

FEMALE AMBITION

How to reconcile work and family

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INTRODUCTION

“Women who seek to be equal to men lack ambition.”
(Timothy Leary)

The conciliation of working and family life, the specific contribution of women to companies, their role as agents of change, the styles of female and male management are all subjects that are present throughout the this book joined by a common thread: female ambition. Women in the 21st century want to be mothers, wives, professionals, citizens ... all at the same time, and there is no turning back on this process.

What do women think about? The press, public opinion and even some literature arising from certain media sometimes give the idea that we women have gone mad and only think about demanding rights and waving flags.

We go to the gymnasium, we scream in traffic jams, and we put up with separations, divorces, disputes, romances, two-shift working days and even power races, but our true ambition is to have a full life that can be called so.

In the post yuppie era and in light of such serious workplace problems as addiction to work and the “burn-out” syndrome, what truly concerns women is to feel that they have support in designing their own working life outside the traditional male lines (which ignore motherhood) and to see that governments are taking measures along these lines by legislating and giving direct, effective aid.

In the new context of this silent revolution in ordinary life of, women want their femininity to be respected and to be given the opportunity to show that their specific contribution is capable of transforming companies and society to make them more welcoming and more humane. And what do they need to do this? The complicity and co-operation of men, and confidence, a great deal of confidence that things will work despite having to change ... a lot.

We women want to the freedom to be able to put “married and mother of two” on our CVs; to get pregnant or say we are going to do so soon; to be recognised as something more than a qualified workforce that is interesting, efficient and complementary to men. In short, we aspire to not only not hide our family, but make it compatible with our professional work. At the same time, we do not want this to be the result of a private battle, but rather the recognition of a social right.

We women think, or rather dream, of politicians, businessmen and social agents who take a chance on the fixed return value, albeit long-term, of motherhood. That they or we might envision solutions and ways to reduce the “cost” (it is sad to say it this way) of the children that a woman might have throughout her working life. Let us use imagination, let us avoid what is facile. Let us take a chance on a true welfare society, based on its components being able to think and exist well.

Although it is true that everything is changing, not everything has been resolved. When we thought about writing this book, we were not only replying to the momentum this topic has generated in public opinion, we wanted also to serve as a platform for social dialogue in the passionate crusade of seeking alternative solutions and ways, since the goal is to foster a legal, public and working context that facilitates freedom of choice. We must bear in mind that today, sixty per cent of women have ambitions to and want to make two things, work and family¹,

¹ A study made by the sociologist Catherine Hakim, published in *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century*. Britain Journal of Sociology. Volume 49, issue one. London School of Economics.

compatible. Another twenty per cent opt exclusively for their families and the remaining twenty per cent for their careers. The changes in our society will necessarily follow these lines: to assure the context of freedom so that every family and every woman can choose.

The family is the greatest existing area where everything important is free. Here people are loved and accepted just for themselves at all times. The relationships are essentially affective, and although there is reciprocity, they are not motivated by self-interest. Although living together may be difficult at times, families tend to forgive, protect and care for their members even in circumstances in which the environment (work, friends, and health) might fail. It is impossible to plan any similar type of social organisation. Here each individual is loved and accepted simply because he or she exists. Our society lives on this basic core of civic guarantees and core value. We cannot merely look at the family with affection based on the fear of a society without pensions or the reversal of the population age pyramid. For the company too, as we shall show in these pages, the employees' family environment is key, since a large part of an individual's equilibrium, balance and habit-learning necessary for working life comes from this reality.

On the other hand, for all men (men and women), work is a source of self-realisation and socialisation. Work is serving and is, indeed, living. However, in the past thirty years, we have witnessed a celebration of paid work as the main indicator of a person's value. You are no longer worth what you have managed to be but what the market pays you. This purely economic view, in which the only things of value are those that can be quantified and paid, has influenced a progressive devaluation of household work. Regardless of whether a woman can or cannot devote more time to them, these tasks are deserving of enormous social and personal recognition, as the home is the public service par excellence, the best Ministry of Social Welfare and crime prevention centre. According to several studies, the value of unpaid household work done in Spain mainly by women, if paid at market value, would be equivalent to forty per cent of the gross domestic product. Household work, so little appreciated at times in favour of work outside the home, fulfils an essential role not only because of its invisible yet real value in the gross domestic product, or because of the savings it means for public social services, but also because its very nature develops personal skills and competences related to service and co-existence. For this reason, men also benefit personally when they take part in the housework.

AN AGREEMENT BETWEEN TWO

If it were necessary to draw up a diagram of the situation of women throughout history, three phrases would suffice: the private area (family), public life (paid work, participation in political and social life) and finally, rupture (women give their talents to the working world, but the working world does not provide flexibility). Today one of the great challenges facing individuals is to re-establish this harmony among individuals, companies and countries.

In our studies of dual-income families, that is, families in which both father and the mother work outside the home, it can be seen that although an individual's working environment is important, the greatest cause of conflict between work and family is each individual's way of handling the problem. Business culture, that is, a company's modus operandi and values, may facilitate or hamper conciliation, but the resolution of the problem is something personal, unique and unrepeatable. It is a question of taking decisions according to personal priorities and anticipating situations of conflict. Every married couple has to agree on this part of their joint project (how to take care of the house and their respective jobs), just as they have to agree on the mortgage, the children's school and holidays.

COMPANIES: A CHANGE OF MENTALITY

The time has come to consider every professional, who is at the same time a citizen, father or mother of a family, child, etc. This attitude is not only socially responsible, but in the long run it

is more profitable for a company in order to gain the loyalty of its employees with something more than money: with trust translated into flexibility. In this context, management by objectives and not by hours of presence has become the most serious target in the labour problem in our country: “eternal” working days that have no positive effect on greater productivity.

In Spain, people work too many hours; this is our national vice which is determined by a late, excessively long lunch at midday that extends the working day, which leads to a professional profile characterised by an addiction to work, which in turn leads to “burn-out” syndrome, and its opposite, absenteeism, something that nobody hesitates to associate with disinterest and lack of commitment, but maybe which should be analysed more closely to determine how often it hides not enough time to get everything done. Stress is the greatest cause of sick leave in our country, and in the case of women, it is the main reason why they leave their careers.

This situation also diminishes motivation and creativity, two qualities that are very highly valued in companies, two intangible factors which can enormously increase the value of a team, of a company, and even more so in times such as the present when different solutions are required in the context of a global village and constant change. At a time like now, when we already have a European currency and a European job market, why have we not yet got a European timetable?

The main asset, not only of the company but of the whole of society, is people. We have heard this no end of times, but maybe we still don't really believe it. Yet the most serious concern is that we are endangering “human ecology.” For many decades companies showed no concern about their impact on the environment, but today this has changed. There are regulations, quality certifications, legislation and sanctions that have made companies more sensitive to their social responsibility with respect to the pollution generated in nature. However it is true that many companies today systematically contaminate the human environment where they are and with which they work without being aware of it. When a worker is not allowed to play their role of husband or wife, or father or mother, or son or daughter, due to rigid or interminable timetables or constant travelling, they are being impoverished as a person, in addition to having their marital or parent-child relationship jeopardised.

If there is no time to enjoy the family, the number of children falls and homes are not made. The fact is that the abandonment or omission of families means that values are not conveyed, good habits are not developed and society is impoverished. Family, company and society are living realities that form a triangle in constant evolution which is enriched or devalued through individuals’ positive learning in the different areas of their life. Oscar Wilde said that sometimes “we are capable of destroying what we most love.” Seeing what is happening around us, are we not destroying this place of co-existence par excellence which is the family?

The pollution of rivers is corrected in some cases by building fish factories, which have saved more than one aquatic species, but people are not developed as easily as animals, and if we do not allow the family to fulfil its function, what will the new “human factory” be like? As the French writer André Frossard wrote, “ancient civilisations were destroyed by the barbarian invasions; ours has the barbarians within it.” We must therefore take care of the family if we do not wish to work against ourselves.

If we lose sight of this, if we stop giving importance to one of the main reasons behind the breakdown of marriages and educational problems within the family and schools; or if we look indifferently at the fact that many women managers (current or potential) self-impose a cement ceiling in their professional careers in order to avoid further conflict between their professional and family lives; if we consider as a secondary problem the fact that there are discriminatory measures in companies not only because of sex but also because of motherhood (let us not forget that a woman without family obligations - children, parents or dependents - is hardly ever a “problem”), we are avoiding reality and its possible solutions.