

The long road to conciliation

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Work culture should ideally be based on achieving objectives rather than counting the hours that employees put in. Unfortunately, long working hours in Spain make it impossible for many people to reconcile their professional and personal lives.

Despite the many laws that have been passed to help people reconcile work, family and personal lives, many organizations still refuse to treat it as a priority. This is borne out by extensive research carried out over the past decade by IESE Prof. [Nuria Chinchilla](#) and researcher Consuelo León.

In their [new book on conciliation in Spain](#), Chinchilla and León contend that the most significant change in Spanish society during the first decade of this century has been the aging population and declining birth rate.

The rate needed for one generation to replace another and guarantee economic growth is 2.1 children per woman of child-bearing age. But this rate fell drastically between 1999 and 2009.

In 2002, Spain joined Greece in having the lowest birth rate in the E.U., with an average of 1.26 children per woman of child-bearing age. If this continues, Spanish population growth will hit a historic low by 2017.

The repercussions are already being felt. The so-called "sandwich generation" is trapped these days between working full time and taking care of children and elderly relatives. Women continue to do the lion's share of housework, dedicating an average of two hours and 44 minutes a day to taking care of their kids, twice as much as their husbands.

Family-friendly companies

To help resolve this dilemma, many companies have begun to address the demands of their workers by offering them greater flexibility.

Some companies are still putting up resistance, as they stubbornly cling to a work culture based on hours spent at the office rather than achievement of goals. But the way the market works is changing, and it is forcing companies to redefine the way they organize themselves.

Among the sectors offering the greatest flexibility are banking, insurance and pharma, which have launched programs to reconcile personal and professional lives.

In the 2007 index of family-friendly companies (Empresas Familiarmente Responsables), the financial sector was singled out for offering the fullest range of benefits to its employees, including life insurance and retirement plans, accident insurance, subsidized meal plans and health insurance for direct relatives.

Legislative initiatives

Such measures complement others being taken by public institutions, including Spain's central government and other regional or local administrations. Over the past 12 years, the Spanish government has passed two new laws to promote gender equality in the workplace and to make it easier for people to juggle their professional and personal lives.

At the European level, similar initiatives have also been on the rise. After all, declining birthrates and an uncertain socioeconomic future are affecting all countries.

Even so, there are significant differences in the budgets that countries earmark for social spending: while the E.U. average is just over 2 percent of GDP, in Spain the figure is only 0.4 percent.

In 1994, the International Year of the Family, the European Parliament passed its first resolution on the protection of families. Six years later, another resolution was passed to enable parents to dedicate more time to their children's upbringing.

Despite this effort, the reality is that women occupy more part-time positions (31 percent of women, compared with 8 percent of men), in less highly regarded sectors, and on wages that are, on average, 17 percent lower than those of men.

It is clear that conciliation is still very much seen as "a woman's problem," even though the right to, and responsibility for, taking care of children and dependent relatives are concerns of both the father and the mother.

Good business practices

The authors conclude with a roundup of the measures that companies are taking to address conciliation.

- *Flexibility in the workday.* Being able to leave for a family emergency, flextime, reduced shifts, part-time work and a condensed work week.
- *Flexibility in people's careers.* Taking leave of absence to take care of a relative, or maternity or paternity leave that goes beyond what is stipulated by law.
- *Workplace flexibility.* Combining regular work with working from home, thanks to the use of new technologies.
- *Employee support services.* Setting up day-care centers at the company or outside it, providing sports facilities and offering information on facilities for taking care of elderly relatives.
- *Consulting and career support policies.* Services such as mentoring and coaching.

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