Spanish Women: Breaking the Glass Ceiling

In a country that lagged behind, progress now is taking place in business, politics, and the judiciary

In a country where women have long lagged behind their European and U.S. counterparts in salaries and power, Spain's Magda Salarich is a beacon of hope. After getting a degree in industrial engineering in the 1970s, she went to work for French carmaker Citroën and worked her way up the ranks in communications, training, and marketing, while earning master's degrees from two of Spain's best business schools, Instituto de Empresa and IESE. Today, Salarich is general manager of Citroën Spain and European head of sales and marketing for the parent company. An avid cyclist and mother of two children, she describes herself as "800,000 cars."

No question, the female population of Spain has had a lot of catching up to do. The four decades of authoritarian dictatorship following Spain's civil war kept women in traditional roles far longer than other Europeans, and they trailed far behind women in the U.S. and Britain who gained substantial ground during World War II when they filled in for men away at battle. Even now, less than 3% of top management in Spain's public companies is female.

Yet in recent years, Spanish women have made substantial progress in business, politics, and the judiciary. Now, with new laws on the way designed to increase their power in business, they may be on the verge of breaking the glass ceiling at last.

Change in the Universities

"There has been a deeply rooted traditional culture we have had to overcome, much like an obstacle course," says Petra Mateos, president of Spanish satellite operator Hispasat. As in many countries, she says, women were expected to assume all responsibility for caring for the family and educating children. "Today's generation has a different mentality," Mateos says.

The greatest progress so far has been in education. The number of women enrolled in Spanish universities now surpasses that of men, and female participation in business schools also has soared. Two decades ago, the percentage of female MBA candidates stood in the single digits; now, it varies from 20% at Barcelona and Madrid-based IESE to 44% at rival ESADE—though many of those come from outside Spain. The schools are upping their efforts to lure women, including instituting mentoring programs and a growing number of scholarships for female students.

The gains are equally impressive in the public sector. Spain's Prime Minister José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero, for instance, has two "first vice-presidents," one of whom, María Teresa Fernández de la Vega, is widely seen as among the nation's most powerful political figures. An ardent feminist with a doctorate in law, the 57-year-old Fernández has been in public service or politics since the start of her career in the mid-1970's.

Family Priorities

She's no mere token: Half of the ministers in the Zapatero government are female and Spain now ranks eighth in the world in number of women with political posts. The administration also
stands strongly behind a new "Law of Equality" set to go into effect this year. As with similar legislation in Norway, it aims to boost the representation of women on the boards of publicly traded companies to at least 40%. (Unlike the Norwegian law, however, it doesn't specify penalties for failing to comply.)

Still, it will take more than education and legislation for women to reach equality at all levels. A more basic problem—one that recurs in most advanced economies—is the challenge of balancing professional accomplishment with personal and family life. "While men interested in business careers spend that crucial decade of their thirties pursuing business education and networking," says Celia de Ancla, professor of organizational behavior at Madrid-based business school Instituto de Empresa and director of the school's Center for Diversity and Global Management, "family becomes the priority of many women in their thirties."

The problem, of course, is that taking time out for family can derail career advancement. "There is a perception on the part of management," says a senior female investment manager at a major bank based in Madrid who prefers to remain anonymous, "that if a woman's personal life calls her, she will respond to that call." Once that choice is made, the manager continues, "she loses it all and is relegated to the back office."

A study carried out among 150 successful professional women in Spain by research institute Círculo de Progreso in 2005 confirms the dilemma. Of the top women interviewed, 60% had never interrupted or changed career paths even once during their working lives. Nearly three-quarters said they felt as if they were doing double duty with both career and family.

**Keeping the Work-Home Balance**

The only real solution is a workplace environment that accommodates both. Perhaps nobody has done more to advance that model than Amparo Moraleda. One of Spain's youngest rising executives, she is president of IBM for Spain, Portugal, Greece, Israel, and Turkey while at the same time married and raising two children.

An industrial engineer with IBM (IBM) since 1988, Moraleda has an MBA from IESE and worked alongside legendary turnaround CEO Louis Gerstner when he transformed IBM in the 1990s. Today, she is also known for shutting off her computer at going home at 7:30 p.m. in a country where many executives are still at the office past 9 p.m. Far from holding her back, Moraleda's example underscores IBM's position as one of Spain's most flexible companies in balancing work and family life.

No question, there's still work to be done. In a country where wages still lag behind the eurozone average, women earn only about 75% as much as men. And many Spanish workers, not just women, continue to contend with a traditional schedule that includes a two-hour lunch break followed by office hours often stretching past 8 p.m. Young and single people can handle the classic Spanish workday, but it's tough for women with children.

Breaking the glass ceiling is a long process, and the toughest part is changing attitudes. "At the corporate level, preparation, discipline, and commitment aren't enough," says Hispasat's Mateos. "The mentality has to change." Fortunately for Spanish women, the evolution is finally under way.