

Women, work and equality: businesses can't do everything!

If we want to allow women to work, we need affordable and professional nurseries with meals available every day, all year round. The State must allow tax deductibility on these significant costs.

Highlighting a decline in equality between men and women in Switzerland, the recent statistics from the World Economic Forum reminded me of my arrival in Geneva eighteen years ago. Maternity leave didn't exist then. My predecessor - a woman moreover! - had absolutely nothing planned for maternities in the Company. One of my priorities as the new manager was to offer insurance to protect the salaries of my female colleagues during maternity leave, which the company decided to grant them with no strings attached.

I worked for a Swiss subsidiary of a Dutch group where everything was not rosy for women: it was impossible to make a career by working 80%; a second child represented an additional obstacle for my career and one downside was I earned significantly less than my male colleagues, which an internal auditor was kind enough to inform me of. As a result, I had to start fierce negotiations regarding my pay conditions. In addition, I experienced much unwanted attention from my direct male superior too! Finally, like all working mothers, I had significant childcare problems...

Independence and freedom

I have always fiercely defended women's independence and freedom, and strongly believe that they have an interest in keeping a foot in the job market at all times. In order to offer women as many opportunities as possible, in 2009, when I managed to buy the Swiss subsidiary that employed me (a services company) I decided to organise it according to this belief.

Why do women always have an interest in keeping a foot in the job market? Because a husband isn't a life insurance, as the former Genovese national socialist adviser, Maria Bernasconi, reminds us. This is true, even though lots of housewives

are completely happy, especially in Switzerland where we enjoy a very good standard of living. But, life isn't always a long, calm river!

My dad was the owner of a business. In the 1950s, in Holland, passionate about jazz, he launched a record factory, 'Artone', which employed about 1200 employees. He was brilliant with a strong personality and in our family, as he was in business, all powerful, there was little room for divergent opinions. Then, suddenly, for health reasons, he had to sell his business when I was only 8 years old.

This experience taught me two things: that a man's career isn't eternal and that if a woman wants to have the freedom to make her own life choices, she should be independent and that means being able to work – especially since divorce rates are on the rise and alimonies are dropping! Aware of these challenges, lots of realistic women are choosing to work.

Can one work at 80%?

What can we do to help women in the workplace? At my Company, where 18 out of 24 colleagues are women, a strict pay equality is respected. I don't hesitate to hire young women, nor do I discriminate against them if they become pregnant. On the contrary, I congratulate them and systematically offer them to work at 80% or even at 70% if they have several children – without losing the possibility of progressing in the company. One of my male directors works at 90%, because men too should be able to look after their families.

Working at 80% is also common for colleagues close to retirement. As a result, on Wednesdays and Fridays our offices seem a bit empty. But we manage the workload very well. My part-time employees are organised, keep their cases up-to-date, so that their colleagues will only have to deal with emergencies in their absence.

What are the politicians waiting for?

This formula works very well! Our business achieves strong profits and above all, has an excellent working environment. The employees who benefit from this flexibility are grateful and motivated by their work. Staff *turnover* is very low, so we retain skilled and experienced employees. Almost every year a baby is born and it's rare that a female member of staff leaves us.

However, businesses can't do everything! What are my female colleagues' biggest problems in daily life? The impossibility of finding nurseries! The "mother of substitute" solution isn't sufficient. If we want to allow women to work, we need affordable and professional nurseries with meals available every day, all year

round. Furthermore, the State must allow tax deductibility on these very significant costs, which discourage mothers from going back to work.

Finally, don't forget about the impractical school hours that are based on the organisation of a traditional home. What are politicians waiting for to finally organise canteens for all, which already exists in some communities and affordable extracurricular activities, which offers the opportunity for children to attend homework and sports classes every day of the week until 7pm?