Featured School:
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Research Center for Women in Senior Management

The gender imbalance in the senior management positions of firms worldwide has never been favorable to women. However, in recent years it has begun to grow more favorable in certain countries and regions around the world. In 2012 in Latin America, for example, it is estimated that 22 percent of people in senior management roles were women, one percent higher than the global average for that year.¹ For research faculty at Mexico City’s IPADE Business School, however, it is not enough simply to observe this encouraging trend; it must be understood if it is to be helped to continue.

For over four years now, IPADE Business School has broken new ground in Mexico with its Research Center for Women in Senior Management (Centro de Investigación de la Mujer en la Alta Dirección, or CIMAD). According to the center’s director, Professor María del Carmen Bernal, CIMAD was an idea initially generated back in 2007 by a meeting of the minds among several female IPADE alumni, many of whom now serve on the center’s advisory board. She says that this group presented their idea to the dean of IPADE in early 2008, and CIMAD was launched in November of that year.

A Triple-Pronged Approach

The inspiration behind CIMAD was to promote awareness and study of issues facing women in their professional lives, including work/life balance, geo-political and social dynamics, and female advancement in the workplace, as well as to be a source of solutions to workplace problems unique to the female context, both in Latin America and globally. To these ends, the work of the center is focused on the development of three separate but interwoven lines of research:

1. **Personal Perspectives**—This line of research focuses on aspects of individual characteristics, such as emotional intelligence, leadership styles, work/life balance, etc., to better understand the roles of women in senior management positions.

2. **Business/Organizational Perspectives**—This line of research focuses on organizational culture and firm-level strategies for the promotion of female managerial talent.

3. **Social/Cultural Perspectives**—This line of research focuses on identifying and analyzing cultural mores, social programs, and public policies that generate a better balance between family, work and society, and result in a greater environment of equal opportunity for women.²

According to Professor Bernal, each of these perspectives provides an essential piece for understanding the situation of female senior executives. She says that cultural barriers to female advancement in the workplace must be understood in their various contexts in order to be overcome, both in Mexico and
internationally. The multidisciplinary nature of CIMAD’s research is also reflected in the diverse faculty members who contribute to the center’s efforts. Ms. Alejandra Moreno, the research director at CIMAD, says that faculty from several different academic departments at IPADE are heavily involved in the projects that the center undertakes. At least four academic departments are also represented on the management team and advisory board of CIMAD, while the remainder of that group is made up of female senior executives, including some of the IPADE alumni that helped to found the center.³

**Connections to Business and the World**

Funding for CIMAD’s research comes primarily through IPADE Business School, but Professor Bernal says that the center has also pioneered corporate-sponsored research, which she notes is historically uncommon in the Mexican (and Latin American) context. The center’s research has enjoyed the support, both financial and collaborative, of numerous multinational corporations that maintain a presence in Mexico.⁴ In addition, Professor Bernal and Ms. Moreno point out that CIMAD has also reached out across international borders to develop joint research projects with other business schools, such as Argentina’s IAE Business School and IESE Business School in Spain.⁵

In addition to the center’s research activities, CIMAD supports several annual events, and participates in others. Since 2009, CIMAD has run an annual international seminar for the presentation and dissemination of information regarding its research findings. The most recent iteration of this seminar took place in Miami, Florida, in cooperation with Argentina’s IAE Business School, and attracted over 50 senior female managerial participants, representing 20 firms from eight different countries throughout Latin America.⁶ This year, say Professor Bernal and Ms. Moreno, CIMAD is branching out even further, and will present the center’s research at a seminar in Bangalore, India.

**Creating Impact for Women in the Workplace**

The main value that CIMAD is able to offer to its partners and stakeholders is the information and expertise generated by their research, say Professor Bernal and Ms. Moreno. They indicate that the research work the center does with its partners around the Latin American region, and around the world, to help develop policy recommendations and best practices yields significant impact on the development of public and corporate policies that enable the promotion and retention of female managerial talent.

Perhaps the best example of this impact is the 2009-10 Best Practices in Mexico Project. During this project, CIMAD worked with eight foreign-based multinational firms with a Mexican presence, including Avon, Coca-Cola, General Electric, Hewlett-Packard, Manpower, Microsoft, Nestlé, and Santander, as well as the Mexico-based multinational Televisa. Together, the center and these firms developed a series
of case studies in support of expanding the knowledge base of how companies operating in various different sectors of the Mexican (and global) economy deal with promoting and retaining female managerial talent, both from the standpoint of internal policies and programs, as well as the individual work/life paths of the participants’ chief officers. Subsequently, the participating firms formed a study group with CIMAD faculty members to reflect on the results and develop recommendations. UPS has since worked with the center to this end as well.\(^7\)

The results of the Best Practices in Mexico Project have yielded a number of recommendations that positively impact the ability of the participating firms to identify, promote, and retain female managerial talent, per the CIMAD faculty that developed the research. These include such actions as: taking full advantage of information technology to set up telecommuting capabilities and flexible work options; providing for both maternity and paternity leave; and ensuring child and senior care services exist for employees with familial obligations. In addition to implementation of recommendations arising from the results of the Project, the above-mentioned firms (and others such as Wal-Mart), as well as public policy makers and government agencies such as Mexico’s Ministry of Labor, have worked with the center to create capacity-building executive education programs specifically targeting their female senior managers and administrators.

Professor Bernal and Ms. Moreno indicate that, particularly in Mexico but also in the greater Latin American region, influencing the policy and practice of firms and governments with regard to the promotion of female talent in senior management is a primary goal of CIMAD’s research. They carefully point out that the best managerial talent should be promoted regardless of gender; however, the focus of the center’s research efforts is to support endeavors on the part of its corporate and governmental partners to ensure that diversity and gender policy coincides with what CIMAD’s research indicates are best for creating a workplace environment congenial to the advancement of female talent, in the context of the organization and society at large.

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End Notes


