**8. Do French Women Make Best Mothers and Lovers?**

French women lead Europe as mothers, workers and in health and sex appeal, say some of the country's leading sociologists.

Academic research has lent a little support to President Jacques Chirac's Bastille Day insistence that France should not envy Britain, despite recent jolts to national pride: desperately high unemployment, plummeting spending power and London's victory over Paris to hold the 2012 Olympics.

Ahead of a seminar on European population trends in Tours this week, sociologists and statisticians have come up with a series of figures that prompted the daily paper Libération to headline a report yesterday: "The French woman: at work, seductive and fertile."

The paper described French females as "champions of Europe" for producing babies and longevity. Official figures put them on a par with the Irish in terms of fertility, with 1.9 children born to each woman, compared with 1.7 in Britain or 1.4 in America.

On life expectation, French women are said to vie with the Spanish, reaching an average age of nearly 84.

Commentators and experts anxious for something good to say about the "French model" - shorter working hours, entrenched labour rights and a social security system that critics say France cannot afford - speculate that it has much to do with the supposed supremacy of womanhood.

Aids to an emancipated womanhood include France's municipal crèches, supervised homework sessions, subsidised holiday camps for children and generous family allowances.

Even the much-derided 35-hour working week plays its part, theoretically giving working mothers more time to spend with their children without losing out at work.