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FRENCH WOMEN IN THE CORPORATE WORLD

As statistics reveal, the number of working women has been steadily climbing in France over the past thirty years (Hantrais 73). In 1962, there were 6.5 million women and 13 million men employed. In 1992, the number of working women had grown to 11 million whereas the number of working men had remained stable around 14 million. Indeed, most of the increase in the working population is due to the influx of women, most of them in the 25–49 age group who traditionally stayed home to take care of the children (Maruani 21). Today, 44% of the work force is made up of women. Seventy-five percent of mothers with two young children are working outside of the home. In the early twentieth century, few women worked outside of the home; increasingly now, they are wage-earners, primarily employed in the service industry. A similar phenomenon can be observed in most developed countries. France, however, presents an interesting and unique case to study. Situated in the center of Western Europe, between the Northern and the Mediterranean countries, France borrows characteristics from both cultures. While the United-States's very vocal feminist movement has pushed for changes in corporate America, French women's best ally has often been their government and the public sector. Although French and American women have fought equally hard to enter the work force, their goals and ultimate successes have not always been the same.

In the past thirty years, French women have made giant strides in the working world. In 1972, the first women were allowed to enter l'Ecole Polytechnique (the most prestigious engineering school); in 1985, France had its first female Prime Minister, Edith Cresson. There are more female than male students in French universities, and women pass the *baccalauréat* in greater numbers than men. However, women still face tremen-

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dous challenges in the corporate world. While females represent 76.5% of civil servants and employees (Cordero 63), they only account for 30.5% of senior executives. They remain overwhelmingly concentrated in a few so-called “feminine” occupations, such as nursing, or in jobs for which they are overqualified. Moreover, when women start entering a particular profession in large numbers (such as elementary school teaching), that profession becomes devalued in the eyes of society, hence the saying “une profession qui se féminise s’appauvrit” (Majnoni 156; “a profession where women work in increasing numbers loses its status”).¹ It loses status and salaries start falling.

This article will look at French women in the corporate world, the progress they have made, and the help they have received from the government. It will also examine the many hurdles that they still encounter in France: lower salaries, poor job security, greater unemployment, fewer promotions, and fewer training opportunities.

Under the Napoleonic code (1804), French women were legally regarded as minors.² They had to wait until the end of World War II to be granted the right to vote (1944). Until 1966, a married woman could not hold a job without her husband’s permission (Cordero 177). Contraception was legalized only in 1967 (loi Neuwirth), and abortion in 1975 (loi Veil). It was under the presidencies of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing in the seventies (with the creation of a *Secrétariat d’Etat à la condition féminine*) and François Mitterrand in the eighties that women saw their condition improve dramatically. Now, at least in theory, they enjoy the same rights as men.

In 1983, the socialist government passed the most comprehensive antidiscrimination law with respect to “l’égalité professionnelle” (Hantrais 94). La *Loi sur l’égalité professionnelle entre hommes et femmes*, or the *Loi Roudy*, was far reaching. Linda Hantrais tells us that “it was designed to tackle three problem areas: access to training and promotion, pay, and unemployment” (95), all of which directly affect women in corporate France. The new law stated that job advertisements could no longer specify the sex of the candidate to be hired, and it introduced the principle of equal pay for work of equal value. More importantly, it required large corporations to report annually on the relative status of male and female employees while encouraging measures to improve women’s

¹All translations are the authors’, unless otherwise stated.

²“Le Code civil consacre l’incapacité juridique totale de la femme mariée” (Cordero 175).

chances at hiring, promotion, and equal pay. Some positions could even be reserved for women in areas where they were underrepresented. In recent years, efforts have been made in the area of sexual harassment in the workplace (1992: *Loi prévenant et sanctionnant le harcèlement sexuel sur le lieu de travail*); and after many years of heated debate, women are finally allowed to work at night (*Loi autorisant le travail de nuit des femmes*). Sexual harassment, however, is only recognized as such when a superior forces his/her advances on an employee, and never between colleagues of the same rank.

The fight is far from being over, however, for the political arena is still largely a male stronghold. In France, women holding positions of power in politics are few and far between. France actually trails all other European Union member states, except for Greece, for the number of women in public office; only 5% of mayors and 6% of *députés* (representatives in the Parliament) are women. The few women who reached top positions had to pay dearly. Edith Cresson, the only female Prime Minister, was ridiculed during her short tenure and had to leave in total disgrace. The first Juppé government at the beginning of the Chirac presidency had twelve women in key positions, whom the press nicknamed, half-mockingly, the “Juppettes.” A few months later, the reshuffled government had only kept four of them (in the Ministries of the Environment, Francophony, Transportation, and Employment). Without a strong female lobby in the government, women issues will always be short changed. Aware of this problem, ten female politicians, from both the Right and the Left, are demanding political parties to make “parity” their goal (an equal number of men and women among elected officials). In June 1996, they signed a manifesto, *Le Manifeste des dix pour la parité*, published in the weekly magazine, *L'Express* (32–33). The debate is currently raging, with the majority of French people (71%) approving the principle of equality in politics (*L'Express* 30).

The area in which women have made the most stunning progress over the past thirty years is undoubtedly in secondary and higher education. Today, 42% of all women and only 32% of all men hold a *baccalauréat*. A greater number of female students than male students completes a college degree. All the *Grandes écoles* have finally opened their doors to female candidates.³

³And “some women have achieved spectacular successes: for example Anne Chopinet was placed first in the first qualification at the Ecole Polytechnique in 1972 when women were first admitted” (Hantrais 36).

Although, generally, girls receive better grades in school and are judged to be more mature and more serious students than boys, they suffer from a low self-image and a lack of confidence reinforced by their teachers' negative stereotypes ("boys are lazy and their success is due to their superior intelligence," "girls do well because they work hard") and textbooks that still portray most female characters as housewives (Cordero 42). Even when they achieve the same results as their male counterparts, they rate themselves lower and choose a less glamorous course of studies (Cordero 43).⁴ Women segregate themselves in a few disciplines; they favor the literary or general tracks over the science curriculum (Zeldin 408). Seventy percent of high school girls prepare a *baccalauréat* with an emphasis in the humanities, the social sciences, or economics, while 60% of the male students choose a math, science, or technological *bac* (Cordero 38–39). In the professional and vocational high schools, girls specialize in a few traditional disciplines such as secretarial studies, health, or paramedical sciences.

This self-imposed segregation continues in higher education where young women flock into a few areas: liberal arts, law, and pharmacy. These choices limit their subsequent employment opportunities. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to go into the so-called "voie royale" [royal road]: math, science, and engineering.

A growing number of female students elects attending the *classes préparatoires* for the *grandes écoles*. They represent 35% of this elite student body and have almost reached parity in business schools such as the *Ecoles de Commerce* and *Ecoles Supérieures de Commerce et d'Administration des Entreprises*. However, they remain a minority overall, especially in the more prestigious *Ecoles d'Ingénieurs*. The number of women does not exceed 10% of the student body at l'X (*L'Ecole Polytechnique*), which is the de-facto training ground for the future French CEOs. Top management executives are still heavily recruited among engineering graduates who create a real "old boy network" making it even harder for women to participate. Furthermore, the top *Grandes Ecoles* have traditionally promoted "virile values" such as "decisiveness, networks, hierarchies, camaraderie and dominance, . . .

⁴"Ainsi, avec une mention assez bien au bac C, 5% d'entre elles s'orientent vers une classe préparatoire à une grande école alors que les garçons s'y dirigent en plus grand nombre avec une mention passable" (Cordero 43; Thus, with a grade of "pretty good" [C] on the high school track C, 5% of them [women] turn towards a preparatory class in a "grande école" whereas boys took that path in even greater numbers with a grade of "passable" [D]).

and the curriculum too bears the stereotypical masculine hallmark of logic, mathematics and Cartesianism” (Barsoux and Lawrence 142). The combined emphasis on engineering skills and traditional masculine views of management continue to exclude most women from the top. Eventually, the choice of subjects at school and in college will impact on women’s chances to get a well-paid, upper-management position.

As we have seen, French women are on an equal footing with men (at least in theory) in recent legislation and in education. Once in the workplace, they benefit from many governmental family-friendly policies that Anglo-Saxon women would envy. In an attempt to reverse a falling demographic curve, an interventionist government helps French women to balance career and family by way of benefits. Hantrais remarks that the French government’s role has been to “support systems and services for all women who want to be economically active” (91).

In France, working conditions are governed by the *Code du Travail*. The majority of women are employed in the public sector, which sets the example for private industries to follow. To encourage demographic growth, the French government has enacted strict policies to protect pregnant women. For instance, they cannot be refused employment on account of their condition, nor can they be fired or discriminated against. French women are also entitled to a sixteen-week maternity leave for their first two children, and twenty-six weeks for the third child. Public sector employees may take up to six months leave on half-pay to breast-feed their babies (Cordero 88). Maternity leave is counted as employment, so that pension rights and seniority are not affected. Upon returning to work, female employees recover their former position within the company. Both male and female employees are entitled to a three-year parental leave without compensation for each child. Since 1985, parents who have three or more children receive *l’allocation parentale d’éducation* if they decide to stop working or to take a half-time position in order to look after their children. Besides government benefits, parents also receive *allocations familiales* based on income and family size.

It is easier for a French woman than for an American woman to find affordable care for her new-born baby. Cordero notes that

cette prise en charge collective de l’enfance et de la petite enfance fait l’admiration de tous les observateurs étrangers, notamment américains, confrontés au problème de l’insuffisante socialisation et scolarisation de l’enfant. (148)

Most French babies are placed in state-subsidized *crèches* [nurseries] that provide professional care at an affordable rate. Some parents may hire a state-certified *assistante maternelle* (nanny) to look after their young children at home. Once again, the government helps out with the *allocation de garde d'enfant à domicile* [subsidy for maintaining a child at home].

Almost all French children start attending *l'école maternelle* by the age of two (Cordero 148), and the state runs after-hours childcare centers. Once in elementary and secondary schools, French children spend more time in the classroom than their American counterparts. They are on the school premises between 8 am and 5 pm; after which parents can leave them in supervised study halls or have them join after-school sports or cultural activities.

Finally, like all French workers, women enjoy a five-week paid vacation and a first-rate, national health care system that covers all the doctor visits during pregnancy. On the whole, the French government has intervened to dictate family-friendly policies to the corporate world, compensating households for the cost of raising children and making it easier for women to have both a family and a career. Actually, French women no longer have to choose between staying at home or having a career; *le cumul* [balancing both] has become the norm.

Blöss and Frickey consider that French women who choose the career path have to face certain problems that increase as they go up the corporate ladder (90). Women are still a minority in management: 20% of French companies have a female boss and 30% of small businesses are created by women (Majnoni 156). Women in upper management are still often referred to as *femmes alibis* [token women], and their regular appearances in the management press seems to be an attempt to allay fears of underrepresentation (Barsoux and Lawrence 143). For instance, when in 1989 Colette Lewiner became the first and only senior executive of Electricité de France, she felt that she was “un alibi” and she added “cela m’énervait profondément” (Harrois-Monin 28; “that bothered me a lot”).

Furthermore, despite all the government pro-family policies, well-educated women (*bac + 4*: High School Diploma + 4 years of college) are more likely to remain unmarried (18% of the 35–39 age group) and childless, or, if they marry, to have fewer children than the average. As a matter of fact, whereas marriage and children are considered to be an asset for a male executive, they are handicaps for ambitious women. A

prospective employer always fears that a young, recently-married employee will bring additional costs to his/her business as a result of maternity leaves and repeated absences to care for ailing children. A married woman is perceived as less committed to her work and less dedicated to the company. In spite of the *Loi sur l'égalité professionnelle entre hommes et femmes*, she receives a lower salary than a single woman.

Because there are so few women in upper management, the ones who succeed often find themselves quite isolated. Socialist Martine Aubry, a former Assistant General Manager at Pechiney, was the only woman among four hundred executives. She comments: "On m'appelait parfois Monsieur le Directeur en réunion" (Charles 32; "In meetings, I was sometimes called Mister Director").

Since the French business world remains to a large extent a male fortress, it tends to perpetuate the dominance of male values. Entrance exams to the top engineering schools seem to discriminate against female candidates (Barsoux and Lawrence 142), half of whom will fail, being thus excluded from the training grounds of upper management. Women are deemed too soft and too passive to rule, their qualities—nurturing, intuition, openness—are regarded as flaws in an environment that values strength and authority in leadership. Even some successful women like Francine Gomez, the CEO of Waterman pens, think that "les hommes ont un désir de puissance que n'ont pas les femmes, c'est physiologique" (Barsoux and Lawrence 143; "men have a drive for power that women lack, it is physiological").

In France, business is often conducted over lunches that sometimes last several hours. It is customary for the business partners to drink a sequence of an *apéritif*, several wines and a *digestif*, and to eat heartily. Women executives will find it difficult to comply with this male 'ritual'; physically, it is harder for them to keep up with the drinking and the eating (Barsoux and Lawrence 109). Culturally, women are not supposed to indulge; they are expected to remain sober, slim, and elegant.

Bosses feel that female workers are less flexible and less available than their male colleagues. A study found that

men took longer over lunch and were available at the end of the working day for informal discussions which were an important component in their career progression, whereas women could not afford to have extended lunch breaks and arrive home at unpredictable times. (Hantrais 145)

The few women who make it to the top still have to overcome many hurdles. Married or single, they assume a double load at home and at the office. Even when they are employed full time, women often have to take on the main responsibility for the smooth running of the household. It may affect their concentration and the quality of their work, since they have to worry about trivial things, such as what to cook for dinner or how to find a babysitter. Young men increasingly help their wives, especially with the caring of children. However, domestic equality remains a dream. Most women are in charge of washing, ironing, cleaning, cooking, etc. (Cordero 138–39). Moreover, household chores are not considered ‘real work’ by society, since they are not remunerated. Women are trapped in a “catch 22” situation that causes a lot of stress. Whether they work outside the home or not, they are made to feel guilty: either for neglecting their family or for wasting their education and their skills.

Single-parent families are primarily headed by women, and 25% of French female executives are either divorced or single mothers. All French women are keenly aware of the challenge presented by the need to balance work and family life. They have to juggle several, at times conflicting, schedules. This is a problem that becomes particularly acute during their children’s summer vacation. These business “superwomen” never find enough time to fit it all into a twenty-four hour day (Georges 37). As Hantrais comments,

Women who work full time in a demanding job and raise children claim that in order to cope, they need to be excellent time managers, displaying the same management skills at home as at the workplace: the ability to plan, organize, delegate, direct and control. (161)

A female executive in a demanding upper management position who has to spend long hours at the office, often returning home long after 7 pm, feels unbearable time pressure and often suffers from overload (Hantrais 150). Moreover, it is less acceptable for a mother than for a father to spend less time with the children due to professional obligations. She suffers from both personally and societally imposed guilt if she misses her children’s bedtime or other important moments in their lives.

It is little wonder that, despite all the egalitarian talk, women are still the ones who sacrifice their career for the sake of a family. They take time off when their children or elderly parents are sick. They forego

promotion if it means moving, but follow their husbands when they are transferred. Commuter marriages are still uncommon and they usually end with the birth of children or with divorce. Contrary to other European women (especially British and German), French women keep on working full time after the birth of their first and second child. However, their level of employment and activity drops sharply at the birth of a third child (from 79.1% with one child to 49% with three). The pro-family policies of the French government, aimed at encouraging women to have a family of three, have failed thus far. French women who want to keep on working prefer to limit their family size (Hantrais 115–16).

Until recently, French women were barred from working nights (a few exceptions were made for nurses, hotel, and restaurant employees). In 1992, the law was repealed. Unions had a mixed reaction, for although it opened new job opportunities for women, it further endangered the stability of family life.

Most career paths are now open to women, but their chances are slim of reaching the same status and commanding the same earnings as their male counterparts. Women are forever pulled in opposite directions by the conflicting demands of work and family. They are required to make greater sacrifices than men in order to succeed, such as postponing or rejecting marriage and children, having to put in a double day of work, etc. Since entering the job market in large numbers, women have been held responsible for all the ills of modern society, from low births to high unemployment, from the breakdown of the traditional family to juvenile delinquency.

They are constantly found in the lowest-paid job categories, and they comprise the majority (2/3) of *smicards* [minimum wage earners] (Zeldin 408). It is harder for them to find first-time employment, and they are more often unemployed than men. In 1991, 17% of young men under the age of 25 and 5.9% of men over 25 were unemployed versus 22.6% of young women and 9.9% of men (Maruani 48). They stay unemployed longer, and when they finally find work, they are more likely to be in *emplois précaires* or in part-time positions, which carry less security. Out of 2.8 million part-timers, 85% are women (Blöss and Frickey 106).

Many French women do not possess the technical skills and expert qualifications required in an increasingly complex working world. They are offered fewer chances to upgrade their skills, attend workshops (stages), or receive further training. They are often recruited to fill dead

end positions, or in jobs that do not correspond to their qualifications (Cordero 103). Finally, a job performed by a woman traditionally carries less status and a lower paycheck than if it were done by a man. For example, a woman who enters data on a computer keyboard is called “une claviste,” a low-wage job requiring no qualification; a man doing the same job becomes a qualified and better paid “typographe” (Cordero 97).

French employers distrust women, thinking they are unwilling to dedicate themselves fully to a career. Women’s careers are often disrupted by the arrival of children and the priority given to a spouse’s job. Consequently, they often find themselves in more precarious situations than men. In times of recession, female workers are the first to be laid off since they are at the bottom of the scale. And corporate dynasties still prefer their heir to be a male. François Michelin never even considered that his daughter, Clarisse, a brilliant student, could succeed him as the head of the company, just because “c’est une fille . . .” (“Les Héritiers” 36).

A woman’s salary is still often thought to be “un salaire d’appoint,” a mere complement to the main wage-earner’s salary. Indeed, only 5% of women earn higher wages than their spouses. Although the law requires employers to pay an equal salary to their male and female employees for an equivalent (no longer equal) position, women are still paid on the average 30% less than men; partly, but not entirely, because they have fewer technical skills. It is in private enterprise that the gap between male and female wages is the largest and in the public sector that it is the smallest. We have already mentioned some of the reasons for this difference: women have less experience, fewer qualifications, more discontinuous careers, more absences than men, they are stereotyped as being less mobile, less reliable, more emotional, and unpredictable.

Therefore, to reach the upper levels of management, women have to be better than their male colleagues. Female top executives often have more diplomas than men and a better school record. Once at work, they have to uphold higher standards than their male colleagues, since their actions represent those of all women. Each successful female executive also serves as a role model for younger generations.

Although problems persist, French women are now an accepted and integral part of the working world. With the active support of their government, they have succeeded in striking an uneasy balance between their homelife and their career. They reject the American model of the

“executive superwoman,” which they find too aggressive and extreme. French women often claim that their relationship with the opposite sex is healthier and better than in other countries. It is surely less confrontational than in the United States. French women have achieved much in the corporate world without threatening their femininity.

In comparison, American women in France are surprised to see that flirting is commonplace at the office, and that French female executives do not shy away from wearing low cut blouses and miniskirts to work. French women, on the other hand, are often shocked by what they regard as American feminist excesses. “We must not end up with the excesses of the United States, where the slightest glance can be misinterpreted,” comments a French politician about American sexual harassment cases (Platt 225).

On the whole, French women feel proud of their *différence*. After all, they believe in the French saying that “la femme est l’avenir de l’homme” [“women are men’s future”].

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