

## Difference at work

**Women's employment conditions in Ticino are the object of a survey carried out by the Department of Management and Social Sciences (DSAS), SUPSI. Commissioned by Ticino's Department of Health and Social Security (DSS) and conducted jointly with the Canton's Statistical Office (Ustat), the research explores gender differences by means of statistical indicators and interviews with women in employment. The study shows that gender equality in the workplace is far from satisfactory in Switzerland, and even less so in our Canton. Although nobody denies the importance of women's talents, firms are still managed along eminently male-dominated lines.**

It is only recently that the crucial role played by women in the economy has been properly acknowledged: and their skills, qualities, and approach to work are now known to enhance productivity (the term *womenomics* has been coined). A 2006 survey by *The Economist* shows that women today represent the most powerful engine of global growth in rich countries. It is estimated that women's contribution to the production of goods and services and to child care covers 50% of world wealth.

While the economic world fully appreciates the strategic importance of women in the labour market, companies still continue to be run on strictly male principles. The survey, carried out by the Department of Management and Social Sciences, SUPSI, investigates women's position in paid employment in Ticino not simply in terms of discrimination but also in terms of difference. Being a woman is not purely a biological question, but it implies different ways of thinking and acting. The distinguishing features identified in women's attitude to work include, for example, their capacity to relate.

The quantitative component of the survey draws a statistical picture with a number of indicators such as hours worked, degree of employment, professional sectors, and position held and salary scale. The survey also describes women's status within the family unit, analysing both the householder (the person who, on the basis of income



Source: [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)

level and other employment variables, is the linchpin of the household) and the housework. The qualitative part includes interviews with some twenty working women who give an account of their daily experiences. *"The feminine thoughts distilled here express significant events, which serve to show the difference in women's perception of, or attitude to, their career or their integration in the world of work"*, comment Christine Butti and Carmen Vaucher de la Croix, lecturers and researchers at DSAS, SUPSI, and authors of the study.

The research uses data from the 2000 Federal Population Census, which takes into account all aspects of an individual's life. It also uses information from the Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS) published in 2002, the most important cross-section survey conducted in the Swiss labour market on the supply side. Commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Security, the DSAS analysis was developed in collaboration with the Canton's Statistical Office (Ustat), Bellinzona. The latter provided and processed the ad-hoc figures for Canton Ticino. The research is currently being published, under the title *La differenza al lavoro. La situazione delle donne nel mercato del lavoro in Ticino (Difference at work. Women's situation in Ticino's labour market)*. The volume is due out in October 2006.

### Research at DSAS

The survey is part of a research project series run by the DSAS research unit. Their main focus is the ongoing changes affecting the world of work and their impact on society, with issues such as discrimination, job insecurity, health or the work-family balance. *"It's a piece of the puzzle that had to be faced in our pursuit of coherence and continuity for this area of study"*, adds Christian Marazzi, director of the DSAS research unit. Gender studies are an area that SUPSI believes in. The proof is that it has an equal opportunities service, whose task is to develop gender difference issues within the school; and it has a Gender Working Group, actively committed to building a crèche serving a catchment area, with a view to helping balance family, work and-or study commitments.

## Right to equality but also to diversity

The analysis has highlighted a steady increase in the number of women in paid employment, in Ticino as well as the rest of Switzerland, over the last twenty years. Nevertheless, the women's percentage continues to be lower than the men's: in 2000, women represented 42% of the Canton's workforce.

Despite the steadily growing number of women going back to work after childbirth, female occupational rate remains lower in Ticino compared to the Swiss average (59% against 70%). This is probably due to a stronger influence of traditional culture. For single-parent families, however, the choice is determined by economic necessity; and higher occupation rates are recorded. In terms of education and skills, despite equal qualifications, women are still on the lower rungs of the ladder (the 'sticky floor' effect). Interestingly, it has been observed that in universities and top management, women are proportionately better qualified than men.

In Ticino, part-time work is still a predominantly female phenomenon (four-fifths of part-timers are women), a choice dictated by the need to juggle a job outside the home, family and child care. Part-time often means insecurity: such jobs are at risk because they do not have the safety-net of insurance. Although the pay gap is gradually narrowing, the men/women differential for median salaries earned by full-time workers in Ticino varies on a range of 17% to 42%, depending on the sector. Pay differences are always to the women's detriment, across the board and across all social-professional classes. In addition, assuming identical work contracts, men's initial



The authors of the survey, Christine Butti (left) and Carmen Vaucher de la Croix.

salary is higher than women's. Different negotiation styles may be to blame for pay discrimination. This is how, quite significantly, one of the women interviewed summed up her experience, as head of a company's Human Resources: "A woman tends to do (her job) first and ask (for money) later; a man tends to 'ask' first, and 'do' later". Within the family circle, the study has shown that more and more women in Ticino have been acting as householders in the past ten years. In addition, two-thirds of housework (equivalent to 90% of unpaid work) is done by women. "Companies' demand for women's skills, developed in a family environment, is growing. Yet, paradoxically, management models are still designed from a typically male perspective", points out Carmen Vaucher de la Croix. And she concludes: "Let us accept that women's abilities are granted greater bargaining power than they used to, which should be used to reform the organisation of labour so as to reflect and value differences. A better work/home balance, in fact, is bound to bear economic benefits for the firm as well" (see box).

**Compatibility: an economic advantage for the company**

In a study commissioned by Migros, Novartis, Swiss Post, the Raiffeisen Group and the Federal Department of Economic Affairs, the Basle agency Prognos AG ([www.worklife.ch](http://www.worklife.ch)) has analysed costs and benefits of a corporate policy designed to be family-friendly. It was conducted on a sample of twenty Swiss enterprises. The analysis yielded a conservative estimate suggesting a return on investment of 8%. It identified a number of quantifiable effects (e.g. more women return to work after their maternity leave, longer working hours on a part-time contract, and more career paths within the firm), as well as other, non-quantifiable effects (e.g. rising levels of motivation, loyalty, satisfaction, and efficiency), all of which factors contribute to making the firm more attractive in the labour market.

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