Women forced to find childcare solutions

SOLEDA AlCAIDE, Madrid
A study published last week of the impact of working women on family life shows how most women are still obliged to find their own childcare solutions. "I couldn't have had children if it hadn't been for the help of my mum," says Ana Goicoechea, a 34-year-old systems engineer and mother of a seven-month-old baby. According to statistics, there are currently some 7.9 million women in the workforce.

The report, produced by business school, IESE, notes that while many companies have begun to adapt to the needs of their employees by offering more flexible hours, support, and other social benefits, "There are a number of companies that proclaim their support for employees who want to attend to family responsibilities. But in reality, employees, particularly women, often prefer not to take them up, because they know that this will negatively affect their careers. Introducing measures will not solve the problem. We need to see a real change in business culture, and that is very difficult to achieve," says the report.

The study was overseen by Professor Sandago Gomez, who says, "The impact of greater numbers of women working is really being felt in the family." He interviewed 300 professionals in a range of careers. The report shows that "reality is evolving much faster than attitudes in society."

And that reality includes state help. "The measures adopted by public bodies are not enough to find solutions to the structural issues," says the report. Which is why Gomez says that the incorporation of women into the labor market is not just "unavoidable"; it is an important revolution of the twenty-first century and must be consolidated and built on.

The simple reality of the report is that for 59 percent of those surveyed, working leaves them less time to look after the family. "It isn't about having to choose between your work and your job. It is that if you have the slightest problem at work, you end up staying late. Nobody obliges you to, because it is really about our mentality. Perhaps our generation believes that work is very important. Everybody seems to feel like this, although I don't know why. It's our own fault, because in the same way that I don't allow my private life into my work, I shouldn't let work into my private life," says Goicoechea.

Immaculada Sanz, aged 41, agrees. She works in a consulting firm, and has two children, aged 12 and 15, although her husband's 26-year-old son also lives with them. She is one of the lucky ones that works a four-hour day, but she says that may be what is on the contract, but she almost always works longer.

The difficulties of balancing a career with family responsibilities is shown, argues the IESE report, by the low birthrate among Spanish women. In 1986, women made up only 35 percent of the workforce, while the number of children per woman of child-bearing age, was 1.5. By 2002, 50 percent of the workforce was made up by women, while the number of children had fallen to 1.25.

Ana Goicoechea says that she has not asked for shorter working hours. "They would cut my salary, and then I wouldn't be able to feed my son," she explains. But she admits that part-time working does not make for good career development. "When you talk to your friends, you can see that it is important. I don't know anybody that has got to the top that has asked for a reduced working week. In fact if you really take your career seriously, then you prefer not to have children," she adds.

"Despite the stated policy of many firms, there are a wide range of obstacles and consequences related to working part time, and which in practice turn this into a handicap and not an advantage," says the report. Of the women surveyed, 49.8 percent said that their company had offered them a shorter working week. However, only 29 percent accepted this, because they said they would earn less money (68 percent), or that it would limit their promotion prospects.