Management in Spain: Where are the women?

Is Spain doing enough to unleash the economic power and potential of women in management? Which strategies might promote female leadership?



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For starters, female leadership is correlated with increased profitability — so concludes a 2016 study by Peterson Institute for International Economics and EY which examined almost

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22,000 publicly traded companies in 91 countries. So why are there still so few women on boards and in executive positions?

Contributing a chapter on Spain to the 2017 edition of *Women in Management Worldwide: Signs of Progress*, IESE's **Mireia Las Heras** and Marc Grau shine a spotlight on women in management in Spain. Using data from multiple international studies on the topic, they conclude that Spain needs to do more to tap into the leadership potential of its highly educated female workforce. Managers should promote better work-family balance — and enjoy its benefits themselves; this is among the recommendations for a thriving, fair and diverse work environment for all.

Where are the women in Spain?

What is the current situation? Well, on average, Spanish women hold 22 percent of management positions — only slightly fewer than the world average, but ahead of both the United States (20 percent) and the United Kingdom (19 percent). Yet 22 percent looks low compared to other Eurozone countries, where women occupy 35 percent of management roles, on average.

Zooming in, some Spanish companies have a much more equitable gender balance, but note that over a third (37 percent) of companies with more than 100 employees do not have any women whatsoever on their top management team. What's more, 39 percent of companies in Spain have no women on their board of directors.

Looking over to Spanish politics and education, the situation is similar: a lack of female leaders means few role models to inspire new generations in business and beyond.

The authors note that the global economic crisis hit Spain's female workforce especially hard. By 2013, the percentage of female-held management positions had decreased from 24 percent to 21 percent. Yet there is reason for optimism: as Spain recovers economically, the overall percentage of women in management is starting to grow again.

Getting work-family balance right

There is clearly still a lot of work to do. According to the authors, changes in legislation, company norms and social attitudes are needed to "unleash the economic power and potential" of women in management.

Specifically, work-family reconciliation remains a major obstacle in Spain. According to the

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IESE Family-Responsible Employer Index (IFREI) — a tool to analyze work-family reconciliation policies in 23 countries — only one quarter (25 percent) of Spanish women surveyed in 2015 and one third (33 percent) of men reported that they work in a culture that allows a good balance between work and family responsibility. Those women surveyed worked an average of 43 hours per week in the office and nearly 5 additional hours from home on office work. (To compare, those men surveyed worked an average of 46 hours per week in the office and nearly 6 additional hours from home.) The survey also found that women were generally the primary caregivers at home, so work-family conflicts affected them disproportionately.

In sum, the authors identify three main challenges at work in Spain:

1. The Spanish job market is inflexible: it isn't geared towards workers leaving and re-entering the workforce.
2. There is an organizational culture of "presenteeism," where companies value working long hours over flexibility and real productivity.
3. Workers see many high-level positions as incompatible with family demands.

One result of these issues is that couples are not currently having the number of children they ideally would like, according the IFREI survey. This contributes to an extremely low birth rate in the country: just 1.3 births per woman.

Looking to change, on three levels

Profound changes are needed at the state, company and individual levels. The authors suggest that the government of Spain implement legislation to promote work-family balance, that companies evaluate contributions rather than hours worked, and that employees develop a flexible, adaptive and proactive mindset. While there is "a long road ahead," they remain hopeful that momentum will continue to build on recent improvements.

Las Heras and Grau conclude that changing these aspects of Spain's work culture will benefit all workers, male and female — as well as companies. These changes will also transform society as a whole, allowing "men and women from different ethnic and other backgrounds to thrive, flourish and perform to their optimal capability."

Methodology, very briefly

This chapter brings together selected, peer-reviewed material to analyze women in management in Spain. It also looks to the **IESE Family-Responsible Employer Index**

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(IFREI), a tool to analyze work-family reconciliation policies in 23 countries, including Spain.

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