



Make  
Mothers  
Matter

## Work – family balance

### Good practices from France

by Marie-Laure des Brosses – President of Make Mothers Matter France – May 15<sup>th</sup> 2012

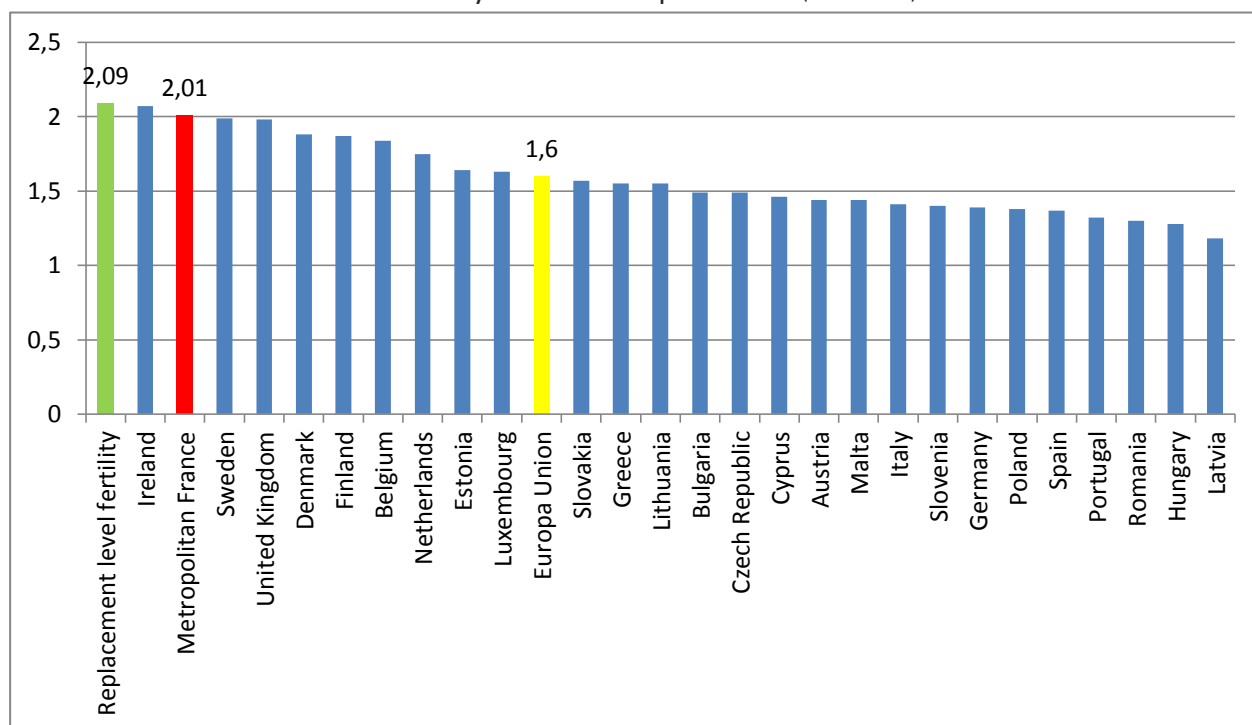
The objective of this presentation is to raise awareness of the best practices applied in France to achieve a balance between work and family life. After a quick review of the current state of professional life - family life, we will discuss public policy tools, the influence of the media and the ambient state of mind, and finally, the key initiatives taken by some pioneer companies. A final section will discuss the development prospects and our recommendations.

#### I – Current state of family life – professional life in France as compared to Europe

##### 1) France experienced a new record of fertility in 2010

With 2.01 children born per woman, France has achieved its best fertility rate for the last 35 years and confirmed its demographic dynamism. Within the European Union, France ranks second behind Ireland.

Fertility rates in Europe in 2010 (Source Ined)



## 2) Women's employment rate in France continues to grow

Since World War II, women's employment rate in France has increased steadily. In France in 1970, 50% of women aged 25 to 59 years were working. In 2010, 75% of them work. When comparing the overall employment rate of women aged 15 to 64 years, France is well within the European average, with a gap between men and women employment rate (ER) lower than the European average. Only the Baltic countries - which have very low birth rates - and the Nordic countries (Sweden, Finland, Denmark) have a gap between men and women employment rate lower than France.

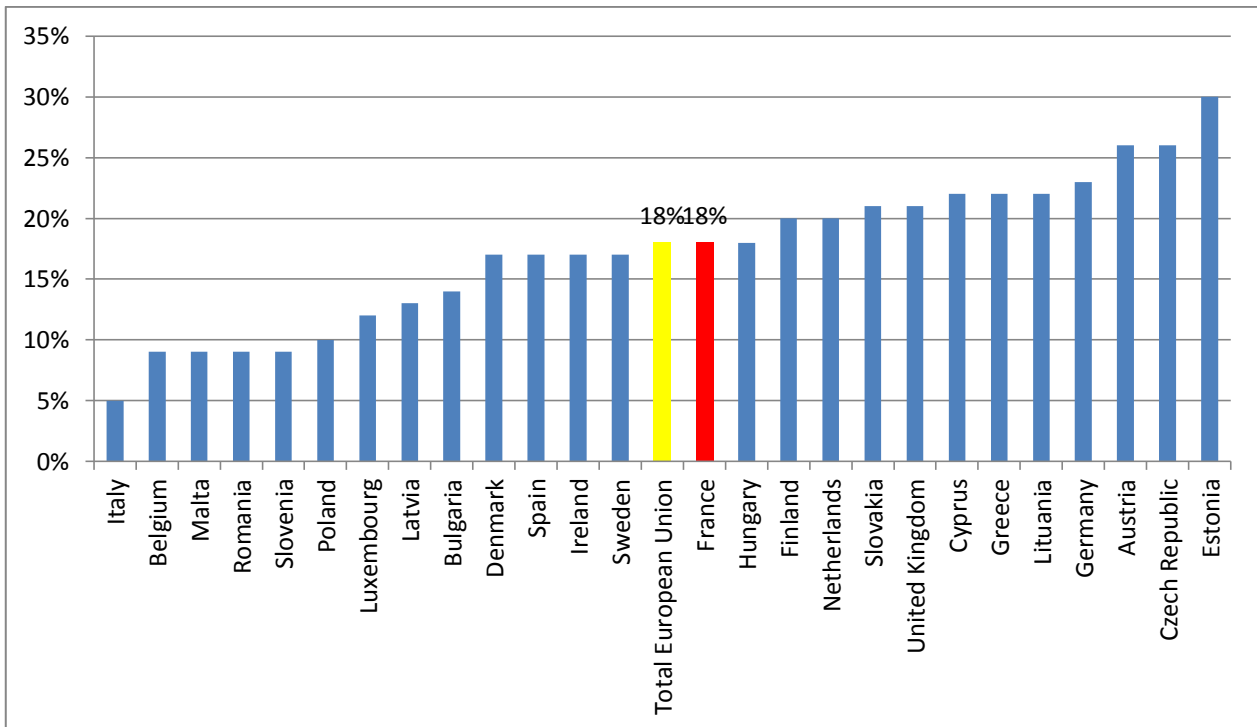
Employment rate of 15-64 years in 2009 (Source: Eurostat)

	Total	Men	Women	Difference between gender
Lithuania	60,1	59,5	60,7	-1,2
Latvia	60,9	61	60,9	0,1
Estonia	63,5	64,1	63	1,1
Finland	68,7	69,5	67,9	1,6
Sweden	72,2	74,2	70,2	4
Denmark	75,7	78,3	73,1	5,2
Slovenia	67,5	71	63,8	7,2
<b>France</b>	<b>64,2</b>	<b>68,5</b>	<b>60,1</b>	<b>8,4</b>
Bulgaria	62,6	66,9	58,3	8,6
Ireland	61,8	66,3	57,4	8,9
Germany	70,9	75,6	66,2	9,4
Portugal	66,3	71,1	61,6	9,5
United Kingdom	69,9	74,8	65	9,8
Austria	71,6	76,9	66,4	10,5
Netherlands	77	82,4	71,5	10,9
Belgium	61,6	67,2	56	11,2
Hungria	55,4	61,1	49,9	11,2
<b>Total European Union</b>	<b>64,6</b>	<b>70,7</b>	<b>58,6</b>	<b>12,1</b>
Roumania	58,6	65,2	52	13,2
Poland	59,3	66,1	52,8	13,3
Spain	59,8	66,6	52,8	13,8
Slovakia	60,2	67,6	52,8	14,8
Cyprus	69,9	77,6	62,5	15,1
Luxembourg	65,1	73,2	57	16,2
Czech Republic	65,4	73,8	56,7	17,1
Italy	57,5	68,6	46,4	22,2
Greece	61,2	73,5	48,9	24,6
Malta	54,9	71,5	37,7	33,8

The ER gap rate between men and women continues to narrow, as young women are more active than their elders.

### 3) France ranks among the European average in terms of the wage gap between men and women

Deviation of average hourly earnings between men and women in 2008 (Source: Eurostat)



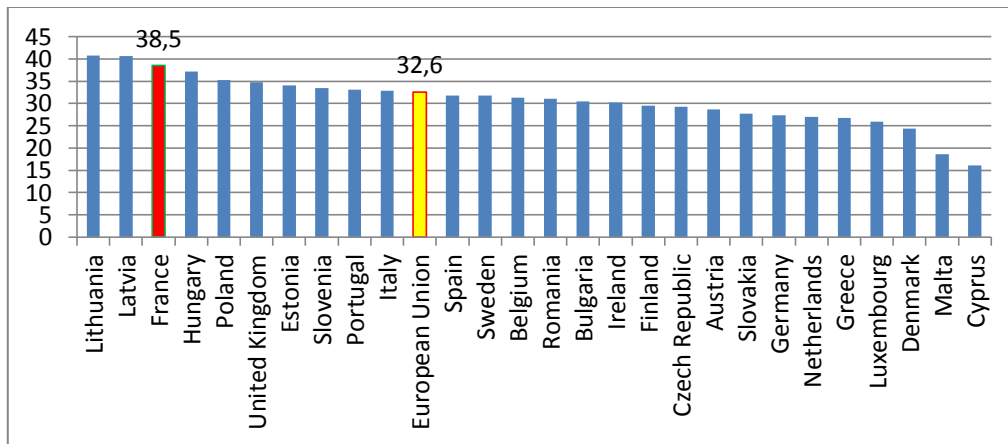
The difference in earnings can be explained in large part by the career choices of women who opt more often than men, for less remunerated professions (teaching, distribution, ...). Nevertheless, there remains a gap of 10% pay between women and men performing the same tasks due to practices or processes entailing "unequal or discriminatory measures that work against women at various times of their carriers" (source : Lara Muller, « Les écarts de salaires entre les hommes et les femmes en 2006 : des disparités persistantes »)

It is interesting to note that the Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Finland), often cited as models of professional parity do not get better results than France which is within the European average.

### 4) The access of women to senior positions has doubled in 30 years :

France, in the early 90 was trailing behind the European average in terms of proportion of women managers (23% in France in 1990 against 26% for the European Community). It has since experienced a strong feminization of the white collar labor force and is now in the leading group of European countries in this field.

**Proportion of female managers and corporate executives** (Source: Eurostat 2006)



The glass ceiling still exists in France to the women's access to management positions in large companies and boards...but again progress has been notable in very recent years, thanks to the “Cope Zimmermann law” (passed in 2011) which sets minimum quotas for women on boards of large companies.

France has managed to combine a high employment rate for women with a dynamic demographic trend.

Let's analyze the best practices that have led to this result, focusing first on government policies.

## II – Good practices as regards government policies

### 1) A long maternity leave ... but not too long.... yet well-paid

Since 1970, working mothers receive paid maternity leave (equivalent to net salary). The leave is 16 weeks long for a first or second child and 26 weeks for a third child. For twins, it is increased to 34 weeks. Some flexibility exists: it is possible to obtain from a doctor an authorization for two supplemental weeks before giving birth in case of complications during pregnancy and/or four additional weeks after birth if the birth is pathological (including caesarean section). Conversely, it is also possible to take only eight weeks of maternity leave if the mother wishes to resume her professional activity sooner. Maternity leave is paid the equivalent of the net salary (with a 3,000 euros a month ceiling). In the public sector and in most private firms, a wage supplement is paid to women executives to reach their net salary. These policies and flexibility allow mothers to welcome the birth of their child and take the necessary rest time without taking too much time off of their jobs.

### 2) An extension of paternity leave since 2002

Since the second world war, employed fathers enjoyed 3 days of paid leave for the birth of their child. In 2002, this leave was extended by 11 days to be taken within 4 months of the birth of the child. This policy allows fathers to be more present at the time of arrival of their child in the home. The three days are paid the equivalent of net pay, but the 11 days have a capped compensation (unless otherwise agreed by the employer).

This paternity leave quickly met with success: in 2004, two out of three fathers used the 14 days paternity leave. It is mostly executives and some private sector employees who are still hesitant to

use this right (difficulty in taking time off + lost wages over the period).

### 3) **A more flexible parental leave**

Parental leave was implemented in 1977. Originally planned for mothers of three or more children, this leave allowed for an absence of up to one year, renewable to up to three years. During the leave, the employee receives a benefit equal to approximately 35% of the French minimum wage (350 euros per month) as allowance paid by the CAF (family allowance fund). The employer pays nothing but is obliged to keep the position available to the employee at the term of the parental leave. Since its inception, parental leave has been continually improved to provide more flexibility for parents :

- In 1984, it was extended to either the father or the mother

- In 1994, it became available after the second child birth

- Since 2003, the parent may choose to stop or reduce his or her employment (part-time work).

Leave becomes available at birth of first child (but it is limited to 6 months).

- Since 2006, the parent can choose between a shorter absence of one year maximum with better pay (about 60% of the minimum wage) or keep the option of parental leave up to 3 years paid at 35 % of minimum wage. Only 2,200 beneficiary families in 2010 (source CAF) opted for the shorter but better paid option.

Parental leave has had a great success with over 530,000 parents benefitting from it per year.

Although the share of fathers is increasing, it remains a minority, mothers representing more than 96% of beneficiaries.

Parental leave is particularly used by mothers during the birth of their second -and especially- third child.

Women with low wages favor full time parental leave while executives and Middle managers mainly use the opportunity to work part time (4/5th in particular). The share of part-time parental leave is increasing and represents 40% of the total.

As a note, almost 40% of mothers who chose full time parental leave have a precarious employment (temporary, fixed-term contracts, unemployed) for which the guarantee of finding a job at the end of the leave does not apply ... but then the parental leave becomes a temporary solution while waiting to find work ... sooner or later.

### 4) **Varied and growing child care options**

While UNICEF suggests that developed countries should offer subsidized and regulated child care to at least 25% of under three years old children, France had in 2009 48.7 childcare spots per 100 children under 3.

At the end of 2012, France is expected to reach 50 spaces per 100 children as a result of the ongoing efforts to expand the availability of child care –particularly since 2000). (Source: Center for Strategic Analysis - January 2012)

- **Maternal assistants** who take care of 1 to 4 children in their own homes. They must obtain a license from the Government and receive a brief training. Since the 1990s, CAF encourages Departments to create RAMs (“Maternal Assistants Relays”). These are places for parents and assistants to exchange information and discussions with the goal to avoid isolation and improve

training. In 2012, maternal assistants had in aggregate 27 childcare places per 100 children under 3.

- **Public day care** : Since 2000, seven “public day care plans” have promoted the development of this type of childcare that is still relatively expensive for the community (1200 € per month per child for operating costs). It is a form of care welcomed by parents ... especially for their first child. In 2012, public day care offer 14 childcare places per 100 children under 3.
- **At home care by a nanny** : This type of care is rather expensive for parents and represents only 2% of custody choice by French parents. It is mostly used by senior executives in major cities. Joint custody (a nanny for two families), is more affordable and evolving, but difficult to organize (choice of schedules, choice of vacation dates, arrival of a new child in a family, ... ).
- **Company day care** : still on only a few, but growing thanks to tax incentives.
- **Parental care** : not counting children of parents on parental leave, 27% of children under 3 are cared for by parents professionally active. These are parents who work from home, part time, with staggered hours, ...
- **Nurseries that allow occasional drop off** (half day to two days per week) keep children with one non-working parent (to "free up" a few hours for the mother). Some parents working part time may also use this type of care.
- **Nursery school** are in France opened to all children older than 3. In some areas they accept children at the age of two years old, thus caring after some children under 3. This type of arrangement is in sharp decline, however, as schools have fewer subsidies to accommodate very young children.

Government policies support the development of all these different types of care, through the use of the following grants and / or tax breaks:

- Subsidies to day care centers and price requirements linked to parental income.
- “Free choice of childcare” allowance for parents using a live-in nanny or a maternal assistant.
- Reimbursement of social security contributions for maternal assistants.
- 50% payroll tax subsidy for nannies.
- Tax breaks for parents for childcare expenses (day care, maternal assistants and nannies).  
Some local constituencies supplement these grants with additional allowances thereby further reducing the actual cost to parents. These allowances are often paid according to family needs.  
Examples : € 1,000 per year in Corrèze. € 1,200 to 5,000 per year per family in Paris.

All this gives families a wide variety of options :

- Parental care remains the most chosen option with 63% of children under 3 mainly cared for by a parent. Custody by parents include : parents on parental leave, parents unemployed, parents working at home or staggered hours.
- Use of a maternal assistant : 18% of children under 3. (The difference with the number of places available is that not all assistants care for as many children as they are allowed to).
- Public day care : 10% of children under 3 (the gap with the number of places available is due to the fact that the location of places do not always match the needs and duration of allocation of places available sometimes remain "vacant" between enrollments)
- Care by grandparents or other family members : 4% of children under 3.
- Care at home by a nanny: 2% of children under 3.
- School enrollment prior to 3 years of age : 2% of children.

## 5) A system supporting parents to return to work

Finally, the Government helps parents who wish to return to work after caring for their infants by

- Access to job centers
- Access to job training if necessary
- Validation of Acquired Experience (taking into account the experience and responsibilities exercised as parents) that provides access to specific professions or government contests for mothers of 3 or more children.

Overall, public policies promote true freedom of choice for parents to choose between caring for their small children themselves or have alternate childcare options.

### **III - A public opinion and media favorable to free choice**

Some European countries favor dominant models. In Germany for example, it is not well considered for a young mother to work full time. In the Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Norway) a long breastfeeding is considered ideal for the child. Taking a long parental leave (at least 12 months) is strongly encouraged. Then the resumption of work is seen as the 'norm' to be observed.

Contrary to these stereotypes, in France neither public opinion nor the media convey any dominant model that all parents should emulate. Thus, breastfeeding is presented as good for the child ... but formula is completely accepted and nearly 50% of mothers use it. Career women are widely mentioned in newspapers. But the press also regularly evokes the happiness of women who put their careers on hold to care for their children. Reconciling family and professional life is widely reported but different scenarios are always presented (full-time work, part-time work, staying at home, etc...)

Thus, French parents have the opportunity to make their own choices based on their own aspirations, financial possibilities or available help. There is no "pressure" from society or the media to favor any particular solution.

Similarly in businesses, it is common to see a mother ask for a part-time job or a parental leave ... but also perfectly acceptable for a mother to pursue her career full time. When the father makes the request, it is more unusual but not necessarily frowned upon.

It is quite likely that this model - favoring freedom of choice - contributes to a higher fertility rate ... and at the same time to a higher activity rate.

The European study conducted by MMM polling 12,000 mothers in Europe showed that 89% of European mothers thought it essential for them to care personally for their toddlers. But the actual realization of this aspiration varies from mother to mother and also from one child to another.

Thus, only 20% of French mothers take parental leave or part-time options at the birth of their first child. They are 50% to make the choice for the second child ... and nearly 80% resort to it after the birth of their third child.

There is also evidence that some mothers who continued their work when their children were young, change gears and choose to work part time when children become adolescents.

Public opinion and media in France have a large tolerance for parental choice and each family tries to find the type of organization best suited to its needs and aspirations.

## **IV – Pioneer family friendly companies \***

For the past ten years, companies have been focusing on the need to motivate and retain employees to obtain better performance/profitability. Accounting for the personal lives of employees is a growing trend ...even if it still represents a minority in the French economy.

\* Some of the practices listed below are taken from the report Jerome Ballarin (a senior French consultant, founder member of the Observatory of Parenthood in Corporations) : "Parenting and gender equality in the workplace : how to involve men? 10 good business practices." (2012)

### **1) The creation of an Observatory of Parenthood in Corporations (OPE)**

In 2008, Jérôme Ballarin created in France the "Observatory of Parenthood in Corporations" which takes an annual survey on the expectations of employees who are parents and the evolution of business practices. A charter of Parenthood in Corporations was written. Employers signatories undertake to educate managers and HR to take better account of parenthood and create a favorable environment for employees with children. To date, nearly 400 employers (including 27 new signatories in 2012) representing 3 million employees or over 10% of the French labor force have signed the Charter.

Most companies develop one or more of the following services for parents: concierge, company day care, specific allowances to contribute to childcare,... We will detail below a number of good practices developed by these pioneers.

### **2) Promotion of flexible work schedules**

- AXA France (16 000 employees, 74% are parents as of December 2010) has signed a corporate agreement in 2005 to allow a flexible schedule with a minimum of "core" hours (less than 4 hours per day) around which the employees organize their working time . With this multitude of options, part-time work is widespread at AXA France (especially among women) : 33% of them choosing the part time option (data at end December 2010) - 29% of women executives and 37% of non-executives. Only 4% of men use it : nearly 3% of male executives and nearly 8% of non-managers men.

- Since 1999, Carrefour (food distribution) has organized its 20,000 cashiers in groups called islands where employees organize themselves in their "island" to plan their weekly schedules.

Management intervenes only if arbitration is required. Over 80% of arbitrations are satisfactory to employees. The company gains in employee motivation and quality of customer welcome.

- Deloitte has established a system of "chosen pathways" allowing auditors each month to determine their geographic availability and pace of work (full time or part time). In fact, the modulation is mainly on the work pace, with opportunities to work part time or have flexible hours. Thus, a professional can chose to work a few months per year on a four-fifths schedule and full-time the rest of the year, particularly between January and April when the audit industry is in full gear. Experience shows that divorced parents who share custody of children are using this system of work schedule : they work more hours the weeks without children at home and less the weeks they have custody of their children. In January 2010, 60 employees – about 7% of the workforce - benefited from this system called "Chosen Pathways ".

- AREVA Lyon.(Nuclear energy) In 2010, the AREVA Group (29,500 employees in France) started



offering its employees at its site in Lyon (1100 employees) part time work on an annualized basis (more vacation breaks). It seems that the formula attracts more fathers ... while part-time on a weekly basis (Wednesday off) is more attractive to mothers.

- L'Oreal has introduced in 1976 a "Wednesday for mothers." program. In 2008, Wednesdays became "Wednesday for fathers and mothers" after the agreement on professional gender equality was signed that year. This feature makes it possible to take one, two, three or four Wednesdays off per month for parents of children under 12 with a return to full-time work at any time upon request of the employee. One condition : that the work organization permits such scheduling. To disseminate this idea, a practical guide to parenting was distributed to managers and to the employees six months later. This feature is a real success ... but it is mostly mothers (98%) who request the benefit.

- BNP Paribas' offers a "schedule menu" as an alternative to part-time. The employee has the option to purchase up to 20 extra days off and use at his convenience without any justification. This device has existed for many years and is not only reserved for employees who are parents.

- STX France (formerly Chantiers de l'Atlantique in Saint-Nazaire) allows single parents to request a switch to 90% part-time over four days until children reach their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday.

### **3) Fighting against workaholism**

This is a bad practice in many French companies : managers confuse working long hours and actual performance, creating a corporate culture that adversely affects employees and parents, especially mothers. Some companies have taken concrete steps to fight against this scourge.

- General Electric (approximately 10,000 employees in France) in 2007 pioneered the practice by prohibiting meetings after 6:30 pm and setting specific time slots for conference calls with the U.S. and Asia. The average number of people leaving the company after 9 pm was thus reduced from 160 in 2007 to 15 in 2009.

- University of Western Brittany (2200 employees) : concrete rules applicable to working meetings have been enacted since the summer of 2011: "Wherever possible meetings should be held on the 9.am/5.pm time slots avoiding if possible Wednesday afternoons. Participants should be given notice at least 15 days in advance, the agenda should be clearly defined, the meeting should not last more than 2 hours. Points that are not treated will be deferred to the next meeting (there are exceptions for regulatory bodies such as the Board of Directors )

### **4) "Telecommuting" Development**

According to the 2011 barometer of the Observatory of parenthood in Corporations, 16% of French employees have the opportunity to work from home. Nevertheless, France still lags behind Nordic and Anglo-Saxon countries, especially the United Kingdom where the proportion of telecommuters is around 40% of the workforce. Companies are striving to develop telecommuting among employees :

- L'Oreal (about 12,000 employees in France), has signed a telecommuting agreement in 2008. Experiments began after mid-2009. All employees whose job was compatible with telecommuting were eligible to work from home one or two days a week.

- Orange has introduced three choices for telecommuting : alternating between home and usual work place, enabling employees to work alternatively at home and at work (presence of at least 2 days on the workplace) ; telecommuting alternated between a satellite office and usual workplace, enabling staff to work regularly near home and / or remotely in a local company other than the

usual workplace ; occasional telecommuting, which allows employees to work in very exceptional circumstances at home.

- Keel Construction : this subsidiary of Bouygues Construction (2150 employees) signed an agreement on telecommuting in 2010 on the basis of one day per week.
- Capgemini (20,000 employees in France) has signed a telecommuting agreement in July 2011 on the basis of one or two days per week. Employees working on sensitive projects are excluded. At the end of December 2011, over 250 telecommuters had benefited from the agreement, with 80% of applications accepted.
- SFR (9,500 employees) has implemented a pilot to test various forms of telecommuting work and find the solution or solutions best suited to the particulars of the company. The pilot tests encompassed three types of telecommuting : a fixed day weekly to another company site, a fixed day weekly at the employee's home, a package of 12 days of work at the employee's home with a 48 hours notice. The pilot began in June 2011 for a period of six months. 150 employees were selected.
- Ferrero (1200 employees in France) launched in April 2011 a year of testing on two days per week telecommuting.

### **5) Manager's awareness of employees' welfare.**

Awareness is growing among business leaders and HR that finding the right balance between work and personal life is predicated upon managers training. Some companies have been pioneers in this field :

- Areva , the group has set up since 2008 a training for its managers to conducting interviews pre- and post-maternity leaves. Men managers, some of whom may be young and unmarried - or never had a pregnant partner -, are coached on how to respond to pregnancy related issues and what type of questions can or cannot be asked to the employee. This coaching remains very valuable for the manager but also for the employee concerned (the admission of pregnancy remains stressful for many women).

- SFR : aware of the importance of educating staff supervisors on a balanced personal/work life of its employees, the group trained in 2011, 1,600 managers to the "Management focused on individuals" workshop, which took place within the "employee wellbeing and work efficiency" program of the company. It was designed to show managers that merely asking employees after their family or holidays does not diminish their managerial stature, thus dispelling enduring beliefs never to talk about personal life to a colleague. Taking an active interest in others is not intrusive. On the contrary, it was pointed out to SFR's managers that the welfare of their employees is their responsibility. The one day training was punctuated by a large number of role playing exercises, where participants were asked to play alternatively their own role or that of their employees. It was about simple acts of daily life, like greeting people with a smile, knowing how to ask simple questions, or offering to talk about it when noticing employee uneasiness... The Observatory of Parenthood in Corporations designed a "Manager's Guide" and distributes it to entrepreneurs and HR departments to promote good management practices.

### **6) Fighting against stereotypes and salary & promotion discrimination**

Several companies have seen the need to develop tools to fight against stereotypes and promote the development of female employment at all levels.

- Bouygues Batiment Ile-de-France in 2011 put together a working group focused on the "role of women in business." Men were thus able to listen to their female colleagues talk about their

feelings in terms of career progression, conciliation between work and personal life, or relationships with their male colleagues. Through these testimonies, it's a safe bet that men's perceptions may have evolved and they will be more sensitive and vigilant in the future about women's difficulties in the business world.

- Orange has a dedicated website on testimonials from professional men devoted to promoting family-and parenting values.

- BNP Paribas distributed to its employees in March 2011 a document entitled "Male Parenting at BNP Paribas".

- The group Publicis (advertising) has created a network of men and women called "VivaWomen" in September 2011 which aims to promote gender equality in the business world.

- Total Group has set up a wage monitoring system during the 5 years after women's return from maternity leave. While on maternity leave, mothers receive automatically the salary increase that corresponds to the average of the industry. During the 5 next year, lack of performance has to be real to justify lack of salary raise for the young mother (HR department has a close watch on this). Other companies (Axa, EDF, HSBC, Societe Generale, ...) voted a budget to bridge the wage gap between men and women.

- Total encouraged its employees to create a network (called "Twice") thru facebook (Twicebook) that include approximately 1,700 employees. Workshops such as "Managing Your Career as a Woman" are offered. Breakfast with successful career women are also organized. They have been so successful that men ask to attend.

- Accenture has created a "promotion indicator" keeping tabs on its different business' gender promotions .

### **7) Promoting paternity leave.**

Better reconciliation between work and family life involves engaging much more fathers. Intent on helping fathers become involved in their children's lives, many large groups in France have signed agreements for fathers to receive full wages (without limits) throughout their paternity leave:

L'Oréal, Axa France, Ferrero, La Poste, ... Taking paternity leave is encouraged even if executives sometimes struggle to take the full 14 days they are entitled to.

Fathers remain a small minority in the use of parental leave (less than 4% in 2010). Ernst & Young took an initiative in that direction, allowing employees to save one week vacation per year in a "time savings account" (for a maximum of 10 weeks). The time earned in the account can be used to extend a parental leave.

### **8) Development of family-friendly policies**

Initiatives are taken to heighten parenthood and create greater connection between family and professional life.

At the initiative of the Observatory of Parenthood in Corporations, the first Wednesday in June has been set as "family day in business" since 2010. Some companies such as PPR or the hospital of the Hotel Dieu have made it a real event.

Companies have developed parent networks dedicated to the information sharing of professional - private life conciliation methods : "Mothers at Danone", and HSBC in partnership with the MMM France.

## **9) Services to make life easier for working parents**

- Ferrero is one of the companies offering the most comprehensive range of services to its employees. The company proposes a comprehensive concierge (dry cleaning, shoe repair, automotive services, postal services, food shopping), access to inter-company day care, and since 2005, the creation of mini-clubs catering to employees' children within the company's premises on Wednesdays and during school holidays. It also offers social worker to inform, listen and support employees in case of difficulties.
- Many companies (Total, L'Oreal, ...) are developing company or intercompany day care.
- Calyon develops recreational centers for children aged 3 to 10.
- Alstom pays each parent of a child under 12 years a "CESU" (Universal employment check) of € 700 to contribute to childcare costs.

It is interesting to note that since 2010, MEDEF (employers' association) conducts information meetings throughout France for SMCs (small and medium size companies) to explain that to be successful companies need to ensure that their employees (not just mothers) have a good private and professional life balance.

## **V - Outlook and Recommendations**

While we see many good attempts in France to promote the balance between family and professional life, there are still areas for improvement.

The following recommendations are derived from comments and data collected from the following sources :

- MMM Europe's survey of 12,000 European mothers published in 2011 about "What matters to mothers in Europe." This study helped understand the challenges faced by mothers but also their wishes. French mother's participation was high and the responses differed little from their European counterparts.
- MMM France has been conducting workshops for mothers for the past ten years. Nearly 500 mothers of all cultural backgrounds and all social groups participate each year. These workshops allow a thorough understanding of maternal problems. Mothers from humble backgrounds and those of foreign origin are particularly represented.
- Much thought was given by the French government about parental leave in 2008-2010. On this occasion, the MMM France reached – via Facebook - nearly 4,000 parents of young children. Detailed data on 250 respondents was collected and revealed that parents are very much attached to a 3 year parental leave option.
- Finally, for the last ten years, MMM France has consistently followed family/work life balance issues by participating in numerous seminars, reading many reports and researches, and meeting with many experts and politicians.

## **Our recommendations are:**

### **1) To continue to assist parents who want to work**

a) By continuing to offer various forms of childcare :

While MMM stands for freedom for any parent to choose to take a parental leave or to work part-time, it is also very attached to allow any parent who so wishes to pursue its career in good conditions.

If the majority of parents who go on parental leave do so by choice, it is noteworthy to note that 30% of mothers who take parental leave do so by default, having not found any appropriate childcare (CNAF - March 2009). This is completely abnormal and France must continue its efforts to offer alternatives and solutions for childcare.

We stress that the options offered must be varied : a lot is done by the government to develop public day care but one has to keep in mind that maternal assistants do take care of twice as many children than public day care and they provide an invaluable service to parents in small towns and villages as well as providing parents of numerous children for school pick up on Wednesdays or babysitting during school holidays, a service public day care can not offer...

Many maternal assistants are nearing retirement age. We encourage the Government to facilitate this choice of profession.

Finally, in a context where public money has to be saved, an effort is required : many parents say that the search for a type of care is still an "obstacle course", while up to 30 % of places in public day care centers and 35% of places at maternal assistants are still vacant. (Centre for Strategic Analysis - Analytical note # 257 - January 2012)

Although the website : [www.monenfant.fr](http://www.monenfant.fr) lists childcare facilities city by city, it is unsatisfactory in the information provided and does not indicate availability....

A real effort should be made to simplify the search for child care options. As part of responsible government spending, such improvement efforts should help guarantee a better service to parents at no additional cost to the State.

b) By accompanying re-employment of parents who stopped their activity for a while

To guarantee freedom in terms of length and choice of parental leave at any point (birth, early childhood, or adolescence), it is fundamental for parents to know they can rely on assistance and coaching when they are ready to go back to work.

The current job insecurity means that 40% of women who take parental leave do not have a guaranteed employment at the end of parental leave (source : CNAF/Credoc 1999 et Dares 2003) : these women are unemployed, temporary workers or fixed-term contract workers. As their maternal leave is ending, they are particularly in need of assistance to find back a job.

Similarly, parents who choose to stop working for several years to attend their families as in the case of big families or when there is a sick or disabled child, must be assured of a support network when they'll be able or want to head back to work.

## **2) Pursue a policy of CHOICE for parents**

The study "What matters to European Mothers" shows that:

All mothers do not have the same approach of work-family balance. Some of them want to work full time whatever the age of their infant. Some like part-time job at all ages.

Most of them would prefer to be available when the child is a baby. When the child goes to school, their preference is to resume work part-time and the majority prefers to return to a full time job when the child gets older. But again, from mother to mother, the timing will be different.

Similarly, in terms of childcare, since various solutions exist, they allow to meet different needs of parents depending on whether they have one or more children, live in a big city or in rural areas, have to work fixed hours or not and depending on their financial resources.

We believe that one of the pillars of the success of French family policies is free choice available to parents, both in terms of career choices and of childcare choice.

Whatever the improvements that can otherwise be made, we draw the attention of legislators on the risk of limiting available choices for parents under the pretext of seeking to improve and provide a particular family policy option.

## **3) Increase job flexibility**

According from OECD data 40% of couples with a child under fifteen in France are both working full time (OECD 2008 family database ) and 15% of families with minors are single parent families (database OECD Family 2000).

As Vanessa Wisnia-Weill from the Department of Social Affairs, Centre for Strategic Analysis, observes, these sociological trends create a greater tension between professional obligations and family commitments.

It is therefore key to continue to develop measures that provide the best possible balance between work and family life.

The most beneficial options for these employees but also to all parents are:

- Flexible working hours
- Telecommuting
- Evaluation of job performance based on real performance rather than of time of presence at work
- The acknowledgement by corporations of parenting issues

It is worthwhile noting that most policies aimed at employees' welfare end up having a beneficial impact on business performance.

There is some evidence that the current family policies can be maintained or improved in the future without inducing extra costs for the community.

We are happy to see that more and more young fathers are involved in the education and care for their children. We hope that this could develop without any coercion or "diktats" that would interfere with parents' rights to organize their lives as they wish.

**To conclude :**

For a balanced professional life/family life in France and in developed countries three main axes must be implemented :

- Easier access to childcare for all parents who wish to pursue their jobs (development of all means of childcare, simplifying the access to childcare, help for parents resuming their job after a period at home)
- The right to free choice for parents as regards work (full time, part-time, parental leave or not), means of childcare (maternal assistant, public day care, nannies,...) and family organization (sharing household duties,...).
- The development of flexibility for all by continuing the efforts undertaken by companies to help all employees get a better work-family balance.