



## Interview with Maria Helena de Felipe Lehtonen

by Nicola Thornton  
December 22, 2011

Content

Images (1)

ShareThis Print

**Launched in 2002, AFAEMME comprises 36 women entrepreneurs' organisations from 21 Mediterranean countries and has its headquarters in Barcelona.**

Image/Picture



Working in collaboration with the European Commission, Chambers of Commerce in its representative countries, and various other networks, AFAEMME serves as a platform for international projects that promote gender equality in the marketplace. Nicola Thornton spoke to its founder and president, M<sup>rs</sup> Helena de Felipe Lehtonen, an employment lawyer.

### How did you become involved in AFAEMME?

Well, after working my way up through the Catalan Business Association, I joined the Spanish Businesswomen's Association and was nominated as

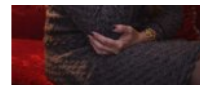


PHOTO BY LEE WOOLCOCK

President. As such, I got to know a lot of organisations around Europe and the Mediterranean. I realised there was a need for something to bring us altogether; the women were always asking to meet up and discuss things. We started off with seven organisations and are now 36. Each group has an average of 200 members.

### Why did you focus on the Mediterranean and not Southern Europe, for example?

The Mediterranean area takes in Arab countries and I've always felt very comfortable with Arab women. They were always very welcoming, with a high educational level. Most of them have two university degrees, one of which they have usually got from the US. They are privileged, they have good minds and they hold good positions in family-owned companies.

### What are the challenges for female entrepreneurs in particular?

In the Mediterranean area, we have the religious stereotypes and, of course, there is inequality. The strange thing is that things appear to be going backwards. Ten years ago in Turkey, for example, men and women were seen as equal in the business arena, but the power has shifted in favour of men. In Egypt, 20 years ago, women didn't wear the veil, but now they say it identifies them as Muslim women. I think, as a result of the Arab Spring, we will see more women losing their rights and their liberties and I keep saying to those women's groups: go forward, not back.

### How influential is AFAEMME as an organisation?

Well, we work closely with the European Commission on certain issues, and if we have a good idea, and show it will create better practices, they listen. We have given them the key pointers that women need to succeed more quickly, because statistics show that if we keep going at the current pace, it will be 50 years until we reach equality. I believe that having a particular quota of women on executive boards is the way forward. In Norway, thanks to positive discrimination, they now have 40 percent women on the boards of the best companies. In Spain's IBEX companies, it is only 8 percent. We are lobbying hard to change this.

**THE BEST OF BARCELONA  
DELIVERED TO YOU**

**CLICK HERE TO SIGN UP FOR YOUR  
FREE WEEKLY NEWSLETTER**

**Read it  
HERE**



**RECENT COMMENTS**

### British writer living in La Coruña publishes new novel

British writer Mark Guscín publishes new historical novel, entitled *All the Diamonds in the World*. ...

Mark Guscín | [Reading corner](#)

### It's on the up again!

We were kindly invited back to La Vietnamita to see the changes, which Nina and her team have been ...

Alicia & Steven | [La Vietnamita](#)

### Re: dummies

'Dummy' is the British English word for 'pacifier' - see Wikipedia for clarification if necessary. ...

Hannah (Metropolitan) | [Kings' Day Parade 2012](#)

### dummies

I'm sorry Hannah, but despite your answer I remain very puzzled by your use of the word "dummy". I...  
kbwildthing | [Kings' Day Parade 2012](#)

### Bun Bo

Image/Picture



PHOTO BY LEE WOOLCOCK

The problem is now that young women don't want these positions. We want to have a high quality of life, a personal life, and we don't want an institutional life because we don't have enough time. Women are being actively encouraged to sit on commissions or whatever, but they say no because of familial or domestic commitments.

**As a career lawyer, President of AFAEMME and a mother of two children, how do you manage?**

The difference is, if you earn enough money to have help at home, you can manage. If you don't, having it all is not possible, unless you distribute family tasks equally with your partner.

**How is the equality situation in Spain?**

Spain is not very productive. We work too many hours and are inefficient.

Change is happening very slowly here and I don't know why. In Morocco, work finishes at 6.30pm. Here, it is much later. Yesterday, I attended the general meeting of Foment and we started at half past seven. At 8pm, I had to leave. It doesn't matter if we have small children; the fact is it is that I don't want to be at work till 9pm if I start at eight in the morning. That is not a gender issue, but a productivity issue. If the Socialists [PSOE] were cautious about this, I don't know if the PP will help us, but I hope they do.

**Do you think business schools have the right approach to entrepreneurship?**

No, I don't. The high-level business schools only focus on the multinationals with 20,000 employees. You can have a company with 50 employees and you can be very profitable and make very good products or services. We know if that we don't create more SMEs [small and medium companies], we are going to go bankrupt, so we need to address this.

Women make very good small business owners. They are not generally risk-takers but they can multi-task better than men and make a good profit.

**How are you encouraging more female entrepreneurs in Spain?**

I have run courses in universities here and in Cordoba on this theme and it has been very positively received. It was very different from when I was studying law—nowadays, they ask so many questions! We try to motivate young women to set up their own businesses, with a good partner, a business plan and an idea. We tell them to be proactive. Women make up half of the country's talent, and if we don't use this 50 percent, we lose a high potential of our economy.

Hannah (Metropolitan) | *Kings' Day Parade 2012*

**dummies**

I'm sorry Hannah, but despite your answer I remain very puzzled by your use of the word "dummy". I...

Read it  
HERE



RECENT COMMENTS

**British writer living in La Coruña publishes new novel**

British writer Mark Guscin publishes new historical novel, entitled *All the Diamonds in the World*. ...

Mark Guscin | *Reading corner*

**It's on the up again!**

We were kindly invited back to La Vietnamita to see the changes, which Nina and her team have been ...

Alicia & Steven | *La Vietnamita*

**Re: dummies**

'Dummy' is the British English word for 'pacifier' - see Wikipedia for clarification if necessary. ...

Image/Picture



PHOTO BY LEE WOOLCOCK

**What has been your own experience as a woman in business?**

I started with a partner, she was a lawyer like me, and we had one client each. We had no business plan and no special budget, just the motivation and a set of targets! My greatest achievement, however, was setting up AFAEMME: I share everything I know with the members of this organisation and make good use of my position.

**What is the best advice you've ever been given?**

Be reliable. If you say you are going to do something, you have to follow it up. It's like the opposite of being a politician!

**What advice would you give to a woman reading this interview who is thinking of starting a business?**

Get information, training and good entrepreneurial advice. Sometimes the idea is very good but there is something you are not thinking about. They can contact

the Association of Businesswomen in Catalonia for advice: [www.acee.com.es/](http://www.acee.com.es/)

[www.afaemme.org](http://www.afaemme.org)

Read it  
HERE



RECENT COMMENTS

**British writer living in La Coruña publishes new novel**

British writer Mark Guscin publishes new historical