission, and a determination to get things done. Each person is unique and unrepeatable.

It has been said that to cope with today's workplace, one needs to become more and more of an entrepreneur, even in a highly structured corporate environment. To what extent do you agree with this, and how does one develop an entrepreneurial mindset if one's natural taste and inclinations do not lie in that direction?

Entrepreneurship is a competence for life. It is always necessary and has to be developed. Each individual approaches reality with different glasses. Being an entrepreneur means to provide your specific and unique vision and point of view and to act consequently in order to discover new opportunities whether they are in service, satisfying real needs of others or improving the products, the processes or the way we work.

What are some simple ways to bring the need for more family-friendly policies to the attention of management without seeming like a complainer?

First, we can change the term "family-friendly" to "family-responsible," because the company has an obligation to respond to the needs of people with family responsibilities after work. Families of employees are the new stakeholders in a company. Data obtained from different studies show how greatly results improve in flexible and family-responsible environments. The figures from 23 countries gathered by the International Center for Work and for Work and Family, our research center, show that productivity increases 19% and commitment rises 300% in flexible and family-responsible environments.

For young people just finishing their education, it is increasingly difficult to find a job commensurate with their talents, education, or interests. What advice would you give a young person entering the workplace for the first time?

I would advise them to excel in service, and to put all their talents and efforts into action. Try to learn from other people in the workplace and be humble. "Don't complain. Give thanks".