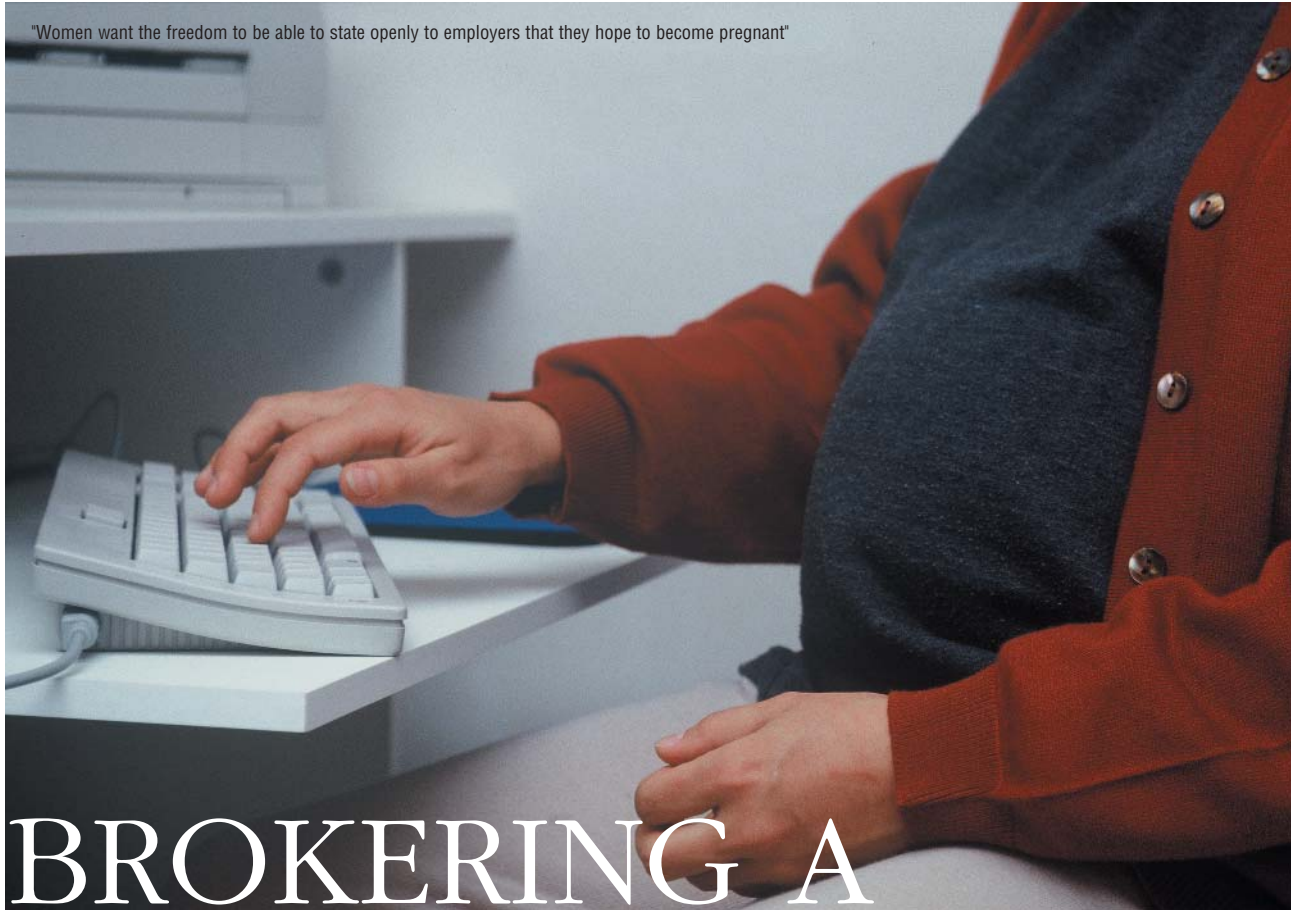


"Women want the freedom to be able to state openly to employers that they hope to become pregnant"



# BROKERING A WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Can women ever have it all? Even in the 21st century, it seems, women are still having trouble finding a work-life balance. Prof Nuria Chinchilla, director of the International Centre on Work and Family in Barcelona, believes that modern companies must become more family friendly to improve their competitiveness. She spoke to Mary Anne Kenny.

"There's no doubt that women are different to men. Our brains work differently and the two genders each have their own strengths. One of the big problems for women in the workplace today is that they are forced to try to act and think like men by companies that don't recognise female strengths."

In this politically-correct age, it is unusual to hear the opinion that males and females are fundamentally different, but Prof Nuria Chinchilla stands by this assertion. As director of the International Centre on Work and Family (IESU) in Barcelona and a specialist in issues of work and family, she cites the family unit as the most important element of society and believes that modern workplaces should work around this.

"The European Union Charter of Rights backs this up, and states that 'the top priority in family policy is to promote measures and policies aimed at achieving a better reconciliation between work and family life'. Unfortunately," she conceded, "more and more women are trying to fit motherhood around their jobs."

"When a man works long hours, it's assumed that he's doing it for the good of his family. If a woman works long hours, she's considered to be neglecting her family," she continued. "Women want the freedom to be able to state openly in their CV 'married and a mother'; the freedom to be pregnant or say that we hope to become pregnant; the freedom to be acknowledged as more than just qualified, useful and efficient workers to assist the male workforce. We aspire to

make our family fully compatible with our professional life. We don't want this to be the outcome of a private battle, but the recognition of a social right."

Even in the 21st century, however, these are high ideals. In reality, many women suffer from stress while trying to balance work and personal life. The first step to dealing with this is to fully understand what causes this stress. "According to our research here at the IESU, the first reason for this conflict is how the employee organises work and family," said Chinchilla. "The second is the support or lack of it from colleagues and bosses. The third, of course, is lack of flexible working hours."

To address this problem, both policies and culture must change. "Companies should measure work performance in terms of results and objectives more than by how many hours someone spends in the office. Being committed to a company means more than just long working hours."

#### FAMILY-FRIENDLY POLICIES

In practice, this means promoting teleworking and part-time working. "Studies show that workers who are given these options are actually more committed because they have a balanced life and they don't burn out. I believe that two people working for four hours each can be much more productive than one person working for eight."

Smaller companies may argue that they cannot provide that flexibility, but Chinchilla believes that public administration should pay any difference in taxes or social security for this shorter working day. "In Holland, this has been done to promote part-time working. More than 40 per cent of all workers – both men and women – work part time in Holland and it's sponsored by the government. Put simply, it works."

In other European countries, steps are being taken to promote family-friendly workplaces. In Spain, an initiative was recently begun awarding certification for family-responsible



Prof Nuria Chinchilla, director of the International Centre on Work and Family

employers. A similar system is in place in Germany, where over 400 companies have this certificate. "A lot of these companies are SMEs, so it's not just large multinationals that can take this on board," said Chinchilla. "These companies are helping to change the culture. We must change the belief that longer working hours equals more productivity. We also have to change the working paradigms to which many companies adhere."

There are three of these paradigms, she explains – mechanical, psychological and anthropological.

"The first treats employees like machines. It's a stable system that doesn't encourage learning. The second recognises that people are motivated by intrinsic motives like learning and need to like their work. It recognises the importance of internal feelings. The third anthropological model recognises that people are complex and are motivated by transcendent or altruistic motives as well as self-satisfaction – that what they do has an impact on others."

This latter paradigm is the only complete model and incorporates the

first two. Companies who adhere to this model usually have comprehensive employee assistance programmes (EAPs). "I believe that these can really help – responsible employers should incorporate psychological education, training in work-life balance and the differences in men and women into their EAPs. The best assistance employers can give is to help women to self-manage so they can avoid work-life conflict."

EAPs aimed at balancing work and family life can help women to feel motivated and supported, resulting in a more productive workforce, lower absenteeism and enhanced employee loyalty and commitment, she continued. "What at first might be taken as a handicap for companies may in fact be turned to competitive advantage in the labour market, making a virtue of necessity."

"Our research has found that women are still discriminated against because of motherhood, not gender," she continued. "Companies who do this tend to be of the mechanical paradigm – they see motherhood as an extra expense and hassle. Some companies may prefer to hire married men with families, because they're seen as stable, but employers may look at a woman of childbearing age and see her taking time off for things like visits to the doctors and school meetings. This attitude has to change. I think a compulsory leave of absence of a month should be compulsory for fathers. This would help them to bond with their children and be more likely to take responsibility for things like their child's visits to the doctor."

#### MENTAL SALARY

Other good workplace practices should include employees collectively organising their own working time to fulfil different personal needs; working parents' childcare needs provided by the company if possible; reduction of working time, including part-time work; training on time management and stress management; and flexibility of working hours when family emergencies occur.

These are part of what Chinchilla



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calls a 'mental salary' – a form of remuneration in which the quality of a woman's private life is a fundamental element. From this perspective, pay is no longer the most important criterion for choosing a job, but rather the opportunities offered for on-going learning and for achieving a balance between work, family and personal life.

"I hope that this will gain ground over the idea of 'self-realisation' that has had a significant impact on the entry of women into the labour market, pushing home and family to the sidelines," said Prof Chinchilla. "Companies who can provide a better 'mental salary' will have a strategic advantage and attract and retain better staff."





Can women ever break through the glass ceiling?

In recent times, retaining female talent, given equality of training with men, has become a priority, she said. According to the IESU's Family-Responsible Employer Index 2004, the predominant individual labour conflicts in large companies are absenteeism (21 per cent), lack of commitment (15 per cent), lateness (12 per cent), difficulty in transferring employees (12 per cent), difficulty in hiring people (nine per cent), difficulty in persuading employees to travel (eight per cent), and stress and turnover (ten per cent).

Very often, at the root of these difficulties lies conflict between work, family and personal life. The resulting tension has a cost for companies in the form of absenteeism, apathy, declining productivity and competitiveness, and staff turnover. "That's why policies to foster work-family reconciliation today are seen as employment strategies, and flexibility has become the catchword."

#### HAVING IT ALL

Even with family-friendly structures in place, is it really possible to combine

a family and a top career? "Well, I think there are different stages in life so you have to decide when to run more quickly. Women must make rational decisions, and not just react when things happen or rely on sentiment or emotions. All actions have consequences and these must be anticipated when making decisions. Balance is possible, but I believe that you can't have everything all at once."

She believes that being forced to choose between family and career is ultimately damaging. "Many women have to thwart their natural instincts because of their work. It doesn't make sense, it makes them ill and they inevitably fail. Others are making the choice to have their families late in life because they have to get their careers established first. They hope they'll have the time for a family later. What's worse, some companies are actively encouraging this."

She cites the Harvard Business School as a negative example. Two years ago, its Business Plan Contest for entrepreneurs was won by a company called Extend Fertility. Their business idea was to freeze women's

eggs so they could use them in their forties after their career was established. "How can Harvard Business School say to women that this is the way forward? It's completely misguided. What sort of example is this? And who's to say that they will have the time to raise a family later, anyway? It's treating women like machines."

In Spanish, the word for career, or 'carrera', also means to race against somebody. "It conjures up the image of running against someone just for the sake of it and putting yourself under unnecessary pressure. I prefer to talk about 'trajectories', which gives you more control at your own pace. Life is not a competition; you don't have to compete against anyone else."

"Essentially, it comes down to balance. Men and women have different areas of specification and their own strengths, and this should be appreciated. To quote Timothy Leary, 'women who want to be equal to men lack ambition'. This may sound contentious, but the objective is to establish relations of equality between men and women – equality, not identification."