



**C**ENTRE FOR **I**NTERNATIONAL **B**USINESS **S**TUDIES

**THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN  
IN MANAGEMENT AND  
INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS: THE  
SPANISH EXAMPLE**

Simon Mowatt

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# **THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN IN MANAGEMENT AND INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS: THE SPANISH EXAMPLE**

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## ***Abstract***

*This paper seeks to describe the management experience for women in Spain, concentrating on the broad picture, then examining the individual experiences of managers in the workplace. The paper examines the cultural and sector specific barriers to female managers in Spain. The study examines the potential opportunities afforded to female managers by MNCs. An understanding of the role and experience of female managers in the Spain not only gives us a greater understanding as to the domestic Spanish business economy, but is of interest to international business management and to those interested in the position of women in management in general.*

## **I. Introduction**

The last few decades have witnessed increasing the internationalisation of business. In addition to this, there has been a social revolution in the developed market economies whereby increasing numbers of women have joined the management workforce. However, the growth of female managers in the workforce has developed at differing rates in different countries. For businesses involved in cross-border production, it is more and more likely that the host management labour pool may include female managers. In addition to an understanding of human resources issues in different countries, international business would benefit from a greater understanding of the more neglected experience of female managers in each economy. This exploratory paper seeks to describe the management experience for women in Spain, concentrating upon both introducing the broad picture, then examining the individual experiences of managers in the workplace. An understanding of the role and experience of female managers in the Spain not only gives us a greater understanding as to the domestic Spanish business economy, but is of interest to international business management and to those interested in the position of women in management in general.

## **II. Management in Spain**

The origin of this research lies in a comparative management research project aimed at understanding and characterising management work in Spain in general (Mowatt, 1998; 1999). Management in Spain has changed rapidly in the 1990s, with increasing privatisation and the influence of MNCs through foreign direct investment (FDI) having a major influence. MNCs have been increasingly hiring women into management in Spain. The issues for women are interesting, Spain is a society noted for a tradition of strict social gender roles (Hooper, 1995), reinforced by the Catholic institutions which define social life (such as the

Church) and elements of the business world (such as the Catholic influence on Business education through Jesuit run Universities such as ESADE, and in political life and the public sector through Opus Dei). This paper therefore seeks to first describe the position of female managers in Spain, examine some of the issues facing them in detail, and then to make some tentative suggestions as to the relationship between increasing internationalisation and the participation of women in management in Spain.

### **III. Methodology**

This paper hopes to examine female managers within the context of management in Spain in general, rather than as the exceptions. By this method, we hoped to better understand the experience of female managers within their company, and relationship with their colleagues, and then to be able to generalise from this. The sample of managers interviewed for this study included both male and female managers. From this larger sample, the experience of female managers was analysed. This method avoids the problem of defining a sample by gender, and creating an unrepresentative cohort. Including male managers also gives context to the environmental issues that define the working environment of the female manager. Because of this approach, the empirical sample of female managers is small, comprising of five female managers from a total of 60 managers interviewed, but is representative of levels of female management within the organisations and industries participating.

This research used company visits, over 60 semi-structured interviews with selected practising managers in key companies, and periods of non-participatory observation inside companies within Spain. Managers were selected by interview from a wide variety of Spanish businesses. The aim was to examine management

in Spain in general, and to try to discern if there were issues common to female managers.

The sample included companies with various forms of governance. With the importance of the state sector in Spain, and the dominance of multinational companies (MNCs), as well as a significant number of family owned large and medium sized businesses, it was important to include companies from each sector by ownership. This included Spanish owned MNCs, Spanish owned national companies, Spanish owned regional companies, and Foreign owned MNCs.

The emphasis was on the manufacturing industry. This is primarily because these companies are strategically placed within the business infrastructure. A limitation of the sample drawn from this is that it does not offer a complete view of female managers in the retail services for example. In addition to the core of manufacturing companies the sample included a full range of other companies, including financial institutions, retailing companies, biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies, and food processing companies (including viticulture).

To reinforce interlocking testimony managers were chosen from two primary functions, production managers and human resource managers. These functions were chosen because both are at strategic locations within a company, being well placed for a 'global view' of the company as they have frequent contact with the rest of the organisation, including both management and labour. This gave the sample a matched element, as male and female managers in the same organisation were interviewed, and male and female managers in the same functions were compared.

Because of some of the limitations to the sample size, this is an exploratory study, although every attempt has been made to limit these shortcomings and to explore the wider role of the impact of the business culture on female managers in Spain.

#### **IV. The Position of Women in Management in Spain**

In this section we shall examine the state of women in management in Spain. As in many European countries, including Britain, it is generally felt that there are specific barriers to women gaining managerial employment, especially at senior levels. The aim of this section is to:

- Set out the general state of women in business and management in Spain.
- Examine any special factors of the Spanish environment (such as female manager's unions or social pressures) affecting women's roles in management.
- To take a more detailed look of the experiences of female managers in the workplace.
- Examine the relationship between female management participation and internationalisation.

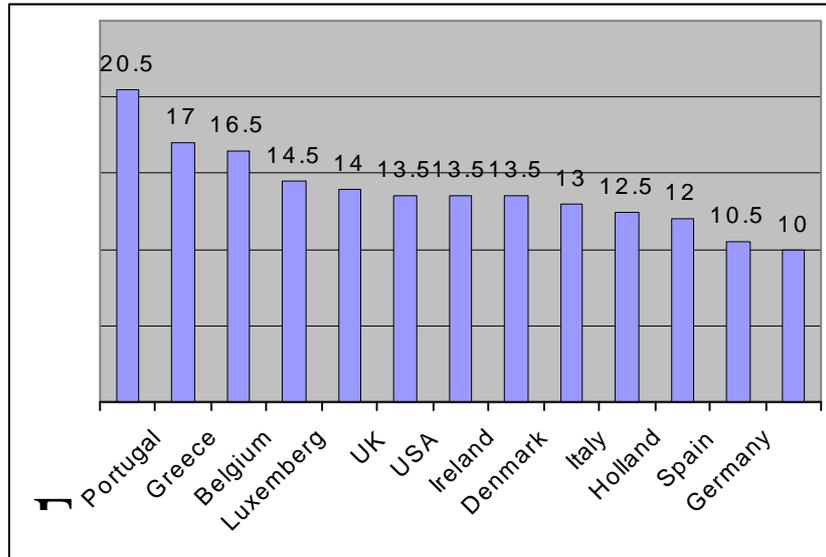


Figure 1: Women in management (percentages), 1995<sup>1</sup>

### *Catching Up*

Spain is following other European countries employment patterns as far as women are concerned, although Spain is further behind. Spain has one of the lowest female participation rates in European industry (Rees, 1995), a situation that is probably worsened by chronic high unemployment. Although much has been made of the poor number of women in managerial positions in Spain, it should also be remembered that prejudice and the ‘glass ceiling’ also restrict opportunities in Britain<sup>2</sup> and other developed economies.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of women in management in the US and the EU. With only 10.5% of managerial positions being filled by women, Spain still maintains Europe’s second lowest number of female business executives. Table 1 shows the low level of female managers in industry, and how they are clustered in a few functions. Further to this, the majority of these posts are junior, and

<sup>1</sup> Source: *Negocios*, 6<sup>th</sup> November, 1995

<sup>2</sup> As noted in *The Report of the Hansard Society Commission on Women at the Top*, The Hansard Society, London 1990. The report details that promotion for senior female managers is “almost imperceptibly slow” and that “women remain seriously under-represented at senior management level.”

women only account for no more than 10% of department heads in marketing (12%) and HRM (12%).

General Management	7
Information Systems	7
Commercial Management	5
Export Management	8
Marketing	23
Finance	18
Human Resource Management	19
Production Management	5
Technical and R&D Management	6

Table 1 Women occupying management functions (% of total)<sup>3</sup>

In the Spanish context, the number of managerial positions for women has been growing. Female participation in the labour market has increased dramatically in the last decade. Figure 2 shows how female employment in business has changed between 1982 and 1993. Across all job levels women made significant gains. Demographically the role of women is growing more important, and in the 1982-1993 period female employment increased by 6.7% whilst male employment fell by 6.2% (Bruton, 1994: 109). Whilst encouraging, figures showing ever growing female participation in the business world must take account of the nature of employment in question. Even at administrative levels much of female employment is ‘precarious’, as the predominance of short-term contracts and part-time employment. Overall in the labour market around 45% of female employment is temporary or short term<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Source: “La Mujer aún cuenta poco en la dirección empresarial” *La Vanguardia* 2<sup>nd</sup> November, 1996 pp. 4-5 Business supplement

<sup>4</sup> Source: CC.OO official, Sra. Salce Evira, *El País*, 10<sup>th</sup> September 1995.

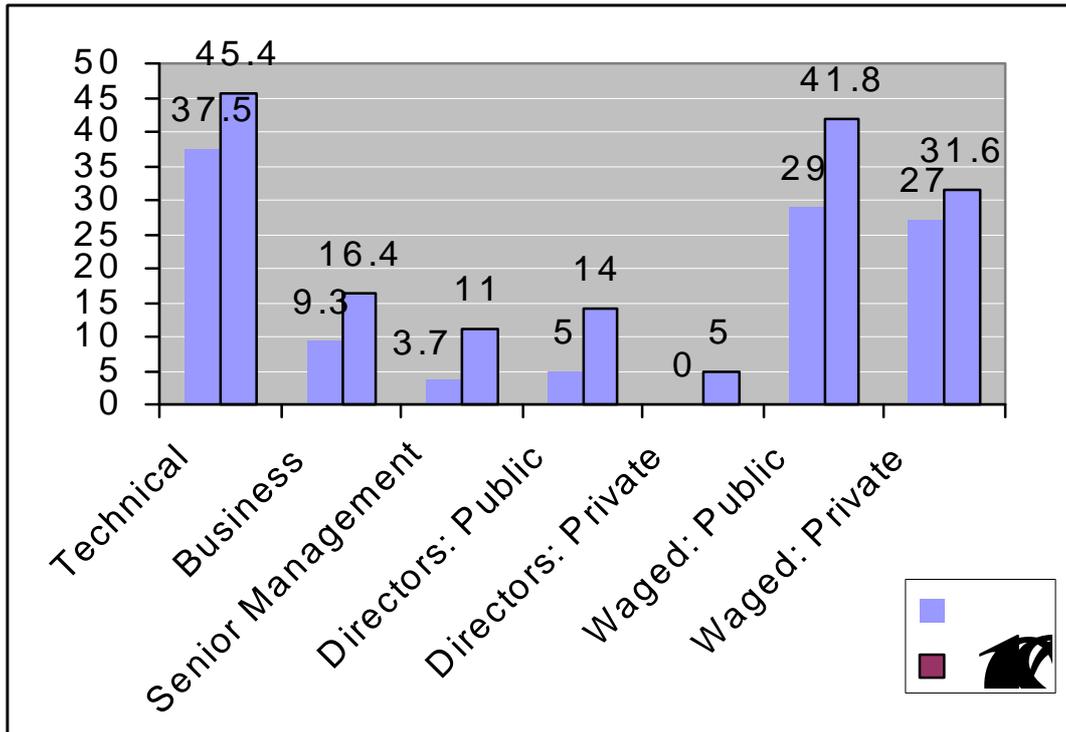


Figure 2: The changing role of women in the workplace (percentages)<sup>5</sup>

At senior managerial and board level women have also made gains more slowly. In 1994, women chaired only two of Spain's top 160 companies, and one of these was the owner's daughter<sup>6</sup>. There is a general feeling that female managers are prevented from obtaining senior positions, and somehow "hay que romper techo de cristal sutil"<sup>7</sup> (have to smash the subtle glass ceiling) of discrimination to develop their careers.

Women have also traditionally found it more difficult to gain posts in private companies, as figure 2 indicates. Overall women in 1995 filled 16% of managerial jobs in state business, but only 5% in private companies. Pay for women still lags behind that of men in comparable jobs. Writing for *Expansión*, a

<sup>5</sup> Source: Ministerio de Asuntos Sociales, 1995

<sup>6</sup> The traditional practice of passing on the family business in Spain is one of primogeniture, so this exception is interesting even if the family has attempted to retain control of the business by appointing a female member in the absence of male alternatives.

<sup>7</sup> Pilar Gómez Acebo, *El País*, 10<sup>th</sup> September 1995

major Spanish business paper<sup>8</sup>, one of Spain's most successful businesswomen, María Jesús Prieto (head of Sistelcom) remembers that:

Caundo empecé en Telefónica en 1970, ganaba igual que los demás titulados superiores. Pero caundo pasas a nivel ejecutivo, no sé por qué pero la remuneración es inferior.

(When I started working for Telefónica in 1970 I earned the same as the other graduates. I don't know why, but when I moved to higher management the pay was less because I was a woman.)

The situation has not improved, and currently female managers may expect to earn 20-35%<sup>9</sup> less than their male peers do.

## V. Snakes and Ladders

Spanish women have some disadvantages working against their moving into managerial jobs. There are also some contemporary factors working in their favour. Working against equality in management is the weight of traditional masculine Spanish culture, with clearly defined roles for women in society – roles clearly defined by the Catholic Church (Hooper, 1997). Outside of the cosmopolitan major cities conservative attitudes still remain very deeply embedded.

The situation for Spanish women is complex, and there are factors simultaneously helping and hindering the opportunities for women in

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<sup>8</sup> “La mujer cobra menos que el hombre cuando llega al nivel ejecutivo” *Expansión*, 8<sup>th</sup> March, 1995

<sup>9</sup> The figure varies widely according to various sources (*El País*, FEDEPE, Bruton (1994), and others. Figures usually suggest female managers are paid 20-25% less than males, but this includes senior positions where the shortfall is more in the region of 20%. Overall, across all management grades, 20-35% is a fair indication for females in general as it accounts for women entering managerial posts at junior positions.

management. In addition to social conservatism, there are other factors we should consider:

- Short-term economic factors may be currently putting females at a disadvantage when applying for senior jobs.
- Long term demographic trends may be women's advantage in the labour market.
- Finally, there are now associations actively trying to help women gain higher managerial positions.

These three issues are examined in more detail in the following three sections of the paper.

### *Gender Economics*

The economic slump of the early 1990s certainly slowed the rise of the amount of women being promoted into senior management, as uncertainty triggered a conservative reaction among executives when considering women for top posts (Bruton, 1994). On the plus side for female executives, as companies downsized the proportion of female executives grew, especially as most female managers are recent entries into the market place. As for the first time there are now more female than male graduates at university level<sup>10</sup>, and that more women are taking technical and business orientated subjects, women are strengthening their position in the labour market. Women now outnumber men on business degree courses for IT, marketing and personnel. The post-industrial shift in the European economies, from traditionally male dominated heavy industries, is also boosting women's long term potential in the labour market.

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<sup>10</sup> Superior graduates in 1995: male 71,600, female 81,400. (58%) Source: *Encuesta de Población Activa*, 1995, as printed in *El País*, 10<sup>th</sup> September 1995.

## **VI. Strength in Numbers: the FEDEPE**

Spanish women in management now have a dedicated association seeking to increase business opportunities for women. The *Federación Española de Mujeres Directivas, Ejecutivas, Profesionales y Empresarias* (FEDEPE, the Spanish society of women directors, executives, professionals and businesswomen) is part of the European Women's Management Network. The FEDEPE was formed by the merger of two separate one year old organisations, the Madrid based *Asociación de Mujeres Directivas, Profesionales y Ejecutivas* (association of women directors, professionals, and executives), and *La Asociación de Dones Directives y Emprearies de Catalunya* (the Catalanian association of women directors and businesswomen) in 1989. Although there had been the short-lived *Asociación Española de Mujeres Empresarias de Madrid*, formed in Madrid in 1971, the FEDEPE was the association was the first serious association for female managers and businesswomen, running a press, disseminating information on known member achievement, sponsoring events and prizes and running training programmes.

In addition to FEDEPE there are now other national and local women managers' associations working for women. Among the most prominent are the *La Organización de Mujeres Empresarias y Genencia Activa* (the organisation of businesswomen and working managers), and *La Federación Española de Mujeres Empresarias , Negocios y Profesionales* (Spanish federation of businesswomen and professionals).

Presumably, these organisations may help Spanish female managers network and provide each other with mutual support. Spanish women are able networkers, although they tend to exploit networks for personal rather than purely career-based motives (Pemberton, Travers and Stevens, 1996).

Despite the efforts of proactive campaign organisations, in 1995, a business publication, listed its 500 ‘*directivos claves*’ (key managers) in Spanish business, and only three were members of the FEDEPE.

## **VII. In the Workplace: As Level a Playing Field as Any**

The sample for the study included five female managers, only three of whom were working in Spain. From anecdotal evidence and press reports (as well as reports from the FEDEPE) their testimonies were fairly typical. Whilst carrying out the interview research and company visits the author had come into frequent contact with many managers, and had the opportunity to look at the management structure of many of the companies participating. Because of this access, the author was able to note that the small number of female managers interviewed was in proportion to the general number of managers in the companies visited. Of particular interest companies visited that had been in the state sector, or which were still associated with the sector, had no female managers. This does not accord with 1995 figures that show that 14% of state sector managers are women in relation to only 5% in private industry<sup>11</sup>, and this is probably because of our emphasis on the manufacturing sector.

In the following section we shall take evidence from the female executives interviewed to build up a picture of managerial singularities for women working in management. As mentioned before, their testimonies are fully consistent with supporting material, if slightly more downbeat than the FEDEPE literature.

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<sup>11</sup> Source: *El País*, 10<sup>th</sup> September 1995. Unfortunately, the figures are ambiguous, as we do not know what is encompassed by the state sector, or what the definition of management used was. Our findings, although only indicative, could show a lower level of female participation in management in the state sector because of the companies comprising our sample. The majority of which were in

The interviews revealed that there was the possibility that there was still discrimination against women in senior management positions. One way in which this may be manifested is by designating female managers with lesser titles (and therefore pay) than their male peers. In the following testimony, a female HRM manager comments on her experience in an American MNC, managed by Spanish nationals:

Yes, it is very difficult to be a women manager here. You get a lot of problems. For example my title is *responsable* the lowest title for a head of department (HOD). Let me explain job titles in this company: in English you have the term ‘manager’, but in here we have many levels of status title for manager. For example, a HOD is a HOD but there are levels of rank here:

- *Responsable*.
- *Jefe*.
- *Director*.

All these jobs have the general job of *ejecutivo*. The *gerente* is the general manager, the top man. I have been given the title *responsable* because I am a woman. I have other male friends whom I was at college with, and they are less well qualified, and have less experience than I, but they have the title *director*. The previous manager in this post, a man, was a *director*. We do have two other women heads of department here though, one in IT and the other in

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industrial manufacturing. This sector traditionally has low rates of female participation in management.

logistics, and they have also been given lower titles. They are both *jefas*.

It is impossible to prove that this is for discrimination legally – because the company can always claim that the woman has a lesser job title for other reasons, although there are laws against discrimination.

The reason is that in society in general women are seen not to be as good as men. This is because they “are not as clever”, “they have children, and they get sick all the time”. I am not in any way a feminist, but this attitude is true. Things *are* changing, but very slowly.

Women managers interviewed for the project thought that their job was made more difficult because of their gender. The manager quoted above gave her opinion of the situation for her personally, and illustrated some of the concerns by giving an example:

Being female gives you a lot more pressure. The following example has been a very difficult situation for me. We are in negotiation to sack two people – and in Spain it is very difficult to sack people – and it is very difficult to negotiate with the upper management because I am a woman and I’m young also. I’m 30 years old. In fact when I say ‘sack’ I really mean arrange early retirement for two senior managers, and we have to discuss the arrangement for their leaving settlement. It is very hard to talk to these two because of the prejudice. They do not take me seriously.

It is worth noting that the *responsable* quoted above also felt that she was discriminated against because she was young. This is not a coincidence. Women have only been entering management positions in Spain recently, and there are still few in senior positions. The vast majority of these are management graduates and business school trained. Because of this they are usually fairly young, and this too can cause problems, especially when they enter into companies with traditionally a high management age and a tradition of seniority. Because of the changes in many Spanish companies, especially state sector and associated companies being restructured or privatised, younger managers are often promoted into companies as a means to reform the business culture (Mowatt, 1998). In these instances women managers face the two edged sword of ingrained prejudice. Even younger male managers in these companies have difficulties, as testified by managers who edit their CVs and documentation to remove traces of their ages. This is not an option for female managers, who generally tend to look younger (at least to older hidebound managers) than they really are. Many women managers therefore find themselves at the sharp end of culture change conflict in business.

Male managers were naturally reluctant to speak of any prejudice against women in management, although many acknowledged that things were more difficult for them, “although things are changing” of course followed. One manager opined that he would work under any senior manager, “be they female, Chinese or blue from Mars”, because senior staff were senior staff, and must therefore be superior. This is very much in keeping with the ‘human face’ (Mowatt, 1998; 1999) ideas of managers, but it may be worth noting that this manager had not had the opportunity to prove his words. In a mocking swipe at ‘old fashioned managers’ one recent graduate male manager informed me that he’d heard them say that female managers were ‘good for nothing’ because they had ‘no

*cajones*'<sup>12</sup>. Although the author did not see any tactless prejudice against the women managers interviewed there is no reason to suppose that there is not a grain of truth in this. It could possibly account for the fatalistic attitude that all female managers interviewed seemed to have regarding prejudice.

### *Possible Regional Differences in Attitudes*

The interviewees felt that female managers were more readily accepted in Catalonia. Other regions were 'socially behind' the more European atmosphere, in terms of feminism, and this can even be seen in women's fashion on the streets, which are much more fashion conscious outside of more cosmopolitan and relaxed Catalonia. The other female managers interviewed who were not working in Spain were from Madrid, but interestingly were working in the UK because they could not find work there. They certainly (subjectively) felt that there was some resistance to female 'fast-track' managers in Spain. It is notable that both the female managerial associations that formed the FEDEPE were from the two dominant business regions of Madrid and Barcelona. Of course, both of these heavily developed business centres have more opportunity for managers as a whole, so it is only natural that female managers would be able to associate in numbers large enough to forge interest groups in these centres. Despite this, there probably *is* more social resistance to managerial equality in the southern and north-western regions of Spain, where there are traditional attitudes towards female social roles, and the strong influence of the conservative Catholic Church, means things are more slow to change.

In Spain in general, although women are joining the labour market at managerial levels, their economic function is changing faster than their social role in Spanish society. Traditional Catholic Spanish society reveres the role of the mother in the

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<sup>12</sup> This vulgar expression literally means that female managers have "no testicles (*cajones*)", and relates not only to the gender difference but the use of *cajones* to mean 'guts'. A manager with *cajones* is a

household, and although there is not scope in this thesis to explore the complex dynamic between social and sexual stereotypes in Spain, it is significant that the popular acclaimed films of Pedro Almadovar are populated by successful businesswomen simultaneously coping with the traditional housewife role.

### **VIII. The Impact of the FEDEPE**

Although the FEDEPE had approached both the female managers interviewed in Spain, neither manager expressed any interest in it. They, and those working in the UK, did not feel that it was of concern to them, despite feeling that there was prejudice against them. The reasons for this seem to be the Spanish cultural predisposition towards fatalism, and also the feeling that they had to overcome problems on their own, much as in ‘every Spaniard is his own king’ lies the internalised *machismo* of self-reliance. Although we have noted the details of the FEDEPE in this section, this paper cannot offer any insight into the association’s impact in the workplace.

The selection of a sample of women managers from FEDEPE may well give a slightly more optimistic picture than the view presented here. However, this papers attempts to present a picture of the realities of female management within the wider context.

### **IX. MNCs and Management**

It has been noted that women managers may benefit from employment opportunities offered by MNCs in economies where they had been traditionally

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brave, risk taking manager, hence the double meaning of the slur.

excluded from the management labour force (Schneider and Barsoux, 1997: 134)<sup>13</sup>. Although this research does not present figures to depict the ratio of management in national to foreign firms, there was a clear indication in the conduct of the research that foreign firms were often more ready to employ women in the middle and higher management categories. In the case of the female managers interviewed working in the UK, this was a factor (along with the high levels of unemployment in Spain) in their decision to work outside of their own country. Before this can be firmly established however, more robust research may need to be carried out. Despite this limitation to the current study, in the sample the senior female managers interviewed were all working for MNCs (including national firms which had been recently acquired, where the managers appointment followed the acquisition). Despite the wider problem of restricted opportunities for female managers in MNCs in general, positions afforded to women may be greater than in national countries where high level employment for women is at lower levels than the average. In certain countries MNCs may therefore present women with greater opportunities for employment than national companies as they often adopt a more flexible approach to labour (than even in the MNCs country of origin, as we have noted), and this appears to be the case in the Spanish example. Conversely, by using the greater labour pool, MNCs can benefit from female managers. In hiring female managers in Spain, MNCs would benefit from both an appreciation of the specific issues and history relating to women in management in Spain (as outlined in this paper), and by an

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Interestingly, although Schneider and Barsoux (1997) assert that in Japan female managers are prejudiced against, thereby allowing foreign firms in Japan to exploit the female labour base, Japanese firms in Spain employ female managers. This suggests that MNCs may offer opportunities to female managers even if they originate in countries (or companies) traditional held to be restrictive for women. In our sample, one manager who worked for a Japanese MNC explained that she was one of two female senior managers in the Japanese parent organisation, and that being female did not represent a problem for her because she was viewed as 'Spanish' by here employers, even though they would feel differently about hiring a Japanese women into the home organisation at management level.

appreciation of the distinctive characteristics of Spanish management in general (as outlined in Mowatt, 1998, for example).

What is notable from the experience of women managing for MNCs is that they emphasise the commonality of experience with female managers in other countries, rather than focus on national problems. Sectoral specific issues are also highlighted over national interests, as in the following example. The manufacturing sector has particular entry barriers for female managers<sup>14</sup>, as noted in the following testimony by a female manager at a Japanese MNC:

It is very difficult for a woman to enter into management in the production sector. This is why from the 50 managers at (the company), only 2 are women. And in the Japanese HQ there is one woman manager, and she is also in HRM<sup>15</sup>. It is not more difficult to be a female manager in Spain than it is anywhere else.

This suggests that MNCs should critically consider whether the gender division in their industry (whether traditionally male dominated, for example) is relevant when considering the labour pool in host economy, in order to benefit from the widest choice. In the Spanish context, where MNCs may acquire family owned firms or ex-state sector firms with reputations and histories of long authoritarian hierarchies (as suggested by Boisot, 1993), the induction of ‘new blood’ management from business schools in order to reform the business culture is an opportunity for increasing female participation in management.

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<sup>14</sup> It is beyond the scope of this study to enter into a lengthy description of gender and management, but it is generally accepted that manufacturing industries present more entry barriers to female managers. The primary reasons for this are: industrial manufacturing has traditionally been a male occupation, the educational structure (in Europe in general) has prevented women from gaining training in practical subjects for industry and the socially accepted gender roles acting against women prioritising careers in manufacturing.

## X. Conclusion

The position of women in management in Spain is coming broadly into line with that of most Western European countries. Female managers are starting off in educational terms on parity with their male colleagues, and encountering much the same problems as women in management throughout Europe. With demographic trends on their side, and the restructuring of industry in Spain away from the male dominated traditional heavy manufacturing sector, their situation seems set to improve. As a recent portent of change, the Spanish business monthly *Dinero* ran a cover story on the “*irresistible ascenso de la mujer en la empresa*”<sup>16</sup> – the unstoppable rise of women in business<sup>17</sup>. This presents MNCs with the opportunity to benefit from highly educated female graduates and managers, as female managers with the opportunity of circumventing traditional barriers by seeking employment in MNCs.

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<sup>15</sup> HRM has been called a ‘ghetto’ for female management.

<sup>16</sup> *Dinero*, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1995.

<sup>17</sup> *La Vanguardia* also ran the story “La Mujer sube en la Empresa” (the rise of women in business), 2<sup>nd</sup> November, 1996 p.1 Business supplement.

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