

Healthy women,  
Healthy economies



**Understanding Working  
Women's Experiences  
and Gender Diversity  
Policies in China**

2021

*Understanding Working Women's Experiences and Gender Diversity Policies in China* seeks to understand the factors impacting women's well-being in China in order to support their full participation in the economy. This report has been produced by Merck in partnership with SCHSAsia. The data within the report is current as of July 2021.

Merck is a vibrant science and technology company that believes in science as a force for good. Our Healthy Women, Healthy Economies initiative strives to unleash the economic power of women by bringing governments, employers, and other interested stakeholders together to help improve women's health so women – and by extension their families – can join, thrive, rise in their communities and live better lives.

According to the International Labor Organization, 865 million women across the globe are not reaching their potential to contribute more to their national economies due to preventable causes (2013). We see the enduring obstacles women must overcome to achieve their full potential and the impact that has on societies around the world. We have a responsibility to do better. Healthy women lead to healthy economies.

Our experience tells us that public-private partnerships are key to addressing these challenges, because businesses and governments both want to generate sustainable growth. We partner with world-class organizations to bring our commitment to life. In line with this approach, we partnered with SCHSAsia to conduct the China-based research, author, and release this report.

SCHSAsia is a China-based women empowerment consultancy that specializes in projects, training, and consulting. Its principal project the Women Empowerment Council (WEC) is an engaged network of multinational companies that aims to advance gender equality in businesses in China. Current members are bp, Chayora, ConocoPhillips, Dell, Dow, ExxonMobil, FedEx, Henkel, HPE, Johnson & Johnson, Merck, Volvo, and WilmerHale.

The WEC's main objectives are to establish a healthy pipeline of competent and confident women professionals, create inclusive workplaces from the top down, close the gender gaps in leadership and STEMM, and be the collective voice of women empowerment in businesses in China. With support from the council, SCHSAsia spearheads impactful initiatives such as Girls in STEMM, the Gender Pay Study, and the Women Empowerment Awards in China.

SCHSAsia also works with individual clients, including Merck, to articulate and identify their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion objectives and build successful, cost-effective strategies empowering women to thrive in the workplace.

Special thanks to the main researchers and authors of this report, Irene Lee and Delia Friel, the chief editor, Charlotte Smith, the designer Becky Wei, as well as proofreading support from Jenn Hu.

# Table of Contents

## Preface

## Executive Summary

## Introduction

## Methodology

## Research

### ■ Secondary Research

- Introduction
- Background
- Government Policy
  - Two-child policy
  - Gender-based discrimination in recruitment process
  - Sexual harassment
- Corporate Policy
  - Family-friendly workplace policies and practices
  - Flexible work arrangements
  - Childcare
- Society and Culture
  - Gender roles and attitudes
  - Division of household labor
  - Child and elder care
  - Marriage
  - Two-child policy
  - Overall wellbeing
- Conclusion

### ■ HR Interview Findings

- Introduction
- Best Practices
  - Writing diversity and inclusion targets into performance reviews
  - Setting balanced gender ratio targets and inclusive hiring practices
  - Supporting and developing women at all levels and promoting women into top leadership
  - Gender pay equity
  - Career and replacement planning prior to maternity leave
  - Addressing gender stereotypes
  - Implementing flexible work arrangements
  - Promoting psychological and physical wellbeing
- Gaps
  - Low uptake of paternity leave
  - The need for sexual harassment training
- Conclusion



## ■ Quantitative Survey: Results and Analysis

- Introduction
- Hiring and Promotion Practices
- Sexual Harassment
- Current Work Environment
- Challenges Working Women Face
- Flexible Work Arrangements, Family-Friendly Policies, Two-Child Policy
- Personal Health and Wellbeing
- Conclusion

## ■ Focus Group Findings

- Introduction
- Women's Additional Family Responsibilities
  - Impact of family responsibilities on career success
  - Gender discrimination in hiring
  - Gender stereotypes
- Childcare Challenges
- Retirement
  - Inequality in career and financial opportunities
  - Ageism
  - Retirees at work
- Sexual Harassment
  - Lack of clarity on how to define or deal with subtle forms of sexual harassment
  - Education on respectful workplaces
- Positive Assessment of Current Workplace
- Remote Working
  - Flexibility in time management
  - Lack of separation between work and life
  - Lower work efficiency
  - Office equipment and facilities
  - Ideal amount or frequency of remote working
  - More focused on results instead of process
- Psychological and Physical Health
  - Employee Assistance Program (EAP) valued
  - Importance of self-care

## Conclusion

## Bibliography

## Appendices

- Detailed Description of the Methodology
- Interview Guide for HR Professionals
- Quantitative Survey
- Focus Group Questionnaire

# Executive Summary

China has made great strides towards gender equality over the last few decades; however, there is still much progress to be made. Although China has a high rate of women's participation in the labor force, above the global average, a minority hold managerial and leadership positions. For instance, only 20.1 percent of 401 surveyed enterprises reported having had a woman CEO in 2018, less than 17 percent of senior managers are women, and less than 10 percent of board directors are women (World Economic Forum, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2021; International Labor Organization, 2019).

The purpose of this report is to understand the factors impacting women's well-being in China in order to support their full participation in the economy. Interviews with HR professionals, as well as quantitative and qualitative analysis of working women's perspectives and experiences, indicate that companies must build inclusive work environments by investing in and developing female talent, and empowering women with options that support them to make decisions based on their personal values and professional goals.

Corporate policies that are embedded in a company's culture and values, modeled and demonstrated by local leadership's actions, and supported with financial commitment and resource allocation are critical to promoting women's participation in the workforce. Structured support of women's career advancement through concrete programs that provide sponsorship, mentorship, and networking opportunities is vital to developing female talent to eventually take on leadership roles. Of particular importance is intentional integration of diversity and inclusion targets into performance reviews, as it holds employers and employees accountable and explicitly showcases the organization's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) values and goals. In addition to illuminating best practices, the interviews with HR professionals reveal several shortcomings in current policy, including low uptake of paternity leave due to social and cultural perceptions, as well as a lack of effective sexual harassment training.

Our analysis of the experiences and perspectives of working women draws out three key trends. First, gender discrimination persists within hiring practices in subtle and indirect forms due to persistent gender stereotypes, company work distribution, and budgetary concerns. Second, the gender gap in retirement age impedes women's career development and economic power, as they are required to retire five to ten years earlier than their male counterparts. Third, consistent with prior academic research, gender stereotypes and expectations hinder women's opportunities and success, including promotion into top leadership positions.

In summary, this report leverages the perspectives of HR professionals and working women in order to identify the factors limiting women's abilities to join, thrive, and rise within the workplace in China.

# Introduction

Healthy Women, Healthy Economies (HWHE) is an initiative at Merck that strives to unleash the economic power of women by bringing governments, employers and other interested stakeholders together to help improve women's health so that women – and by extension, their families – can join, thrive, and rise in their communities and live better lives. The China-based HWHE project aims to understand the factors impacting women's participation in the workplace in China in order to support their contribution to the economy. It explores government policy, society and culture, corporate culture and policy, and working women's perspectives and experiences.

The research is divided into four parts – **secondary research**, **qualitative interviews with HR professionals**, **a quantitative survey**, and **focus groups** conducted with working women of various seniority levels. The secondary research looks at the history, policies, and socio-cultural trends affecting working women's well-being. The HR professional interviews shed light on the impact of corporate policies and company culture on promoting gender diversity and utilizing women's work. The quantitative survey and focus group discussions seek to understand women's firsthand experiences of working in China.

This report undertakes an investigation into recent studies and reports on trends in China relating to the two-child policy (three-child policy as of May 2021), discriminatory hiring practices, sexual harassment, gender roles, childcare, eldercare, marriage, and household division of labor. The secondary research findings guide the formulation of questions for the HR interviews, quantitative survey, and focus groups. The primary research aims to study China-based multinational corporate (MNCs) policies and women employees' views on women's career development, gender stereotypes, work-life balance, flexible work arrangements, the two-child policy, sexual harassment, and psychological and physical health.





In an effort to analyze the factors impacting women's participation in the workforce, this report draws on the HR policies of MNCs, as well as the personal experiences and perspectives shared by working women. To understand the unique policies in place to support women, **12** HR and Diversity and Inclusion (DNI) professionals from **10** China-based MNCs were interviewed. These professionals provided insight into a diverse range of companies' policies and initiatives which, analyzed collectively, show how internal strategies and policies can successfully create a healthy work environment and promote women's career advancement. Conversely, an analysis of their insights also reveals shortcomings in current policies.

In order to analyze current pain points facing working women through quantitative and qualitative means, a total of **84** working women—from entry level to senior level management—employed by **17** MNCs based in Beijing and Shanghai were surveyed and interviewed. The 17 companies represent a breadth of industries including **technology, pharmaceuticals, oil and gas, accounting,** and others. Collecting multiple perspectives across cities, sectors, and seniority levels enables a comprehensive analysis of the factors impacting women's engagement, growth, and success in the workforce.

## ■ Secondary Research

### - Introduction

The secondary research aims to examine existing research on the factors thwarting women's participation in the Chinese economy. This section analyzes academic articles, organizational reports, and newspaper articles. This analysis of previous research in the field serves as a foundation to contextualize and inform the primary research.

Three sections are covered in the secondary research, including government policy, corporate policy, and society and culture. This report analyzes specific government policies related to the two-child policy, gender-based discrimination in hiring, and sexual harassment. It then explores corporate policies of MNCs in China. Finally, it examines the social and cultural impacts on working women's experiences.

### - Background

China has made great strides in gender equality over the last few decades; however, there is still much progress to be made. China has a high rate of women's participation in the labor force with approximately 69-73 percent of working-age women employed compared to the global average of 47 percent (World Economic Forum, 2021; Zeng & Thorne man, 2014; Women in the Workforce: Global (Quick Take), 2021). With that said, Chinese women's participation in the labor force is still lower than men's as approximately 83 percent of working age men in China are employed (China, 2021).

Despite the relatively high rate of women's participation in the labor force, few hold managerial or leadership positions. For instance, only 20.1 percent of 401 surveyed enterprises reported having had a woman CEO in 2018, less than 17 percent of senior managers are women, and less than 10 percent of board directors are women (World Economic Forum, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2021; International Labor Organization, 2019).

In response to current gender disparities, the Chinese government and businesses in China are actively promoting gender equality. A report completed by the International Labor Organization (ILO) found that a majority of surveyed companies in China are actively promoting gender diversity in recruitment, retention, and promotion; skills and executive training; and remuneration (International Labor Organization, 2019). The ILO report (2019) suggests that gender diversity is a priority among companies in China. Moreover, the Chinese government has issued policies aiming to promote women's full participation in the economy through legislation barring hiring discrimination and sexual harassment. This section will evaluate the effectiveness of these policies and their effects on women in the workplace.



## - **Government Policy**

### • **Two-child policy**

Faced with an aging population and declining fertility rates, China introduced the two-child policy in 2015, effectively ending the one-child policy by allowing couples to have two children. The policy, however, did not lead to the expected rise in number of births. Most recently, in late May of 2021, the state is now allowing couples to have three children under the three-child policy.

Along with the policy to increase family sizes, several local and provincial governments are trialing family-friendly policies in order to encourage families to have more than one child. These policies include extending maternity leave for the second child and offering cash rewards to families having a second child (Woollacott, 2018).

Despite policies allowing couples to have up to three children and rewarding those who have more than one, many couples are still choosing to have one child. A study by the All-China Women's Federation in 2016 found that only 21 percent of surveyed couples indicate they want a second child (Wang, 2021). While these policies have not necessarily led to women having more children, they have generated issues of gender-based discrimination.

Significant instances of discrimination have been reported since the reversal of the one-child policy. A study conducted at Renmin University in 2018 found that “employers are more reluctant to offer key positions to women who have a second child” (Wong, 2019). Furthermore, a report by Human Rights Watch (2020) found that after the two-child policy was introduced, working women have faced an increase in pregnancy-related discrimination. Examples of such discrimination include job advertisements explicitly seeking either men or women who have already had children, women “being forced to sign contracts pledging not to get pregnant and being demoted or fired for being pregnant” (Wang, 2021). It is evident that even though the reversal of the one-child policy did not dramatically impact couples' willingness to have more than one child, women have faced increased discrimination in the workplace based on their decision to have one or more children. These types of discriminatory hiring practices negatively affect working women and deserve serious consideration from employers including MNCs in China.

### • **Gender-based discrimination in recruitment processes**

In the 2010s, hiring discrimination based on gender was prevalent in China. In 2018, approximately 20 percent of jobs were advertised as “men only” or “men preferred” (US Library of Congress, 2019). Other discriminatory hiring practices include job advertisements explicitly seeking married women with children or women with specific physical characteristics (Human Rights Watch, 2018). It is hypothesized that the bias in recruiting and hiring is due to gender stereotypes and the “perceived cost of meeting legal entitlements available to women” (US Library of Congress, 2019). The prevalence of gender discrimination in hiring practices prompted the government to release a notice specifically addressing this issue.

In the winter of 2019, the Chinese government strengthened its anti-discrimination guidelines in the workplace. They issued a decree prohibiting discrimination against women in the hiring process, one consequence of which is a 50,000 RMB fine for discriminatory advertisements (US Library of Congress, 2019). The government notice also encourages companies to support new mothers through assisted transition back into employment and provision of quality childcare services (Ethical Toy Program, n.d.).

The updated guidelines are evidence of the government strengthening its commitment to preventing gender discrimination in the workplace. It builds on prior policy outlawing gender discrimination by providing a more concrete understanding of what constitutes gender discrimination and the state's enforcement mechanisms.

The government's commitment to gender equality in the workplace has prompted companies to re-evaluate their policies in order to ensure that they are not discriminatory and that they promote women's career advancement. Although most MNCs in China likely already had internal anti-discrimination policies in place and were not engaging in such overt forms of gender discrimination in the hiring process, the notice makes MNCs accountable to guidelines set by the Chinese government in addition to internal standards.

While the government notice strengthens the state's commitment to gender equality, gender discrimination issues persist. Human Rights Watch found that in 2020 over 10 percent of national civil service job postings expressed a preference for men. Hiring discrimination that disproportionately targets women continues to be a problem in China.

- **Sexual harassment**

Sexual harassment is prevalent in the workplace in China, as is the case in most countries. Studies have shown that between 20 and 80 percent of women in China have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace (Halegua, 2021). The wide range in reported prevalence is due to the challenge of accurately measuring reports of sexual harassment. Scholar Aaron Halegua (2021) found that sexual harassment in Chinese work environments most commonly takes the form of verbal comments, physical touch, and messages.

In 2021, the government released legislation, Article 1010 of the Civil Code, more clearly defining sexual harassment, expanding the scope of who can be considered a victim of sexual harassment to include both men and women, and requiring employers to take more responsibility for preventing and addressing sexual harassment in the workplace (Durham, 2021). The Article calls for employers to instill prevention measures and to establish protocol to report and investigate instances of sexual harassment (Puckett, et. al., 2020).

Lawyers Bonnie Puckett et. al. (2020) also highlight that the Article “acknowledges explicitly the role that abuse of power and influence plays in enabling harassment.” However, as noted in an article in *The Diplomat*, while Article 1010 establishes liability for individuals, it does not hold companies civilly liable for failing to adopt harassment prevention and reporting mechanisms (Longarino, 2020).

Most MNCs in China likely already have internal policies prohibiting sexual harassment and an established mechanism for reporting and investigating cases. Legal scholar Aaron Halegua argues for foreign companies to serve as a model to other companies in their respective industry. For instance, MNCs should advocate for their Chinese suppliers to adopt policies to prevent and appropriately address sexual harassment (Halegua, 2021).

## - Corporate Policy

### • Family-friendly workplace policies and practices

Family-friendly policies aim to help employees manage personal responsibilities while remaining effective and productive at work. Examples of family-friendly policies include paid and unpaid parental leave, flexible working arrangements, and employer supported childcare. The following section will focus on two types of family-friendly policies: parental leave policies and practices to support new mothers.

The duration of maternity leave varies by province at a minimum of 98 days as set by the national government (Wu, 2019). Beijing and Shanghai offer 128 days of maternity leave and Tibet offers the longest leave of one year. During leave, women receive 100 percent of their salary (Wu, 2019). Although it is not mandatory, almost all mothers take maternity leave (Wu, 2019). There is not extensive literature discussing MNCs in China offering longer maternity leave, suggesting that most MNCs follow policies set by national and provincial governments.

In addition to parental leave, women are entitled to paid leave for prenatal checkups—facilitating access to prenatal care—and one paid hour per day for breastfeeding (Wu, 2019). Moreover, the government mandates that companies do not extend the work hours of breastfeeding mothers (Wu, 2019). More research is needed on expectant and new mothers’ uptake of the paid breastfeeding hour and prenatal checkups.

As for paternity leave, there is no nationally mandated leave for new fathers; yet some provinces offer paternity leave. In provinces with paternity leave, the duration ranges from seven to 30 days with 15 days being the standard (Wu, 2019). In Beijing new fathers are entitled to 15 days, whereas in Shanghai they are entitled to ten. Similar to new mothers, new fathers receive full compensation during paternity leave (Wu, 2019). Unlike new mothers, not all new fathers take paternity leave (Boquen, 2021). A man’s decision to take paternity leave is influenced by workplace culture and superiors’ attitudes which oftentimes look down on taking leave (Lai, 2020).

- **Flexible work arrangements**

Flexible work arrangements (FWAs) are a specific type of family-friendly workplace policy which can be used as a tool to recruit and retain women. FWAs give employees a choice over when and where they work. The most common types of work arrangements in China include telecommuting, part-time work, and flexible start and end times, sometimes referred to as flextime (Liu & Wu, 2016; Parker, n.d.; Anell & Hartmann, 2007). Other types of FWAs include extended leave, compressed work week which allows employees to meet work week obligations in less than five days, and the option to share a job between two people.

In line with the global trend, workplaces in China have been offering more FWAs to employees in recent years. A study in 2014 found that of 20 US companies in China surveyed most offered some form of FWAs, suggesting it is common practice for MNCs in China (Liu & Wu, 2016).

Companies offer FWAs to employees for several reasons. For one, they give employees greater flexibility to manage their personal and professional responsibilities (Parker, n.d.; Asia Research Media, 2018). From an employee perspective, flexible start and end times as well as telecommuting can reduce commute times and allow greater flexibility to be able to meet family needs. For example, flexible start times allow parents to drop their children off at school. For companies, FWAs can reduce office rent as less square footage is needed. As mentioned above, companies use such policies to attract and retain talent, particularly women.

While there are many benefits to FWAs, there are also drawbacks. From an organizational standpoint, it can be difficult for managers to supervise employees and challenging for colleagues to connect when working at different locations and times of the day. By removing the face-to-face element, flexible work also inhibits interpersonal professional relationships. Furthermore, some employees note that FWAs can make it feel as though one is constantly on the clock due to the lack of separation between work and personal life.

As previously stated, the most common FWAs available in China are flexible start and end times, telecommuting, and part-time work. Despite the many companies offering such policies there are several barriers limiting their adoption. Firstly, not all employees are eligible, as policies are typically available to a select group of more senior staff (Parker, n.d.; Liu & Wu, 2016). Secondly, companies rarely adequately publicize FWAs internally. Thirdly, managers can implicitly or explicitly discourage their employees from taking advantage of them, further limiting their uptake. Finally, these policies are often informal and spoken as opposed to written, making their implementation inconsistent across a company.

- **Childcare**

In Chinese culture, childcare is widely regarded as a private matter, which means that companies in China are not expected to play a large role in providing or supporting childcare. Family members, including parents and grandparents, provide 80 percent of childcare services (Childcare centers ease Chinese parents' anxiety for having second child, 2019). In the last five years the state has encouraged the development of infant and childcare services, but family members continue to be the main childcare provider. For example, in 2014, 60-70 percent of Chinese children between the ages of zero and two were cared for predominantly by their grandparents (Zhong & Peng, 2020). The role of grandparents and parents in childcare will be further discussed in a subsequent section on the division of household labor.

Although limited, there are a few notable examples of employer-supported childcare. For example, beginning in 2017, JD.com provides free early-childcare services (ages 2-4 years old) for staff at its Beijing headquarters (Feifei & Jaiyue, 2017). Another example is Didi Chuxing which provides an in-house kindergarten for children of staff during summer and winter vacations (International Finance Corporation, 2020). Although DiDi and JD.com are two domestic Chinese companies, they illustrate the wider trend in China of offering childcare benefits as a way to recruit and retain staff.

## - **Society and Culture**

This section aims to evaluate prior research on the impact of Chinese society and culture on working women. It will provide an overview of role expectations placed on women in Chinese society and further explore the impact of unpaid domestic labor on women's employment.

- **Gender roles and attitudes**

Historically, China, like much of the world, has been a patriarchal society with rigid gender roles. Confucius thought characterized women as subordinate to men and emphasized the central role of women in household labor. There was a shift under Mao as the state promoted gender equality through its ideology and social policies, emphasizing women's active participation in the labor force (Ngo, et. al., 2014). Mao's notable assertion that "women hold up half the sky" is indicative of his efforts to economically empower women. However, contemporary scholars have observed a regressive shift in society's thinking around gender norms during the period of market reform that indicate China has returned to more traditional gender attitudes and social divisions of labor (Qing, 2020; Ngo, et. al., 2014).

The resurgence of traditional gender norms has meant that women in the workforce are impacted by “negative stereotypes, occupational sex segregation, and fewer development opportunities” (Ngo, et. al., 2014). For example, as mentioned in the government policy section, gender discrimination is prevalent in the hiring process which often prefers men for positions or requires women to meet certain physical specifications.

Furthermore, a study done by Isabelle Attanté (2012) shows that in 2010 a majority of men and women surveyed agree that while “men [turn] toward society, women devote themselves to their family.” As in the past, prevailing social attitudes continue to expect women to devote themselves to their family.

However, further research shows that Chinese women today are not only expected to dedicate themselves to their family, but also to financially contribute to the household (Qian & Qian, 2015). Work and family are both important dimensions of women’s lives, but often come into conflict which leads to stress and strain on individuals. Empirical research shows that work-family conflict has increased for both men and women employees in China in recent decades (Xin, et. al., 2020). One such example of the implications of role conflict is its effect on mental health, as shown in a study from 2017 which found that Chinese women with greater degrees of work-family conflict “were more likely to have higher levels of depression” (Wang & Peng, 2017).

Women’s conflicting responsibilities to work and family have also been shown to negatively affect their career path. Even though many Chinese women are highly ambitious in their careers, it has been shown that women are more likely to prioritize family if faced with a decision between the two. Sociologist Lulu Nie (2012) found that many working mothers would “reduce the pursuit of work accomplishments in order to balance work-life conflicts,” in an attempt to maintain a harmonious family, which is a central value of Confucian literature. Employers must consider ways to support Chinese working women facing work-life conflict to be able to make values-based decisions that are in their best interest.

Sociologists Qian and Li (2020) study gender roles in the public sphere (the labor market) and the private sphere (within the family). Qian and Li (2020) found that “men and women show rising support for egalitarian attitudes about gender in the public sphere,” however they also found “continued and rising support for traditional ideology about gender in the private sphere.” This suggests that there has been more progress towards gender equality in the labor market in comparison to private family lives. It is therefore important to consider the public and private spheres as they are both critical to women’s experiences and career advancement.

- **Division of household labor**

Women are responsible for the majority of household labor, including housework and childcare. Chinese women spend roughly three times as many hours on household chores in comparison to men (Cataylst, 2020). A report co-authored by the Asian Development Bank and International Labor Organization (2017) estimates that the gender gap in “unpaid work is 2 hours and 24 minutes per day.” One study in 2013 shows that time dedicated to household labor comparatively between men and women accounts for approximately 30 percent of the gender earnings gap (Qi & Dong, 2013). These findings show that inequality at home contributes to women’s lower positions and income in the labor market. It is therefore evident that unpaid domestic labor impacts women’s ability to participate and advance in the workforce.

- **Child and elder care**

One important facet of domestic work is child and elder care. A study done by the Peterson Institute for International Economics (2020) found that women dedicate three times as many hours to caring for children as men. Women not only spend more time on care labor, their “paid work time is more likely to be interrupted by unpaid care work” (Connelly, et.al., 2018). In addition to mothers, childcare also affects grandmothers as caring for grandchildren has reduced their number of paid labor hours (Wang & Zhang, 2018).

Childcare, particularly for pre-school aged children, is provided by parents, grandparents, nannies, and daycare centers. Families, including grandparents and parents, provide close to 80 percent of childcare (Childcare centers ease Chinese parents' anxiety for having second child, 2019).

Grandparents’ support is an important factor determining whether women with young children will stay in the workforce; when grandparents are able to provide childcare, the mother’s labor force participation increases by over 40 percent (Du, et. al., 2019). Mothers and fathers also provide childcare, and some families hire nannies, known as *ayis*.

Today, young mothers are increasingly choosing their children over their career. Sup China (2019) reports that over 80 percent of mothers born after 1995 are choosing to stay home with their children. Those mothers who intend to eventually re-enter the workforce will require support in terms of developing technical skills, accessing networks, and finding opportunities.

Daycare centers are another actor providing childcare in China. Access to daycare centers increases maternal labor force participation by approximately 25 percent (Du, et. al., 2019). A study in 2013 found that in urban communities with daycare centers, women are more likely to work (Du & Dong, 2013). The daycare centers must be affordable for families as higher costs of childcare correlate to lower labor participation amongst mothers, indicating that many are cost-sensitive (Connelly, et. al., 2018). Access to reliable, affordable, and quality childcare is important for women’s employment and productivity.

Research findings vary regarding the impact of caring for elderly parents on women's employment. Economists Wang and Zhang (2018) found that elder care has "no statistically significant relationship with the weekly hours of paid work for either men or women." However, economists Connelly et al. (2018) find that caring for a parent-in-law negatively affects women's participation in the workforce. Furthermore, Connelly et al. (2018) report that intensive care-giving reduces the care-giver's hours of paid work. Corporate policies should take into account the disproportionate burden of elder care that falls on Chinese working women.

- **Marriage**

Women face societal pressure to be married and start a family by the age of 30. The colloquial term "leftover women" is a derogatory reference to unmarried women in their late 20s and 30s that illustrates the shame and expectations they face. Despite the societal pressure to get married, many are postponing marriage to pursue a career (Tully, 2013). Bearing in mind the fact that young women professionals are focusing on work and career development, MNCs should consider investing in developing young female talent and providing them ample career development opportunities.

- **Two-child policy**

The decision to have a second child is influenced by numerous factors, including but not limited to demographics (ex. age and socioeconomic status), economic factors (ex. direct and indirect costs of raising a child), cultural factors (ex. attitudes of elder family members), and conflict between paid work and childcare. This section will further explore the two most relevant factors to this report: economic and work-family conflict.

One factor influencing a family's decision to have a second child is the associated direct and indirect financial burden of raising a child. Direct costs include the child's school tuition, medical care, and clothing; indirect costs are the parents' missed education and professional opportunities as a result of raising a child. A study completed in Jilin province concluded that parenting costs are a main factor influencing parents' decision not to have a second child, noting that "the pressure of using limited income to raise a second child is unbearable" (Zhang J. , 2020). Economic pressure and limitations, both in terms of the expenses and reduced income opportunity, can thus be shown to deter Chinese parents from having a second child.

Another influential factor is conflict between paid work and childcare. Having access to childcare resources, including grandparents' assistance, can ease the conflict women face between their paid job and providing childcare. Thus, access to childcare resources is an important condition to having a second child (Zhang J. ,2020; Zhao & Zhang, 2019). Moreover, some argue that the rising degree of work-family conflict in recent years decreases women's willingness to have a second child (Attané, 2012). Financial pressures, concerns related to providing childcare, and work-related stress are three reasons why many Chinese women are choosing not to have a second child.



- **Overall well-being**

Being healthy, both in terms of mental and physical health, is essential to women's full participation in the economy. Health is a relevant topic, especially as women's well-being in China has been negatively impacted by COVID-19. In 2021, only 36 percent of women said their mental wellbeing was good/extremely good, compared to 69 percent before the global pandemic (Deloitte).

The primary physical health concerns cited by working women surveyed in a study by Tsinghua University and Blackmores Institute (2018) includes sleep disorders, gastrointestinal problems, skin problems, cervical/lumbar problems, and irregular menstruation. Sleeping problems, specifically insomnia, were a top concern for working women across all age groups.

Mental health disorders are highly prevalent among working women in China. Over 80 percent of working women report experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression in the last year, with younger generations reporting the highest levels (Tsinghua University, Blackmores Institute, 2019). It is significant to note that depression and anxiety are the two most prevalent mental health disorders in China generally (World Health Organization, 2021). With regards to depression, pregnancy-related depressions are commonplace. For example, almost seven in ten respondents interviewed in a 2019 study experienced some form of depression related to pregnancy, with postpartum depression being the most common (Tsinghua and Blackmores, 2019).

The psychological issues affecting women have been shown to be exacerbated by pressure at work, financial stress, and focus on one's physical appearance (The Paper, 2019). Women do not tend to seek professional help to address mental health issues, instead most believe their problems can be solved through self-management by talking to family or friends, exercise, sleeping, and shopping (Tsinghua University, Blackmores Institute, 2019).

While physical and mental health issues are highly prevalent among women, only 17 percent of organizations provide resources to support their employees (Deloitte, 2021). This suggests that companies can provide more support to promote women's overall well-being. Specific focus should be placed on addressing anxiety and depression, especially amongst young professionals.

## - **Conclusion**

In conclusion, despite strides towards gender equality, several obstacles continue to thwart women's full participation in the economy. For instance, although government policy prohibiting hiring discrimination has been recently introduced, gender-based discrimination continues to be present in recruitment and promotion processes. Moreover, gender stereotypes and the societal expectation to be responsible for household labor impact women's ability to fully participate in the labor force. Through exploring existing research and trends related to government and corporate policies as well as Chinese culture, the secondary research serves as a springboard to the primary research, by contextualizing and informing the questions that were asked of HR professionals and women professionals relating to gender diversity policies and working women's experiences in MNCs.



## ■ HR Interview Findings

### - Introduction

This section includes findings from the interviews with HR and DNI professionals of ten China-based MNCs. The interviews seek to investigate the obstacles to women's work participation and career development in China, and the measures their employers have implemented to address these obstacles. The findings indicate that DNI has become an important aspect to the corporate culture and HR strategy of the participating MNCs. These MNCs implement DNI policies under the global framework while adhering to the local laws and regulations in China. As the participating companies represent a range of industries and are at different stages of the DNI journey, the priorities and specifics of their programs also vary. The findings in this section showcase best practices as well as policy gaps that require further improvement.

### - Best Practices

Our research reveals that multiple factors inhibit women's participation in the workforce, including socio-cultural and historical factors, as well as corporate efforts. Corporate policies that are embedded in a company's culture and values, modeled and demonstrated by local leadership's actions, and supported with financial commitment and resource allocation are critical to promoting women's participation in the workforce. This approach leads to diversity practices that are stronger in impact and scope.

#### • Writing DNI targets into performance reviews

**A DNI best practice of particular importance is companies setting DNI targets in staff performance reviews and compensation.** One energy company integrates DNI goals into all employees' performance reviews which are linked to their annual bonus. The HR representative interviewed had expressed optimism that this approach would turn DNI values from "nice-to-have" into real action. In April 2021, this MNC expanded their DNI performance indicators from leaders and line managers to all staff. While leaders and line managers are held accountable for decision-making in the HR process and setting the tone for company culture, the new approach demonstrates that inclusive actions are expected at all levels.

This innovative approach includes criteria to score individuals' inclusion capabilities and sets minimal expectations for inclusive performance. When designing the behavioral guidelines, this MNC takes a more encouraging rather than hardline enforcement approach at the launch of the program. This nurturing approach intends to cultivate favorable DNI performance demonstrated by actions such as participating in a business resource group event, completing DNI modules, sponsoring a business resource group, or speaking at a townhall promoting DNI.

- **Setting balanced gender ratio targets and inclusive hiring practices**

When one considers gender ratio in a company or industry, it is important to recognize that multiple forces are at play. Cultural, social, and historical factors contribute to gender imbalance in certain functions, companies, and industries. In this study, companies closely associated with accounting and nursing industries—in contrast to companies that are engineering and technology driven—tend to have higher women representation in the overall workforce. Nevertheless, organizations have a role to play in moving towards more balanced gender representation at all levels.

Three HR interviewees stated that nationally, gender ratios at certain levels of the company are more balanced compared to their counterparts in East Asia, or even the US and Europe where their gender equality policies originated. Two of the interviewees attribute this trend to the acceptance of career women in Chinese society and the comparatively wide range of affordable childcare support. Nevertheless, the interviews suggest that representation of women generally decreases in correlation with increasing hierarchical levels. **To proactively address the issues of the “leaky pipeline” and “glass ceiling,” several companies have set clear targets and inclusive hiring measures to balance gender representation at all levels of the organization.**

One industrial and manufacturing company has set clear gender ratio targets to address the gender imbalance at the national and global levels. The company’s global targets by 2025 aim for 50% female representation in new hires, 40% in frontline managers, and 30% in executive leadership. To achieve this, the company pushes for 40% women in new hires in R&D and sales roles that are traditionally male dominated.

To drive gender equality in staffing, numerous companies have established hiring practices to ensure a fair proportion of female candidates. One multinational bank requires a minimum of two female candidates to be shortlisted for every vacant position. Senior leadership supports this despite time pressures and the financial cost of engaging headhunters. Another MNC pushes to attract CVs from qualified women specifically when filling more traditionally male-dominated positions. One chemical and manufacturing company requires a neutral observer to participate in the selection panel in order to address any biases displayed during the process.

According to the head of the multinational bank, buy-in by local management to implement and adhere to these inclusive hiring policies is essential. She stressed the importance of local management’s commitment to not bypass these top-down policies despite pressures such as time constraints and a perceived lack of female candidates.

- **Supporting and developing women at all levels and promoting women into top leadership**

To cultivate a healthy pipeline of female talent, MNCs implement policies to ensure a balanced representation of new hires while also providing development and support programs to promote them into management and leadership. This effort is supported by the balanced gender ratio and the even higher representation of women among new graduates in China in recent years. Some MNCs have achieved a 50-50 or higher ratio of women to men for entry-level positions.

Several companies offer development programs for high-potential women employees and line managers. Three HR professionals stated that, compared to men, women tend to be less confident in showcasing their professional success and ambitions. Furthermore, “in the event of failure, women tend to look internally for reasons.” As a result, multiple MNCs established leadership programs to enhance women’s confidence, including global community sharing sessions, coaching, mentorship, and sponsorship programs.

Multiple HR professionals emphasized that **sponsorship goes beyond the training and coaching that mentorship involves as it consists of concrete support and advocacy by leaders for the sponsored talent.** Several companies select women to be sponsored by global and China-based business leaders. One DNI professional commented that it has become a “great success” as sponsors take on more responsibilities to build strong networks and expose women’s success stories.

Other women development programs include employee resource groups (ERGs), women’s networks, and workshops. ERGs promoting professional and personal development are often sponsored by women executives and male allies. Women’s networks serve as a community for support, and workshops feature internal and external speakers presenting topics of interest to women, for example health and work-life balance.

- **Gender pay equity**

In recent years, gender pay disparity has become an issue drawing more attention from companies. **Several companies have conducted gender pay research to identify gender pay disparity and budgeted to meet pay parity targets.**

Two companies engage in regular gender pay equity studies and have set aside budget for the goal “equal pay for equal work”. For several years they have conducted an annual pay equity review as part of the compensation planning process while one of them, an industrial and manufacturing company, generates quarterly compensation analysis for every full-time employee. This company, with their dedicated budget, gave pay equity adjustments to 800 women in 2021 and has narrowed the gaps between the China level and global level year-on-year in the past five years.

- **Career and replacement planning prior to maternity leave**

All participating MNCs comply with the legal requirements to support mothers before, during, and after their pregnancy. They offer paid leave for prenatal check-ups, a minimum of 98 days maternity leave depending on provincial laws and regulations, breastfeeding leave of one hour per day within one year after childbirth, and nursing facilities to support breastfeeding mothers. Some companies offer more than the legal requirements, such as flexibility for new mothers to accumulate their nursing leave.

**One best practice that stands out focuses on career and replacement planning prior to a female employee’s maternity leave, engagement during their absence, and flexibility upon their return.** This policy addresses the issue of retention, work distribution, and inclusion. Before taking maternity leave, the employee and her line manager plan out her work assignment upon return and delegation during the leave. During her absence, she is contacted and tracked by a committee that will also confirm her return to the company. After her return, management is open to adjusting work arrangements depending on her needs. The HR Head of this company said the advanced planning and transparency of the process resulted in the retention of a majority of mothers.

- **Addressing gender stereotypes**

Gender stereotypes negatively affect women’s career success and advancement. Our research found that women’s childbearing and childcare responsibilities lead to a preference for hiring men in China. Women’s age and marital status are seen as indicators of extended absence from work and reduced commitment, straining resources and impacting work distribution. One DNI professional shared that women are seen as risk averse in decision-making, impacting the perception of their leadership capabilities. An HR Head also said that double standards exist for men and women candidates. Women are often judged by their personality: they are either regarded as too aggressive or not aggressive enough, whereas men are usually evaluated based on their experience. To address the issue of gender stereotyping, several companies provide unconscious bias and inclusive leadership training, showcase female role models, and leverage employer branding to nurture a gender inclusive culture in their organizations.

- **Implementing FWAs**

COVID-19 has made working from home a reality for most companies. Even though China's quick recovery has allowed workers to return to the office, **several MNCs now offer the option of working remotely between one and two days per week, or up to 40% of the work time.**

Two HR managers stated that managers were initially concerned that not seeing their staff face-to-face would make them feel out of control. However, managers have gradually adapted to this approach and companies have leveraged new technology to support remote working. Several companies are implementing this policy on a trial basis to further evaluate its impact and effectiveness. Nevertheless, some industries' employees such as factory workers and medical staff are unable to work remotely because of the requirements of their job.

Several HR managers said that remote working has been well-received by both men and women employees. Working from home gives flexibility to employees, allowing them to deal with family responsibilities including family emergencies and supporting elderly parents. Therefore, it is generally welcomed by employees, particularly those with family-care needs. However, one HR professional stated that younger employees prefer to work in the office because they would like to have managerial guidance and face-to-face interactions; they enjoy being in a work environment to learn from others, concentrate, and exchange ideas as a team.

Given the advantages and disadvantages of working from home and in the office, one MNC decided to offer a combination of both for their employees. The HR Head of the company mentioned that their employee satisfaction rate reached a ten-year historical high when employees worked from home during the COVID-related lockdown. However, when asked about their willingness to return to work, 70 percent wanted to return to the office. This shows that employees value the benefits of remote working, yet also see the advantages of working in the office.

- **Promoting psychological and physical well-being**

Companies recognize the value of promoting both the psychological and physical health of all employees. Numerous participating companies offer more generous health benefits than legally required, for instance, an office gym, in-house medical doctor, free physical examinations, and supplementary private health insurance for immediate family. Some companies also offer subsidized yoga classes and massage services. A few encourage employees to exercise by holding global workout competitions.

**Some companies provide Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) that offer confidential counseling to employees and their immediate family.** The counseling sessions are conducted on the phone, via online conferencing platforms and WeChat, an instant messaging app. Two China HR Heads pointed out that the usage rates are not as high as those in Western countries; however, one of them reported a significant rise in the usage rates of this service during the pandemic compared to the previous year. It was found that there were more relationship issues with spouses and children during this stressful period of working from home. This serves as a testament to the counseling service's value for dealing with stress.

## - Gaps

In addition to best practices, the HR interviews identified policy gaps that need to be addressed in order to promote gender equality in the workplace. The gaps include limited utilization of paternity leave benefits and a lack of sexual harassment training in most companies.

### • Low uptake of paternity leave

As with maternity and other leave benefits, paternity leave offered by the participating companies is in accordance with provincial laws and regulations in China. Several companies offer more generous benefits than the legal requirements by allowing up to four weeks of paid paternity leave to fathers. However, when asked about the percentage of uptake by new fathers and whether they take advantage of the full benefits, most HR professionals said that their companies did not systematically track this or that the information was not readily available. Those who had the information generally said that men do not take advantage of the full duration of the paternity leave to which they are entitled.

While men tend not to fully utilize their paternity leave compared to women, they also tend to use less of the childcare related leave benefits provided by their employers. Some companies provide family-friendly leave to employees that surpass the legal requirements. For example, one MNC provides five days of paid family-care leave annually, and another provides extended childcare leave without pay after the birth of a child. The HR representatives of both companies said that more women take this leave than men.

An HR professional whose organization offers four weeks of paternity leave attributed this low uptake by fathers to social and cultural perceptions. Male leaders are concerned about male employees' absence from work, while male employees themselves are worried that they may lose out on opportunities such as securing a business contract. This HR professional advocated for more training for both management and employees to change mindsets, as taking paternity leave should not impact men's career development.

The HR interviewee whose company provides extended childcare leave said that some men do take advantage of this family-friendly policy, and that the “new generation of fathers” plays a more proactive role in childcare. However, this observation is still an exception to the trend of men’s low uptake on paternity and family-care leave which affects women’s perceptions of their career advancement opportunities. Men’s reluctance to take advantage of childcare leave could be considered the starting point of imbalanced parental responsibilities.

- **The need for sexual harassment awareness training**

All participating MNCs have corporate guidelines and mechanisms in place for reporting and investigating sexual harassment and some stress zero tolerance for such behavior. The majority of HR interviewees reported no or very few cases of sexual harassment and did not perceive it to be an issue in their companies. However, further inquiries revealed that more subtle instances of sexual harassment, such as inappropriate jokes or comments, do occur in more social business settings, and it is often tolerated or unaddressed.

This trend reveals that **individuals tend not to identify inappropriate behaviors and remarks as sexual harassment and in turn tend not to report these incidents**. This highlights the need for awareness training on preventing and dealing with harassment, which several MNCs provide in the form of online training for all staff and public support by leaders.

Two participating MNCs have set up respectful workplace training modules that cover the issue of harassment. The online training is mandatory for all staff, with one company providing annual training to everyone, while the other offers more intensive in-person training to management with workshops for reflection and exchange. The training presents scenarios illustrating different levels of uncomfortable situations and educates employees to deal with or report these behaviors. Employees of these two companies found the training useful for identifying and responding to problematic situations.

Some companies have also noted the importance of advocacy by senior management in preventing instances of harassment. Leaders are expected to speak in town hall meetings in order to reinforce the company’s attitude against inappropriate behavior in the workplace and encourage employees to report them. This has proven to enhance employees’ confidence in seeking the company’s support without fear of judgment or retaliation.



## - Conclusion

The HR professional interviews have indicated some best practices and gaps in the participating companies' gender equality policies. Several HR professionals stressed the critical role of local leadership in implementing global policies. As DNI measures are generally top-down policies driven by HQ, leaders and line managers' attitudes and actions are vital to the application of these policies in practice. Our findings suggest that line managers face challenges when carrying out global policies promoting gender equality due to limited resources and budgets. However, in some instances, senior management in China is willing to persist and devote financial resources to see it through. This shows how "walking the talk" models and reinforces a company's inclusive culture.

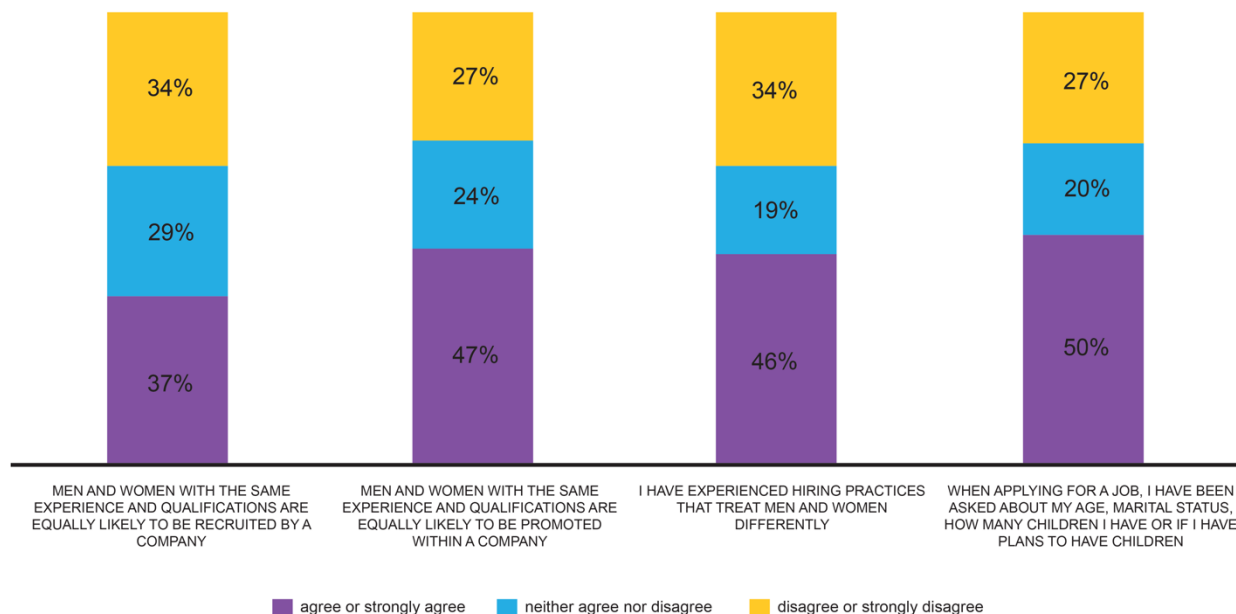


## ■ Quantitative Survey: Results and Analysis

### - Introduction

The survey captures the perspectives of nearly 60 professional women, representing a range of seniority from entry level to senior management. Respondents provide their insights on hiring and promotion practices, sexual harassment, current work environment, the challenges facing working women, flexible work arrangements (FWAs), and health and well-being.

### - Hiring and Promotion Practices

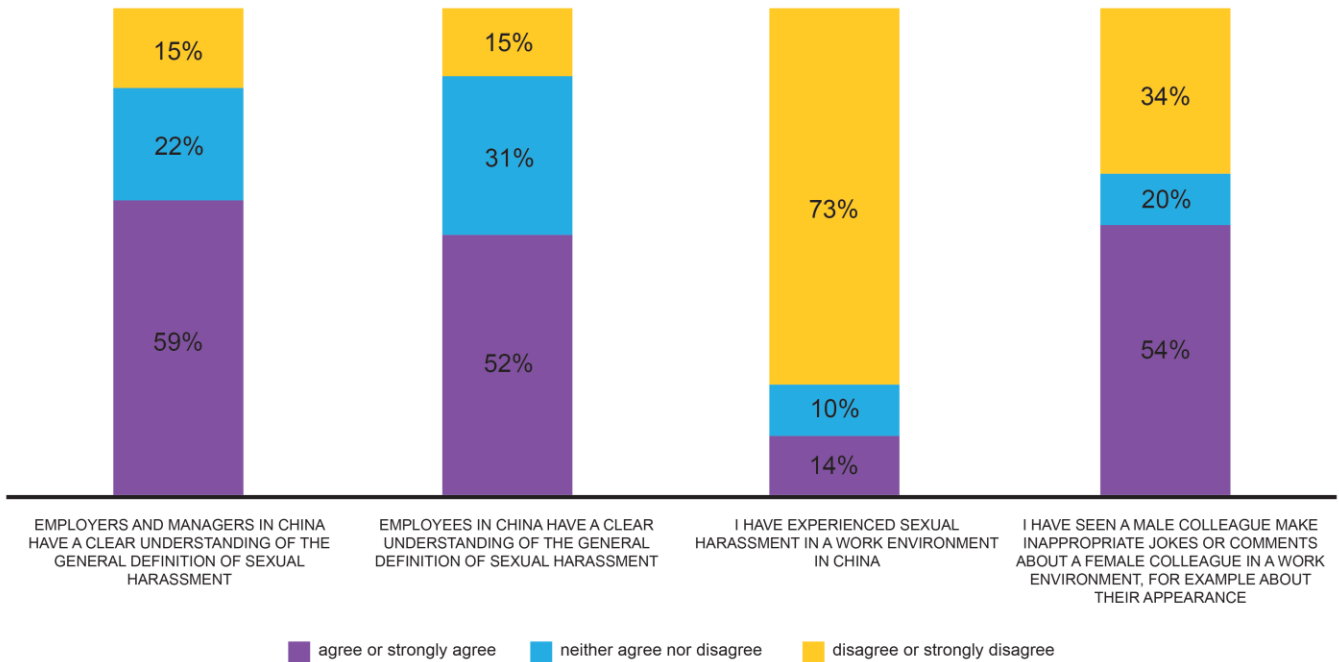


When asked whether men and women with the same experience and qualifications are equally likely to be recruited by a company, respondents are split fairly evenly between agreeing/strongly agreeing (37%), neither agreeing nor disagreeing (29%), and disagreeing/strongly disagreeing (34%). In contrast, almost half of respondents agree/strongly agree that men and women with the same experience and qualifications are equally likely to be promoted within a company. These findings indicate that a minority of respondents perceive there to be an issue of gender bias in hiring and promotion practices.

However, when asked to report on their own experience, almost half of respondents agree/strongly agree that they have experienced hiring practices that treat men and women differently. Furthermore, 25% agree and 25% strongly agree that they have been asked about their age, marital status, how many children they have or plan to have during a job application.

Together, these findings may indicate that respondents do not associate their personal experiences of gender discrimination with a wider systemic issue, instead believing it to be an isolated phenomenon since it was outlawed in 2019. Alternatively, the findings could demonstrate a misunderstanding of what constitutes discriminatory hiring practices. Though it is legal for employers to ask questions about an employee or job applicant's age, gender, and ethnicity, questions about marriage and childbirth status are classified as discriminatory practice in the Chinese law published in 2019 and are therefore illegal.

## - Sexual Harassment

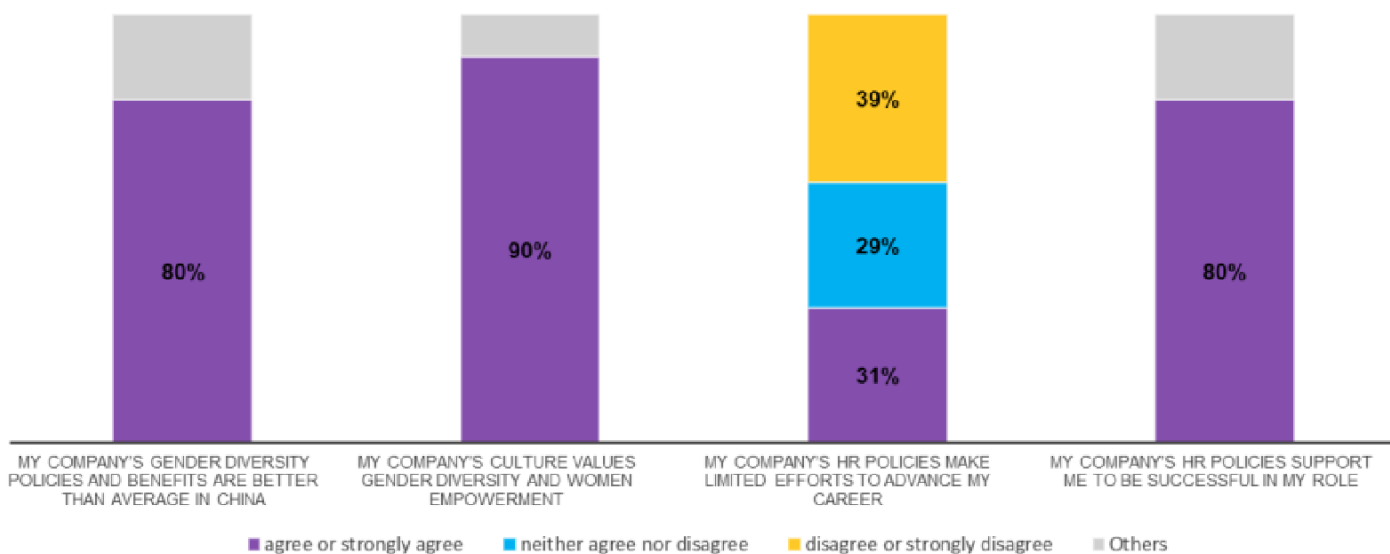


When asked whether employers and managers in China a clear understanding of the general definition of sexual harassment have, a majority (**59%**) agree/strongly agree, and a minority (**15%**) disagree /strongly disagree. When asked the same question about employees in China, the results are almost the same. This shows that a majority of respondents believe sexual harassment to be clearly understood by employers, managers, and employees in China.

In responding to whether they have personally experienced sexual harassment in a work environment in China, a majority (**73%**) disagree/strongly disagree, with 42 percent strongly disagreeing. Although **14%** of respondents agreeing that they have experienced sexual harassment is in itself cause for concern, it is even more alarming that over half of respondents agree/strongly agree that they have observed a male colleague make inappropriate jokes or comments about a female colleague at work, for example, about their appearance.

Together, these findings indicate that although a majority of respondents have witnessed sexual harassment in a work environment in China, a minority have personally experienced it. Alternatively, these findings may once again demonstrate a lack of awareness about what constitutes sexual harassment. If this is the case, it implies that the percentage of employees in China who have a clear understanding of the general definition of sexual harassment is lower than perceived, and this likely extends to employers and managers.

## - Current Work Environment



Overall, these findings clearly show that a majority of respondents perceive their current work environment positively: **80%** view their company's gender diversity policies and benefits to be above average in China; **90%** recognize that their company's culture values gender diversity and women empowerment; and **80%** deem their company's HR policies to support them to be successful in their role. However, one area which employers can improve on is how well their HR policies support women professionals to advance in their careers, as perspectives were more evenly distributed on this point.

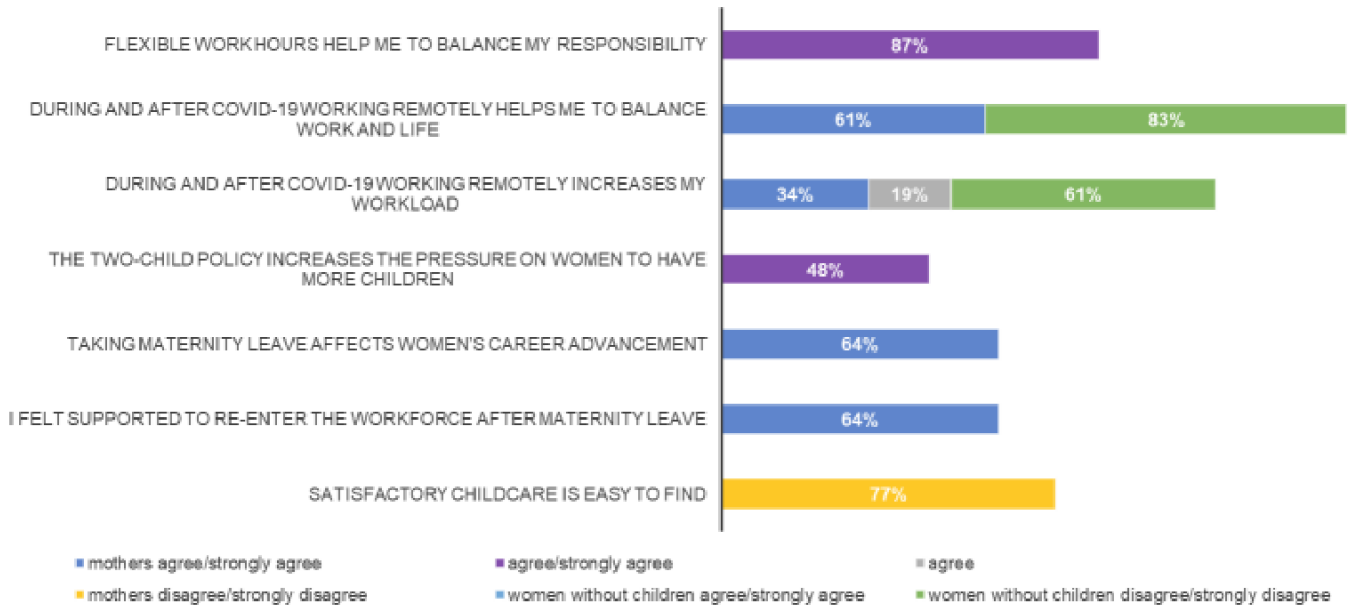
## - Challenges Working Women Face



These findings reveal some of the key challenges that working women face in China. Over half of the respondents agree/strongly agree that they find it challenging to balance work and life responsibilities, that marriage diverts women's time and resources from work, and that women have more responsibilities than men to care for elder members of the family including parents and parents-in-law. Around 3 in 5 respondents believe women have more household responsibilities than men, such as cooking and cleaning, while 4 in 5 feel that women have more childcare responsibilities than men. It is important for companies to be aware that almost 90 percent of respondents believe that the additional responsibilities women hold in the home, such as the ones abovementioned, have a direct impact on their ability to succeed in their job, making it harder for them to succeed than men.

## - Flexible Work Arrangements, Family-friendly Policies, Two-child policy

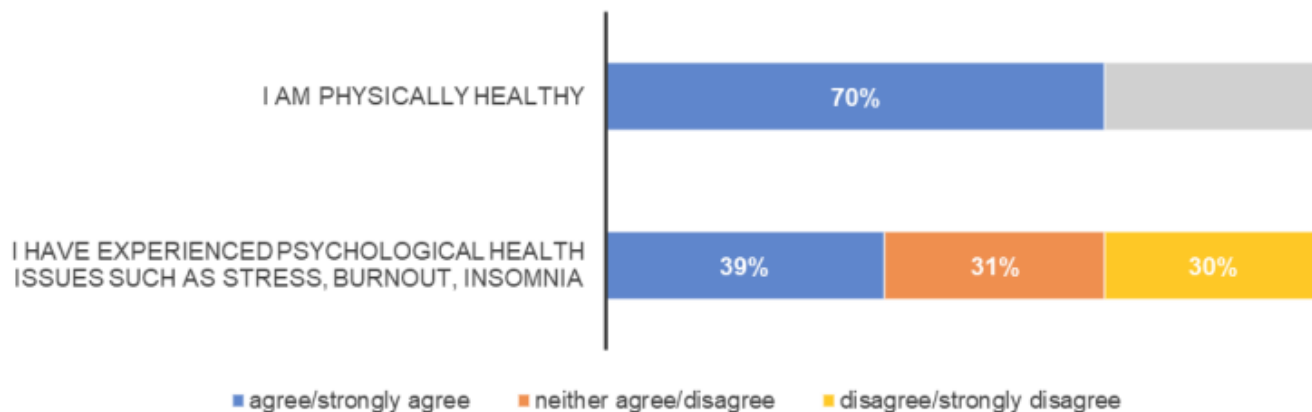
### Policies, Two-child policy



These findings reveal how respondents with and without children are impacted by FWAs, family-friendly policies, and the two-child policy. Mothers shared their perspective on available childcare support in China with the majority (77%) disagreeing/strongly disagreeing that it is easy to find. When asked if they feel supported to re-enter the workforce after maternity leave, the majority (64%) agree/strongly agree; while the same percentage agree/strongly agree that it affects women's career advancement. This may indicate that while they have experienced support from companies in returning to their role after maternity leave, they have also missed opportunities to advance at work or are less preferred for promotions as a new mother. When asked about the impact of the two-child policy, almost half of the respondents agree/strongly agree that it has increased the pressure to have more children, regardless of whether they have already had one child.

Regarding FWAs, some differences are evident in comparing responses of women with and without children. For example, almost twice as many women without children disagree/strongly disagree that working remotely increased their workload during and after COVID-19 in comparison to working mothers, of whom 19% agree that it did. This shows that working remotely disproportionately negatively impacts working mothers in comparison to women without children, which likely relates to children being at home during the pandemic. Conversely, only 22% more women without children agree/strongly agree that working remotely helps them balance work and life in comparison to working mothers, indicating that overall women with and without children see it as a benefit. Finally, a strong majority (87%) of women agree/strongly agree that flexible works hours help them to balance their responsibilities, regardless of whether they have children.

## - Personal Health and Wellbeing



In regard to personal health and wellbeing, 7 in 10 respondents agree/strongly agree that they are physically healthy. However, findings are more split when asked whether they have experienced psychological health issues such as stress, burnout, or insomnia with 2 in 5 agreeing/strongly agreeing, suggesting that respondents' perceptions of their mental health are more varied.

## - Conclusion

The quantitative survey results indicate a number of significant discrepancies: the discrepancy between perceived and reported gender bias in hiring and promotion practices, the discrepancy between respondents who state they have experienced sexual harassment themselves and those who state they have witnessed harassment against a colleague, and lastly, the discrepancy between respondents who agree that it is challenging for women to balance work and life responsibilities and those who agree that it is more challenging for women to succeed in their jobs because of additional responsibilities at home. These discrepancies are significant because they demonstrate disinclination to associate personal experience with larger, systemic problems. This could be due to a lack of understanding of the definitions of terms such as gender bias, sexual harassment, and work-life balance.

These discrepancies aside, the data shows an unambiguous need for better enforcement of hiring policies that discourage gender bias, more education and training around sexual harassment prevention and reporting, better support for women who are struggling to balance their work and home responsibilities, career advancement opportunities for new mothers returning from maternity leave, and finally, more access to quality childcare.



## ■ Focus Group Findings

### - Introduction

Whereas the HR professionals approached the questions from a policy administration perspective, the focus group participants carried out the discussions in a more informal and social setting. They shared their opinions and experiences with other women in confidence. Some of them were candid about the personal and professional challenges they faced, and others shared their observation and evaluation of the current trends. These discussions reflected working women's personal experiences, shedding light on the impact and potential of company policies in gender diversity.

### - Women's Additional Family Responsibilities

Consistent with the findings of the HR professional interviews and quantitative survey **most working mothers reported being accountable for more family responsibilities, including childcare and household chores, in comparison to men. This leads to an experience of the “double burden” that is not shared by men.** However, some focus group participants acknowledged that the trend of men taking on more responsibilities at home is growing, especially among the younger generations. Nevertheless, most women are still expected to play a more important role in domestic work.

Several women in the focus groups mentioned that they do more at home than their husbands. A mother in her 30s commented that “many working mothers complain that their husbands have much room for improvement in the areas of fulfilling their family responsibilities and spending time with their children.” A woman in her 30s said that after becoming a mother, all of her free time was devoted to caring for her child, while her husband still got to have his own space and go out with friends. One night when her husband was playing video games, she started crying and said she wanted to have her own life just like him. Another mother described this fairly common division of labor as owing to the expectation that husbands are the main breadwinner focusing on work, whereas wives care for children while working.

However, this generalization did not apply to all the focus group participants: a few women professionals stated that their husbands actively took on family responsibilities including cooking and helping with children's homework. Some women professionals reported a reversal of traditional gender roles taking place in their home or colleagues' households. A few women observed that **“young generations” of men including those born in the 1990's tend to take on more family responsibilities including childcare.**



While some men do take on more family responsibilities, the cultural expectation for women to be accountable for domestic labor still exists in China. An executive said that her husband made efforts helping with their children's homework, but teachers in school would still go to mothers first to follow up.

A Young professional pointed out that these types of cultural expectations and traditional mindsets push women into conventional gender roles, pressuring single women to take on duties of elderly care and getting married. A few married women with no children mentioned that their parents hope for them to have children.

The focus group discussions indicate **a potential shift in the mindsets of younger women who pay more attention to self-care and expect the mental burden of parental responsibility to be**

**shared by the father.** One woman in her 30s stated that she plans "me time" for relaxation and personal development, and on days when her husband is the primary caregiver of their child, she does not plan or prepare what he needs to do but instead expects him to figure it out on his own. This indicates that the younger generation of women are acknowledging and relinquishing the mental burden of childcare in addition to the practical burden.

- **Impact of family responsibilities on career success**

The HR interviews and quantitative survey found that **women's additional household responsibilities are considered incompatible with work commitment and performance. This perception is shared by some professional women and hiring managers in the focus groups.**

One focus group's participants believe that women's additional family responsibilities affect their career decisions and plans, consequently impacting their career development. A woman said that mothers tend to take on more stable work, take fewer business trips, and adhere to a fixed work schedule in order to attend to household responsibilities. Another woman said her friend chose to delay her plans to change jobs because of childbearing plans. A few women mentioned that working in sales requires a lot of business travel and long work hours. Therefore, some women, after having children, switch to less demanding functions, or try to move up into sales management to take on policy setting and planning roles in the office.

Women's additional household responsibilities are also in the mind of some hiring managers and HR professionals. A HR professional stated in a focus group that men are generally preferred for certain positions, for example, in the field of engineering, that involve business travel, high-intensity work, more physical strength, networking events involving alcohol, and long-term off-site projects with potential security concerns.

- **Gender discrimination in hiring**

In line with our secondary research findings, **women's additional household expectations lead to discriminatory hiring practices, which focus on their childbearing and childcare prospects. Despite the Chinese government's legislative measures and MNC's policies to ensure women's work opportunities, focus group participants still observed or even practiced gender preference in recruitment.**

Although it is prohibited by law for employers to ask a female candidate about her marriage or childbirth status, **it is lawful for employers to seek information on her age, gender, and ethnicity.** In addition, public awareness around illegal hiring practices meant to prevent biased hiring is not as high in China as in the US or Canada. A HR professional shared that all job search platforms in China require age and gender to create a jobseeker's profile. **It is also common for both male and female job seekers in China to disclose personal information including age, gender, ethnicity, and marital status on their resume or job applications.** A HR professional indicated that whereas her counterparts in the US follow the policy of not asking questions concerning age, gender, marriage, and previous salary, this policy is not yet implemented in China.

It was found that employers, including MNCs in China, still ask personal questions relevant to childbearing and marital status, though sometimes in a more careful or indirect way. Before officially hiring a female candidate, companies can still obtain information on her childbearing and marital status by asking about her family insurance needs or if she has childcare arrangements. A HR Head said that if candidates refuse to share personal information, employers can choose to not hire them without revealing the real reason behind the decision.

According to a few focus group discussions, hiring managers prefer to learn more about candidates' personal situation in consideration of business needs. **A woman manager commented that "this is a practical issue":** a woman just married for one to two years is very likely to have children. **The possibility of a female candidate going on maternity leave would be an important risk factor to consider when her team's workload and headcount were stretched. Her potential absence would not help the team.** This perspective is echoed by a HR professional who indicated that women's physical vulnerability during pregnancy, the additional costs of hiring a temporary replacement during her absence, and the popular belief that "women are intellectually weaker three years after pregnancy" all lead to hiring managers or colleagues' unwillingness to work with potential mothers.

Several women's experiences confirm these statements; namely, that they had been asked questions regarding their family situation during job interviews. A young professional believed that between a man and a woman who are equally qualified for a job, a company will choose the man instead of the woman. Some felt the hiring managers had hidden gender preferences, but there was no concrete evidence to support such a claim.

- **Gender stereotypes**

Women's additional family duties are among the many gender stereotypes that make employers prefer men for certain types of positions, limiting women's career options and advancement. These gender stereotypes generalize men and women's traits and behaviors that deem one gender more competent than the other in particular tasks, positions, or areas of expertise. Gender stereotyping inhibits equal access to career opportunities.

**Men's greater physical strength gives them a professional advantage in labor intensive work, as well as work involving more overtime and night shifts.** A young professional working in a hospital said that male nurses are clearly preferred over female nurses as they are deemed more physically strong and better fit to work night shifts. But she perceived this gender preference to be unfair as it does not take into consideration women nurses' skills and clinical experience and that they have worked 80 percent of the night shifts.

Men are also seen as stronger leaders and risk-takers than women, disadvantaging women's career advancement. A senior female leader observed that MNCs now proudly talk about the increased women representation in their companies, including senior leadership roles, but women leaders tend to be in more functions traditionally occupied by women, for instance, administration, communications, or public relations. She found that there **was a lack of top women leaders in profit and loss roles in her own company.** In the same focus group, a mother in her early 40s said that she was a top business leader in her company, attributing her success partly to the corporate culture of inclusivity. Her company has a longer history of cultivating and implementing DNI values, which has been "embedded in their DNA".

A woman senior executive believed that employers and hiring managers should not quickly rule out mothers for certain positions because of the gender bias that mothers are unable to work overtime or go on business trips. Instead, she thought female candidates should be given the opportunity to make their own decisions on whether to take on positions demanding more time from their family life.

## - **Childcare Challenges**

The quantitative survey found that the division of domestic labor was the least balanced for women when it comes to childcare. To cope with the demand from both work and family life, working mothers need help, whether it's from their husband, an *ayi* (a hired nanny who often cooks and cleans), or the children's grandparents. However, in line with the findings of the quantitative survey, **many focus group participants found the childcare options they had unsatisfactory. Although Chinese families tend to have more childcare support from grandparents and can access less expensive domestic help compared to European and US standards, working mothers still face childcare challenges.**

**Grandparents' support is helpful, but their different values and habits often lead to family disagreements on childrearing.** Many grandparents live with their children or spend a significant amount of time caring for their grandchildren. Multiple women appreciated the childcare support from their parents or in-laws, particularly during the pandemic when they had to work from home. Such assistance helped women concentrate on work. A Shanghai mother of two relied on her parents to care for her less than one-year-old baby and older child attending kindergarten. She appreciated her parents' commitment by "sacrificing their time, plans, and arrangements with friends." However, some women did mention that there are generational gaps in values and habits in terms of raising children, leading to friction and tension in the family. A mother said that "the grandparents and I have different opinions on childcare in many areas, but the grandparents have done so much, and if you criticize them, they feel unfairly treated." She said that ideally, she would like to care for her own child while working full-time, but because of work, she had to rely on the grandparents' support for dropping off and picking up her child from kindergarten.

A number of women mentioned that, because of old age, health reasons, or by choice, their children's grandparents were unable or chose not to help them full-time, so they had to hire an *ayi* to care for young children and do chores. In a few focus groups, mothers mentioned that **finding and maintaining an *ayi* that meets their expectations is challenging.** They found it difficult to manage, perceiving domestic help providers to be generally lacking in standardized training and education but frequently seeking higher financial compensation. A woman said she ran through 22 *ayis* with her first child and doubled the market price to maintain an *ayi* for her second child but was still dissatisfied with the quality of the domestic help provided, specifically referring to the *ayi's* accent as dissatisfactory.

Given these challenges, some working parents turn to childcare services or early childhood education institutions for solutions. **Nevertheless, there is a lack of publicly funded early childhood education in China for children under the age of three.** Three mothers based in Beijing and Shanghai said that instead of hiring a nanny or seeking the grandparents' help, they placed their toddlers in daycare services when they were two or younger, but the services were private services that are costly in major cities like Beijing and Shanghai. One of the mothers said that she spent 20,000 RMB a month on the tuition of her child's private kindergarten education and an *ayi* to help with household chores. She said sending her child to a private kindergarten gave her more reassurance that her child would not be treated badly like she was when she had previously attended a public kindergarten; and having an *ayi*, despite its challenges, allowed her to have more time for herself, for example to exercise after work.

It is worth noting that **when discussing the topics of having children and childcare, numerous women professionals referred to them as being expensive and resource intensive.**

A senior executive brought up the idea of “involution” or *neijuan* which is currently a much-discussed term in China. It is used to describe the tendency of excessive refinement and fierce competition in the Chinese society, particularly in education and work environments. This concept is linked to anxiety among Chinese parents, especially those in first-tier cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, where competition is stiff and real estate close to good schools is very expensive and sought after. To keep up with the Joneses, parents face pressures to pay for housing and training classes that would ensure their children’s academic and personal success. The senior executive attributed this trend to be one of the causes for parents’ discontent with the high expectations for children’s achievements that require tremendous investment of time and energy. This has been consistently reported as an attributing reason for not wanting or planning to have more than one child.

## - Retirement

Retirement is another factor impacting women’s participation in the economy. According to the current Chinese legal requirements, which are set to be gradually adjusted, women should retire between five to ten years earlier than male professionals. While the legal retirement age for men is 60 years old, the legal retirement age for blue collar women is 50 and for women professionals is 55. While some women perceive this to be a benefit, others recognize that this disadvantages women’s career opportunities and economic power.

Some focus group participants thought retirement was a benefit for women to take an early break from working in order to focus on their health and develop personal interests. A young professional stated that her mother and her mother’s friend, both senior executives a few years away from retirement, were looking forward to their retired life. One wanted to turn her passion for quilting into her own business and the other had been planning on buying a recreational vehicle to travel in China.

### • Inequality in career and financial opportunities

However, several focus group participants pointed out **retiring five to ten years earlier impacts women’s career development and financial power**. A senior manager said that this gender inequality in retirement age can be perceived by employers as a disadvantage to develop female leadership; it is a big difference for employers to make an effort to promote a woman leader who is the exception rather than when it is a fundamental part of the system. Another senior manager said that five years of difference means one to two assignments less in a person’s career planning, which may mean career opportunities taken away from a woman. While Chinese laws allow companies the flexibility to hire retirees back as contractors, the senior manager said that this arrangement still limits the contractor’s role and responsibilities as an unofficial employee, and the arrangements of hiring someone back are decided at the end of someone’s career, not taken into consideration earlier in their career planning.

Another female manager was also concerned about this policy's impact on women's economic power. She initially disagreed with Chinese government's policy of slowing increasing women's retirement age, thinking that it forced women to work longer instead of "living a more colorful lifestyle". However, she later realized that retiring several years earlier means loss of financial power, impacting a woman's income and eligibility for loans. She also pointed out that there is a growing trend of women remaining single in China, and their livelihood may be significantly impacted by this loss of income. She stated that despite the current trends of women living longer than men and receiving good education, this inequality shortens women's time to contribute to society and actualize their value.

A manager working in a manufacturing factory said that **some women factory workers do not want to retire at the age of 50 as they often face financial pressures and family responsibilities of supporting elderly parents, children, and even grandchildren**. The manager said that those women would rather continue to work for a salary higher than the retirement pension that retirees can legally receive. She also mentioned that the legal retirement age, along with social expectations for grandparents to care for grandchildren, pressure women to fulfill their childcare responsibilities which some women may not want to undertake.

- **Ageism**

While discussing the limitations caused by the legal retirement age, a woman executive mentioned the ageism that she discovered in the Chinese labor market, **where candidates under 35 years old are preferred: she had educated and capable women friends in their late 30s who wanted to shift their focus from childcare to re-entering the workforce but encountered challenges because of their age**. She believed this was another disadvantage in addition to women's retirement age that cut women's careers short. Age as a disadvantage was also mentioned by two women in another focus group, where they observed that both men and women over 45 do not have career advancement opportunities in their companies.

- **Retirees at work**

Retirees with their rich experience and knowledge are a valuable human resource to organizations. An executive commented that some women she knew "retired in their heyday". In addition to being hired back as contractors or consultants, senior managers mentioned retirement options including volunteering, starting their own business, and pursuing self-development. It was suggested in a focus group discussion that retirees are hired on a part-time basis, some as advisors or consultants, to contribute their expertise to companies to keep them engaged. This was seen as a win-win model with MNCs tapping into the rich human capital of professional retirees to support business success with lower costs.

## - Sexual Harassment

When discussing the topic of workplace sexual harassment, most focus group participants believed that the occurrence of sexual harassment in office environments is very rare. However, a good number of them acknowledged that they had encountered more subtle forms of sexual harassment, for instance, men making inappropriate jokes or comments on the physical appearance of a woman. A senior leader said that she had seen men in high positions making inappropriate jokes in business settings. An executive said that subtle forms of sexual harassment would occur more often in client-facing settings where alcohol is consumed. Two women had witnessed male clients hug women colleagues at business networking events.

- **Lack of clarity on how to define or deal with subtle forms of sexual harassment**

The findings of the HR professional interviews, quantitative survey, and focus group interviews of this research project all indicate that the common notion of “sexual harassment” is not associated with ambiguous remarks or behaviors, with inappropriate jokes taking place more frequently. The women interviewees pointed out that inappropriate remarks fall into a culturally gray area, and those who make those remarks or those on the receiving end may not regard them as inappropriate. Therefore, they are often tolerated or dismissed. A young woman stated that when such comments caused her discomfort, she would not know how to respond and what the potential consequences would be if she had confronted and corrected the other person.

While sexual harassment was reported to take place more in the form of inappropriate comments or behaviors by men in positions of power, a HR professional thought that women may also make male colleagues uncomfortable when casually joking about sensitive topics, or making them wear skirts in a year-end event. This led to the observation that more awareness training should be given on respect in the workplace and how to prevent and deal with actions that make individuals uncomfortable.

- **Education on respectful workplaces**

Employees from a few companies shared that their companies provided mandatory training on maintaining respect and professional etiquette in the workplace, covering topics including sexual harassment and office bullying. The training module, usually offered annually, would provide scenarios to identify behavior that oversteps personal boundaries and propose strategies for dealing with behavior that causes discomfort. The women who had received such training found it useful and relevant. A woman also shared that after a top leader in her company openly advocated for reporting inappropriate behaviors in an annual meeting, she felt more reassured and confident to utilize her company’s reporting system.

Three women from different focus groups also shared their experience of being defended and protected by male colleagues after inappropriate comments or actions took place at networking events. This further demonstrates the importance of shared support and respect that can be enhanced by awareness training and leadership support.

## - **Positive Assessment of Current Workplace**

In line with the results of the quantitative survey, **the focus group participants rated their current employers positively. The consensus was that MNCs are generally more open and inclusive, and women felt more respected and valued in their companies.** A fair number of women stated that based on their experience and understanding, compared to state-owned enterprises and private companies, MNCs pay more attention to empowering women by career development and supporting work-life balance.

A mother of two shared her personal story of returning to work after taking maternity leave from the two companies she worked for. After having her first child, she went on maternity leave for five and a half months and returned to find that her position and work had been taken over by another individual and she had no place in the company. This made her leave to join her current company, which is a multinational company. After giving birth to her second child, she went on maternity leave for three and half months, and her employer arranged a temporary replacement from another company location, and she returned to work to find her job still secure.

A young professional also shared her mother's challenges working for a state-owned bank in a third-tier city, where men were "apparently more preferred" for promotion than women. She explained that in her hometown men "have a voice" and are positioned for success, as they tend to have more social resources in government and business organizations which are traditionally male dominated. In a focus group with women senior executives, it was agreed that MNCs tend to respect employees' time off on weekends, "unless there is a project with an urgent deadline".

A HR Head pointed out that corporate culture and company size are important factors facilitating gender diversity policies, but "companies on the rise or are in emerging industries" are focused more on business growth and profits than gender diversity. She believed that the current excess manpower in China leads to fierce competition in the job market, giving employers more advantage in selecting employees and offering benefits.



## - Remote Working

A majority of the HR professionals and focus groups participants believe that the pandemic transformed FWAs (from a plan or an option) into a reality. **Whereas global research found that the pandemic has burdened women with more family responsibilities while trying to work from home with their children, most of the quantitative survey respondents and the focus group participants rated FWAs like working from home quite positively.**

The reason for this different attitude may be that China's relatively quick recovery from the COVID-19 outbreak made life go back to normal more quickly than the rest of the world, relieving working mothers of their unaided "double burden" at home. As parents return to the office with access to the usual childcare support, remote working has become part of the flexible work arrangements offered by numerous MNCs. It is now a good alternative instead of a practice forced upon parents due to pandemic lockdown.

- **Flexibility in time management**

In the focus group discussions, remote working was generally considered beneficial for work-life balance. Women believe it allows more flexibility for them to work while caring for children. A mother said that working from home allowed her to attend to her child's school schedule by sending her child to school and picking her up. In contrast, a fixed work schedule would not have made this possible. A woman who has worked from home for several years stated that she had developed good time management skills and could flexibly work in non-office settings, for instance, working while accompanying her young daughter in an indoor playground.

Working from home also saves time spent on commuting, especially in metropolitan cities like Beijing and Shanghai. A woman living in Shanghai mentioned that working from home reduces two to three hours of daily commuting time, and the time saved from commuting can be used for more productive purposes, including working.

- **Lack of separation between work and life**

However, remote working also presents challenges. Several focus group participants stated that **working from home has blurred the line between work and life, and work hours now go beyond the regular work hours of nine to five.** A few women mentioned that the pandemic has curbed international travel, and made international conference calls a norm, often beyond regular work hours.

A senior executive stated that she had virtual meetings with managers in the European and US time zones, making her work well into the night. This is echoed by a young professional, who stated that one night she had back-to-back calls from six in the evening to one o'clock in the morning Beijing time. She joked that now regular works hours became irregular work hours, and the policy of FWAs has made it difficult for employees to ask for overtime compensation.

Professionals also observed that working at home with young children poses challenges for their ability to concentrate on work and hold online meetings without interruption. Two focus group participants shared that at the height of the COVID-19 outbreak in the first few months of 2020, they had difficulty working from home with their children without any family or domestic help. A single woman shared that she often heard children's voices in the background during online meetings, and her colleague would hide in the basement to ensure quiet away from his children.

- **Lower work efficiency**

A number of focus group participants, including both managers and staff, observed that remote working has made communications and collaboration less efficient. They stated that work communications have slowed down because it is more difficult to reach colleagues and receive a response. A number of participants appreciated the effectiveness of face-to-face exchange, perceiving it to enhance productivity and team coordination.

Remote working also makes it more difficult to focus on work. A single woman in her thirties acknowledged that there was more distraction while working from home and it would take her more time to complete her work tasks at home as she allocated more time to her hobbies and pets. She stated that this did not affect the quality of her work but did impact how efficiently she completed her tasks.

- **Office equipment and facilities**

The emergence of working from home leads to discussions regarding employers' traditional role in providing office equipment and facilities, and the new trend's financial implications. A woman said that her workstation at the office was equipped with an ergonomic chair and desk and large monitors, but she did not have such equipment at home. This made working from home not as physically comfortable as working in the office. Another woman also mentioned that working from home leads to more utilities cost born by employees, but employees are not financially compensated for the additional electricity, water, and heat cost resulting from working at home. A woman shared that an IT company she knew revamped their entire office space, showing how the pandemic has made companies rethink work arrangements and workspace setup.

- **Ideal amount of remote working**

**When asked about the ideal amount or percentage of time that should be allocated for remote working, most focus group participants said 1 to 2 days per week.** A focus group participant said that one should spend 3 days per week in the office dealing with urgent and important tasks, and 2 days away from the office to work at one's own pace for a good balance. This range of 1 to 2 days per week, or 40% of work time, is also in line with several companies' current approach.

- **More focused on results than process**

With the implementation of remote working, managers and staff in the focus groups agreed that managers have learned to focus on the end product of employees' work, as opposed to paying attention to the time they spend in the office. Two young professionals pointed out that despite remote work arrangements, managers are capable of making good judgments on staff's efforts and work performance.

- **Psychological and Physical Health**

When discussing psychological and physical health issues experienced by women, several women mentioned postpartum discomfort, menstrual cramps and menopausal issues. Women professionals also reported experiencing psychological health issues including burnout, anxiety, and stress. **In the focus group discussions, several topics were brought up frequently – psychological and physical health issues attributed to childbirth, family relationships, and work pressure, as well as physical discomfort caused by menstrual cramps.**

Several women spoke about the psychological and physical strains they experienced a few months after giving birth, but some of them did not identify this experience as postpartum depression. One woman reported experiencing lower energy and breast pain after having a second child. Two women mentioned that this period was the toughest time of their lives, when they had to breastfeed and care for their babies late at night. One of them explained that she was not psychologically depressed, but she was exhausted from the lack of sleep.

A few women mentioned negative emotions caused by family issues, including disagreements with their spouse and parents and children's difficulties in school. Some of them turned to psychological counseling and assistance programs for help. A manager said she and her husband have used counseling for guidance and were not affected by the popular belief that counseling is only for individuals with mental illness.

Two women shared that work pressure caused them stress and physical illnesses. One woman reported that the high levels of stress she experienced at work led to a physical surgery and eventually a change of job. A young saleswoman said she was hospitalized for ten days while on a business trip, explaining that the illness was due to weakened immunity caused by work pressure. She found her anxiety and stress levels higher than when she was a student: she did not have insomnia but would dream about work in her sleep. However, she did not think her experience is unique to women.

Multiple women professionals stated that menstrual pain impacts their ability to work. Two women mentioned the need for menstrual leave given the high level of discomfort. A manager said that some women find speaking to male managers about their menstrual pain embarrassing, but it is something that they have to deal with frequently.

- **Employee assistance valued**

**Several women from different companies mentioned and appreciated the support services provided by the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that their companies offered.** A woman said that she and her immediate family used the counseling service by making appointments with psychological professionals to deal with their disagreements. She found the service valuable and helpful and recommended it for her peers. Another senior executive of the same company said that her company realized the popularity of the EAP was beyond their initial expectations, which was a positive trend that should be encouraged. A senior executive said that she and her colleagues thought the notion of making an appointment with a stranger would be quite awkward and uncomfortable, but after hearing about the positive feedback in her focus group, she would be willing to try it out.

- **Importance of self-care**

One theme that emerged in the focus group discussions was self-care. **In the face of demands from work and family responsibilities, multiple women executives with children began to focus on their own wellbeing.** A senior executive with a young child said that “a women needs to please herself first and then please others.” Her comment resonated with a woman in her group, who would find time to read for self-improvement and develop hobbies like dancing and listening to music. She found that after spending quality time by herself, she was more able to deal with relationships with others and difficulties in life. Two other women mentioned in their respective focus groups that they tried not to strive for perfection in work and family lives in order to have a calmer state of mind. One of them said that she tried to reconcile with herself so she could reconcile with others and the world.

Women in the focus groups recognized the value of their companies' community and development programs, including ERGs, salons, and women's networks. These programs provide information on topics of interest like health seminars, as well as support for personal and career development. A manager working in a factory said that in their city-based offices, women's ERGs focus more on developing personal interests or hobbies, but in more remote factories, programs are designed to engage women in activities to socialize and support one another. This is because female factory workers' lifestyle in rural places tends to allow fewer opportunities for socialization.

# Conclusion

In conclusion, this report presents a comprehensive understanding of the factors impacting women's wellbeing in China in order to support women's full participation within the economy. Prevailing gender stereotypes negatively impact women's professional opportunities, career choices, and economic power. Despite Chinese government policies outlawing certain discriminatory hiring practices, many companies continue to explicitly favor candidates who are either men or women with no immediate plans to have children. Moreover, women face societal expectations to dedicate themselves to their families and financially contribute to the household, while men are still viewed as the breadwinners. These competing family and work responsibilities frequently come into conflict, leading to stress and burnout. One recommendation to alleviate this conflict and support working mothers is access to quality childcare, specifically for children under the age of three. Lastly, gender stereotypes about leadership and a gender gap in retirement age thwart women's opportunities to advance into and succeed in senior leadership roles.

Aware of the challenges uniquely faced by working women, MNCs in China implement gender diversity policies to support their choices, advancement, and success in the workplace. One notable best practice is setting clear DNI performance review targets for employees at all levels of the organization -- such as joining an ERG or delivering a town hall talk -- in order to embed the company's DNI values and goals in the culture and make everyone accountable for modeling and achieving them in a measurable way. Furthermore, MNCs tend to implement structured mentorship, coaching, and sponsorship programs that help to support, develop, and advance high potential female talent. More recently, practices like FWAs and EAPs that were once considered a privilege are now a reality due to COVID-19 and are generally seen by women as valuable and conducive to productivity and wellbeing.

Despite the overall positive outlook on MNCs as committed to DNI and supportive of working women, gaps and pain points remain that should be considered as opportunities for leaders and organizations to make further impact. One area for improvement is to provide sexual harassment training for managers and employees in order to clarify its scope and offer strategies for recognizing and dealing with more subtle forms of harassment such as inappropriate jokes or comments towards women, for example on their physical appearance. Another growth area is to go beyond offering extended or equal paternity leave to encourage and systematically track male employees' uptake on paternity leave and other family care leave benefits, as this lack of uptake could be considered the starting point of gendered expectations on family responsibilities that deter women's advancement in the workplace.

In summary, women tend to positively rate MNCs in China as workplaces where they generally feel respected, valued, and supported. However, there is still a need to build inclusive cultures with measurable DNI targets, to invest in developing female talent and supporting their career advancement particularly after returning from maternity leave, to provide training and reporting processes that protect women and reduce instances of more subtle forms of harassment, to investigate gendered attitudes held by managers and male employees towards family-friendly policies, to ensure women are provided equal opportunities at the highest levels of leadership, and to overall empower women with options to make choices that best reflect their personal values and professional goals.



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## - Detailed Description of the Methodology

### **HR professional interviews**

The HR professional interviews were conducted in English with 12 HR and Diversity and Inclusion (DNI) professionals of ten China-based MNCs. The interviewees included six HR Heads, four HR managers, and two DNI specialized managers based in Beijing and Shanghai. Interviewees were provided the questionnaire in advance and each interview ran between one and a half to two hours. Out of the ten interviews, two were conducted in-person and eight were conducted online. During the interviews, interviewers covered all of the questions in the questionnaire and asked follow-up questions to obtain further details and in-depth information.

### **Quantitative survey**

The quantitative survey, comprised of 34 questions in both Chinese and English, was answered by 59 women from ten MNCs. The survey participants were colleagues identified by the HR professionals who participated in the interviews. The HR professionals helped recruit volunteers by sharing information about the project and provided the names and contact information of 96 women who agreed to participate. These women were contacted via e-mail with a link to access the online survey. Out of those who were contacted, 59 completed the survey. The survey respondents were based in the companies' Beijing, Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu locations. 55 of the respondents worked in offices and four worked as senior and middle managers in manufacturing plants.

### **Focus groups**

The focus groups were conducted with 55 volunteers from 17 MNCs from April to July 2021. The 17 MNCs included the ten MNCs participating in the HR interviews and quantitative survey. Among the 55 focus group participants, 30 had completed the quantitative survey. Approximately one third of the participants were senior leaders, one third middle managers, and one third entry level professionals. They were based in the companies' Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Tianjin, Chengdu, Jiangxi and Shandong locations. 55 of the respondents worked in offices and four worked as middle managers in manufacturing plants. The focus groups consisted of a maximum of seven participants and one to two moderators.

Among the focus groups, one was conducted in-person in Shanghai, two were conducted in-person in Beijing, and 11 were conducted online. Each focus group ran for approximately one and a half to two hours. While one focus group session was conducted in English, all other sessions were conducted in Mandarin. In each session, participants were not placed in the same group as colleagues from the same company in order to ensure anonymity, confidentiality, and a safe environment for transparency.

## - Interview Guide for HR Professionals

### **Purpose of interviews**

The project seeks to understand the factors which impact women's well-being in China in order to support their full participation within the economy. The purpose of interviewing HR professionals is to identify what benefits and choices multinational corporations in China offer to provide a healthy work environment and support women's career advancement. Through the interviews we hope to learn about the unique policies and cultures at MNCs that support women. Neither your name nor company name will be disclosed and answers will be anonymized to protect your privacy.

### **Interview topics and questions**

This document contains a list of questions that will be covered during interviews with the HR professionals participating in the research. These questions were informed by our secondary research investigating factors limiting working women's participation and development in work environments in China.

These questions can be categorized into several topics which are outlined in detail below: HR and gender diversity, company culture, family friendly workplace policies and practices, flexible work arrangements, two-child policy, sexual harassment, and well-being.

### **HR and Gender Diversity**

According to your knowledge and experience, are there any specific challenges that women uniquely face when it comes to professional development and promotion? Please explain.

According to your knowledge and experience, what are some effective methods for alleviating or counteracting these challenges in order to support and sustain women's professional development and promotion?

Does your company do anything specific from an HR perspective to attract, retain, and empower women? How is this reflected in the recruitment, performance review, training, financial compensation and promotion processes?

What, if any, gender diversity programs, does your company offer to employees? What roles do women executives and employees play in the development and implementation of these programs?

### **Company Culture**

Does your company have any gender diversity policies that are consistent across all countries in which you operate? Please explain.

Does your company have any gender diversity policies or practices that are unique to China, and if so, why?

### **Family-Friendly Workplace Policies and Practices**

- According to your knowledge and experience, what would you say are the current gaps in family-friendly policies in companies in China?
- What, if any, maternity and paternity leave policies, does your company offer? What are the reasons for implementing these policies?
- What, if any, company policies are in place for supporting work-life balance and childcare and are any of them gender-specific?

### **Flexible Work Arrangements**

- According to your knowledge and experience, how has working from home impacted employees' work-life balance and are any of the impacts gender-specific?
- What, if any, flexible work arrangements, does your company offer? What are the reasons for implementing these policies?
- According to your knowledge and experience, what are the strengths and limitations of these policies?

### **Two-Child Policy**

- According to your knowledge and experience, do you feel that in general, the two-child policy impacts women's labor participation? How and why?
- How, if at all, does China's two-child policy affect your company's HR policies and practices? Please explain.
- Since the implementation of the two-child policy, has there been an increase in maternity leave requests by women in your company who have already had one child?
- How, if at all, does your company support or accommodate pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, or women returning to work from their maternity leave?

### **Sexual Harassment**

- In general, do you feel that sexual harassment is an issue in work environments in China? What is its significance and prevalence compared to other factors playing a role in women's work environments in China?
- What policies or practices does your company have in place to prevent and address sexual harassment?
- How does your company define sexual harassment? Does your company's definition of sexual harassment address more subtle issues such as making inappropriate jokes or comments?

## **Wellbeing**

- According to your knowledge and experience, what types of physical and mental health issues are unique to women in the workforce?
- Can you share any information with us about how prevalent aforementioned health conditions are among women in the workforce?
- According to your knowledge and experience, do you think these health issues are unique to women in China? Why or why not?
- How is your company currently supporting women's physical health, particularly regarding health issues that are more prevalent among women, such as breast cancer?
- Are there any resources available to support your employees' psychological well-being? Are they gender specific? Please explain.

### **- Quantitative Survey**

#### **Purpose of survey** 调研目的

The project seeks to understand the factors which impact women's well-being in China in order to support their full participation within the economy. The purpose of the quantitative survey is to understand the factors that limit women's ability to join, thrive and rise within the workplace environment in China.

本项目旨在了解影响中国女性健康等综合因素，借此支持她们全面投入经济的运作。本次定量调研的目的是了解女性在中国职场参与、成长和晋升过程中面临的限制。

**Please answer all of the survey questions according to your personal experience and perspective.** *Your responses will not be disclosed to any third party, including your company and managers. Neither your name nor your company name will be disclosed and all answers will be anonymized in order to protect your privacy.*

请依据您的个人经验和角度来完成以下所调研的问题。您提供的答案不会披露给任何第三方，其中包括您就职的企业或上级。您的姓名及公司名不会公布，您所有的答案皆为匿名，以保护您的隐私。

Pre-assigned ID 指定代码\_\_\_\_\_

Age 年龄

- 20-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60+

Marital status 婚姻状况

- a. single 单身
- b. living with a partner 同居
- c. married 已婚
- d. divorced 离婚

How many children do you have?您有几个孩子？

- a. 0
- b. 1
- c. 2
- d. 3
- e.
- 4+

What is your current position?职位级别

- a. entry level to junior professional 初级职位
- b. middle management 中层管理
- c. senior management/executive level 高层管理

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:

请评价您对以下陈述同意或不同意的程度：

- a. strongly agree 非常同意
- b. agree 同意
- c. neither agree nor disagree 既不同意也不反对
- d. disagree 不同意
- e. strongly disagree 非常不同意

(These options will be presented for each question in the survey.)

**Experience of working in China in general 在中国工作的整体经验**

Men and women with the same experience and qualifications are equally likely to be recruited by a company.

若具备同等的经验和条件，男性和女性被企业聘雇的几率是相同的。

Men and women with the same experience and qualifications are equally likely to be promoted within a company.

若具备同等的经验和条件，男性和女性在企业中晋升的几率是相同的。

I have experienced hiring practices that treat men and women differently.

我曾经遇过雇主在招聘的过程中，由于性别的因素区别对待男女申请人。

When applying for a job, I have been asked about my age, marital status, how many children I have or if I have any plans to have children.

在求职的过程中，我曾经被询问过年龄、婚姻状况、有几个孩子，或者有关生育计划的问题。

Employers and managers in China have a clear understanding of the general definition of sexual harassment.

中国的雇主和管理人员清楚的理解性骚扰的定义。

Employees in China have a clear understanding of the general definition of sexual harassment.

中国的员工清楚的理解性骚扰的定义。

I have experienced sexual harassment in a work environment in China.

我曾在中国的职场中有被性骚扰的经历。

I have seen a male colleague make inappropriate jokes or comments about a female colleague in a work environment, for example about their appearance.

我曾经在职场遇过男同事开不恰当的玩笑或对女同事有不恰当的评语，例如针对她们的外表开玩笑或做评论。

### **Experience of current work environment 目前工作环境的体验**

My company's HR policies support me to be successful in my role.

我所在企业的人力资源制度支持我顺利工作。

My company's HR policies makes limited efforts to help advance my career.

我所在企业的人力资源制度对于我事业发展的帮助有限。

My company's culture values gender diversity and women empowerment.

我所在企业的内部文化重视性别多元和女性赋权。

My company's gender diversity policies and benefits are better than average in China.

我所在企业的性别多元制度和福利在中国是高于一般水平的。

### **Personal opinions of the challenges women face 对于女性所面临挑战的个人意见**

Women have more household responsibilities than men, such as cooking and cleaning.

女性的家务责任比男性更多，例如做饭和打扫卫生。

Women have more childcare responsibilities than men.

女性的育儿责任比男性更多。

Women have more responsibilities than men to care for elderly members of the family

including parents and parents-in-law.

女性照顾老人（父母和配偶父母）的责任比男性更重。

It is more challenging for women to succeed in their jobs because of their additional responsibilities in the home.

由于家庭的责任较多，女性在事业上取得成功的挑战更大。

Family responsibilities have a small impact on my career development.

家庭责任对于我事业发展的影响很小。

Women are often perceived as less competent than men at their jobs.

女性的工作能力经常被认为比男性差。

Marriage diverts women's time and resources from work.

婚姻占用了女性在工作上投入的时间和资源。

As a woman, I find it challenging to balance work and life responsibilities.

身为女性，我认为取得工作和生活间的平衡很难。

## **Experience of flexible work arrangements, family-friendly policies, and two-child policy**

### **For this section, only answer the statements that apply to your experience**

和弹性工作安排、适合家庭的政策和二胎政策有关的个人经验请只回答以下和您个人经验相关的问题

Flexible work hours help me to balance work and life responsibilities.

弹性工作时间帮助我在工作和生活责任之间取得平衡。

During and after COVID-19, working remotely helps me to balance work and life responsibilities.

在新冠疫情期间和之后，远程工作帮助我在工作和生活责任之间取得平衡。

During and after COVID-19, working remotely increases my workload at home.

在新冠疫情期间和之后，远程工作加重了我在家庭中承担的工作量。

Taking maternity leave affects women's career advancement.

请产假影响了女性的职场晋升。

The two-child policy increases the pressure on women to have more children.

二胎政策增加了女性育儿的压力。

I felt supported to re-enter the workforce after maternity leave.

我感觉在产假结束后，重回职场时获得了支持。

Satisfactory childcare is easy to find.

令人满意的育儿服务/安排很容易找到。

## **Personal health and wellbeing 个人健康**

I have experienced psychological health issues such as stress, burn-out, insomnia or depression in my life.

我曾有过心理健康问题，例如压力大、过劳、失眠和抑郁症。

I am physically healthy.

我身体健康。



## - Focus Group Questionnaire

### **Purpose of focus group discussions**

The project seeks to understand the factors which impact women's well-being in China in order to support their full participation within the economy. The focus group brings together women working in multinationals in China to share their perspectives and experiences. Insights shared will be used to better understand the factors limiting women's ability to join, thrive, and rise within the workplace environment in China. We appreciate your honesty and openness when sharing your perspectives.

**Your name and company name will not be disclosed to other participants and all responses will be anonymized to protect your privacy.**

### **Focus group topics and questions**

This document contains a list of questions that will be covered during the focus group. These questions were informed by SCHS Asia's secondary research broadly investigating factors impacting women's participation and growth in Chinese workplaces.

The questions can be categorized into several topics which are outlined in detail below: general experience of working in China, experience at current workplace, and challenges women face, and physical health and wellbeing.

### **General experience of working in China**

#### Hiring

During the hiring process, have you felt unfairly treated because of your gender? If yes, could you please share these experiences?

During job search and application, have you been asked questions regarding your age, marital status, number of children and plans to have children?

In your opinion, what can be done to address gender discrimination in hiring process?

#### Promotion

Are women and men equally liked to get promoted in a company? Why or why not?

Why is there generally less women presentation in senior management in companies in China and across the world?

In what ways has your workplace supported your career advancement?

In your opinion, how can women's professional advancement and promotion be better supported?

## Sexual Harassment

Are more subtle forms of sexual harassment/incidents considered minor or less harmful being tolerated or unnoticed?

Do you think your employer provides adequate training to clearly communicate what is sexual harassment, including addressing more subtle forms of inappropriate behavior?

In your opinion, how can workplaces improve their education on sexual harassment in China?

## Retirement

Have you thought about retirement? What personal and professional plans do you have when reaching that age?

Do you think your career is impacted by the legal retirement age? Why or why not?

## **Experience at current workplace**

Which of your company's gender diversity initiatives do you find valuable?

Regarding to gender diversity, what are some areas which your company could improve in?

How can companies in China, generally speaking, improve gender diversity policies and benefits.

## **Challenges women face**

### Family Responsibilities

Do you feel that the demands of work interfere with family responsibilities?

Do you feel family responsibilities impact women's career development?

How has your family positively or negatively impacted your career development? How has your family factored into your decisions to accept or reject a promotion?

What has helped you to overcome the challenge of balancing work and family responsibilities in becoming a manager in a multinational company? What advice would you give to other women?

### Maternity Leave

If you have taken maternity leave, what was your experience returning to work?

What type of support should be given to women returning to work from maternity leave?

### Two Child Policy

Has the introduction of the two-child policy increased the expectations for women to have more children?

Do you think women face more pressures than men when there are expectations to have more children?

Why do you think the two-child policy has not significantly increased birth rates?

## **Childcare**

What childcare resources are available for women in China? What are the strengths and weaknesses the aforementioned childcare resources?

If you have children, do you feel that these resources are sufficient to help you focus more on work?

In your opinion, what role do you see employers playing in helping parents secure childcare?

Flexible Work Arrangements.

What are the strengths and limitations of flexible work arrangements such as flexible work hours and working remotely? How do they impact women's workload at home?

Do women face more pressure than men to take on such arrangements to attend to their household responsibilities?

Does taking on flexible work arrangements impact women's work performance and career development?

### **Personal health and wellbeing**

Psychological and Physical Health

What psychological and physical health issues are common in women in the workforce in China?

Why? What factors contribute to these psychological health issues?

What are the most significant factors causing you stress now? How high is your stress level?

What type of support would best help you alleviate the stress?

What role do employers play in supporting employees' psychological and physical health?



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■ ■ ■ Contact ■ ■ ■



[charlotte.smith@schsasia.com](mailto:charlotte.smith@schsasia.com)



+86 13701009271

