

Ministerial Conference - “Gender and Information Society”

Keynote speech held in Athens on the 5th and 6th May 2003

Dr. Caterina Rehm-Berbenni

Introduction

Industrialised countries are undergoing a process of transition from an ‘industrial’ to an ‘information’ society. One essential feature of the latter is, that everyone has access to information for political, economic, cultural and social development, so that there is a high level of information use among the general public¹. In the light of this, I would like to present a systematic approach to women’s role in the information society and in modern professional life, highlighting the particularity of the feminine and maternal world from which we may discover new ways of managing civil, cultural and industrial-commercial life with a special emphasis on running new and small companies.

Background

The way men and women use space in the home and at the workplace is different. Men and women also have different habits and these result from a complex mixture of culture, traditions, personalities, and in particular their different biological nature. This is also reflected in the different ways men and women earn their living². This difference has often been, and in some sectors is still viewed with scepticism. But I believe that the different way men and women live and feel offers 21st Century society an alternative way of analysing situations and doing things. Various cultures in the past have always felt such differences, but nowadays neuroscience confirms them more and more, and even amplifies them.

Therefore, entering the heart of the woman’s universe, it is really worthwhile to concentrate on the fundamental meaning of motherhood, analysing three main characteristics of women’s maternal world: vitality, flexibility and interacting through images. These characteristics are key aspects of beginning and running either a family or a small firm. They are also core elements of the information society we now work and live in.

❖ Vitality

At the maternal level – Mothers have developed enormous vital energies at different levels:

- To cope with the challenging tasks of bringing up children and educating them
- To sense potential threats or conflict before they become manifest, which we also call ‘sixth sense’
- To create and maintain a harmonious social environment keeping some space to realise their own ideas

This was always a guarantee for protecting human life, for creating a favourable and harmonious environment for bringing up children, and for meeting other people’s needs as well as their own.

At the professional level – A woman has the capability:

- To communicate with others, absorbing and/or transmitting ideas and information
- To work hard and tenaciously
- To ‘read between the lines’, to feel existing or approaching conflicts, to ‘smell’ innovative products and markets

¹ Moore, N., 1999. Partners in the information society. *Library Association Record*, Vol. 101, No. 12: 702-703.

² Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential, <http://www.uia.org>

-
- To decrease tensions and mediate between conflicting parties
 - To promote co-operative work

❖ **Flexibility**

At the maternal level – The capability:

- To react very quickly to changing conditions in their environment -often superficially considered as a kind of moodiness- but in reality one of the most valuable talents for a mother
- To do several tasks at the same time
- To adapt to the persons she interact with: children, husband, relatives, neighbours

At the professional level – A woman has the capability:

- To react quickly to changing conditions in her professional environment (in the company and in the market), which means continuous review of and, when necessary, adaptation of decisions and strategies
- To do different things and act at different levels simultaneously (multitasking)
- To network i.e. public relations and manage human resources

❖ **Interaction through images**

At the maternal level – The capacity to think and communicate in images, which emerged from the necessity to make complex issues (traditions, ethical values, dangers) understandable to children and to people with different cultural backgrounds

At the professional level – The increasing complexity of commercial processes and the growing need for interdisciplinary skills (research, design, financing, technology transfer, production, marketing) requires the ability to simplify complex information without losing the essential features of it, in order to make it understandable to partners who are not being experts in the specific field.

The information society has an ever-growing need for this figurative way of explaining complex concepts ‘to keep complexity manageable and make simplicity effective³’.

All the particular capacities of women are reinforced by a high sense of responsibility and justice. All of this together, means that women’s influence in enterprises, as well as in society introduces a tendency towards self-sustaining, durable development.

Consequences

It is well known that one of the fundamental reasons why men and women are treated unequally in employment lies in the multiple roles women play in society, due to the fact that only women bear children.

For a woman, taking responsibility in management especially of an SME, often means accepting a double role and double work combined with the continuous desire to find a balanced harmony between family and profession, no matter how understanding and supportive her partner may be. However, it also means bringing a human perspective into a technology focused environment, in such a way that technology as such is not the focus, but rather a tool that supports all of us as we seek to improve the quality of our work and life. It also means utilising technology as a help towards long-term development and the wellbeing of future generations

One of the best opportunities for women, lie in transferring their ancestral skills to the typical processes of the information society e.g. internet, information filtering, knowledge management, software development and quality assurance and knowledge quality assessment, offers an essential contribution to the building of a sustainable community. In this way women, precisely as

³ FUTUREtec’s mission statement

women, offer an important contribution for all forms of sustainable development and conflict resolution, as well as for the work towards social, economic and political justice.

It is therefore desirable that men and women are equally empowered economically and politically, in order to achieve the long-term sustainable and viable development of the information society⁴).

Information society and particularly the internet open up opportunities for new professions and services. These will benefit women enormously, because they will allow women to work at home and, with the support of their partners, fulfil the double role of being mother and professional.

The new and most interesting approaches to work in the information society are work from home, distance work, on-line employment, tele-working, tele-cooperation, e-commerce, e-teaching, e-learning, on-line services.

All this is in favour of a small, flexible and well networked enterprise becoming an ideal model for the 21st Century information technology enterprise. To achieve this, governments should give support developing the infrastructure for SMEs, promoting small scale production units, creating small offices and supporting small size businesses. In this way the state can play a central role in creating favourable conditions for women to make their special contribution to SME entrepreneurship.

Sometimes we feel helpless regarding the future of a globalising world and seem to be overwhelmed by the problems surrounding us, because we have the feeling that any contribution we could make would be too small to produce an effect.

The main concern today should not in the first place be global problems like resource depletion, over-population and pollution of the environment but rather the scale on which these problems are occurring. The larger the scale in which we view these problems, the less soluble they seems to be.

By contrast people feel empowered to have a real influence in smaller scale communities. When the information society enables these smaller scale communities' to work together, they will achieve global effectiveness. By focusing on the cell-like or family-based nature of society, we enhance the vital role that women can play.

Conclusion

Summarizing, we can say that there is a great need to create a model of society in which man and woman, 'united without confusion and distinct without separation', build up a solid civil project of democracy with more and better jobs for all.

And it may well be that the information society-based 21st Century will be the host of a transition from a defensive feminism to a mature feminine conscience, more and more valued and integrated into the family system, as well as in the socio-political, regional and global system.

⁴ Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential, (<http://www.uia.org>)