

Women in Leadership in Asia Pacific



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Motivation for the study

Rapid urbanisation, growing affluence, higher female education levels and lower birthrates are all impacting social norms in Asia, particularly when it comes to gender and diversity issues. However, although female labour participation rates in Asia are high¹, many women are employed in the informal sector, and comparatively few women in Asia have ascended to higher professional and managerial positions. China, the largest economy in the region, has a relatively high female labour participation rate (74% of Chinese women work), but when it comes to their representation on boards the percentage drops to 8%² and China ranks poorly (92) on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index³, which measures overall gender equity, including access to education and healthcare, as well as commercial participation and political representation.

What has held Asian women back from progressing in their careers to leadership positions? On the surface, Asian women appear to be relatively advantaged. Recent economic growth in the region has generated many new employment opportunities in industry, commerce and advanced services, while rising incomes have facilitated many Asian urban families' access to affordable household help. As well, legislation in many Asian countries has promoted gender equity (for example, China passed its first law against domestic violence in December 2015) and many countries in the region have senior female political and commercial leaders. Many companies have adopted proactive policies for gender parity in hiring, and are making efforts to identify a talent pipeline for female "high potential" management candidates, participating in such company-wide activities as the "30% Club"⁴. Yet despite these advantages, an ascent to the C-Suite is still seen as out of reach by many Asian women. Indeed despite campaigns to encourage and foster female employees, many companies complain of a drain of mid-career female talent.

Why is this the case—and why should it matter? While drop-out decisions are ultimately personal in nature, in aggregate they deplete corporate and national resources. Japan is a case in point, where a low female workforce participation rate by women has compounded the demographic pressures of an ageing male workforce, prompting Prime Minister Abe to stress the retention of Japanese female workers as a tenet of "Abenomics". Moreover, apart from the numeric advantages of a larger working population, there is growing evidence of the economic advantages of a more inclusive workforce⁵. Diversity within the workforce has been credited with fostering innovative thinking and better leadership skills, while more homogenous employee groups are more likely to perpetuate biased systems and processes.⁶ In short, women's degree of commitment to the workforce is significant for overall economic and social development, and their comparative absence from senior leadership roles in Asia is both intriguing and disquieting.

¹ Female labour participation rates in East Asia and the Pacific are estimated at 64%, according to the Asian Development Bank. See *Women in the Workforce, An Unmet Potential in Asia and the Pacific*. <http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/158480/women-workforce-unmet-potential.pdf>

² See "Women Matter: An Asian Perspective", McKinsey Report

³ See <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2015/economies/#economy=CHN>

⁴ The 30% Club was founded in the UK in 2010, with the objective of increasing female participation in on FTSE-100 boards to 30%

⁵ See Naila Kabeer, "Women's economic empowerment and inclusive growth: labour markets and enterprise development" SIG WORKING PAPER 2012/1, www.idrc.ca/EN/Documents/NK-WEE-Concept-Paper.pdf

⁶ See *The Business Case for Equality and Diversity: a survey of the academic literature*, BIS Occasional Paper No.4, Department for Business Innovation and Skills, Government Equalities Office, UK



Research methodology

Our inquiry into attitudes towards female leadership in Asia began with a pulse survey, which was followed by a series of “focus group” lunches in Singapore, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Kuala Lumpur. These lively discussions provided informative insights into the different business conditions and cultural norms affecting gender roles in the region, exploring such issues as legal frameworks for gender equity and parental leave, as well as specific demographic and cultural factors.

The survey attracted 143 responses, of which 83% (120) were female.

Respondents were asked where they were based, with China being the most popular location, at roughly 30%, followed by India and Singapore at 15% each. Hong Kong, Australia, Malaysia and Japan were also represented.

The first part of the survey inquired about personal and family issues, while the second part delved into perceptions of women’s leadership issues. The majority of respondents were married (81%), with roughly half (49%) identifying themselves as the main breadwinner of the family. Two thirds of the respondents had a working spouse, while a large percentage had “sandwich” family responsibilities, comprising young children and older family members: approximately half (48%) had children under the age of 18, and a sizeable number (42%) were responsible for elder care. Given these burdens it is somewhat surprising that 76% of respondents reported they have never taken a career break, but no doubt the availability of household help is one explanation for this—76% indicated they have household help, while 32% have family members that help with childcare. Access to affordable daycare assists roughly 41% of respondents, with the cost mostly borne by themselves. Over half (60%) of respondents said their employers provided parental leave.

With the average respondent female, married, and with extensive family responsibilities—as well as assistance in shouldering these burdens—the questionnaire then explored attitudinal issues towards the workplace. On the question of their perceptions of a glass ceiling in their organizations, the response was equivocal: 49% said yes. The breakdown by gender was interesting: 36% of the men surveyed felt there was a glass ceiling in their organization, while 51% of the women felt this was the case. A breakdown by geography was also notable, in that only 36% of the Hong Kong-based respondents believed in the existence of a glass ceiling, while the China-based affirmative response, at 46%, was roughly similar to that of Kuala Lumpur (45%). The Singapore-based affirmative response to this question, at 63%, was the highest overall.



Blurry glass ceilings

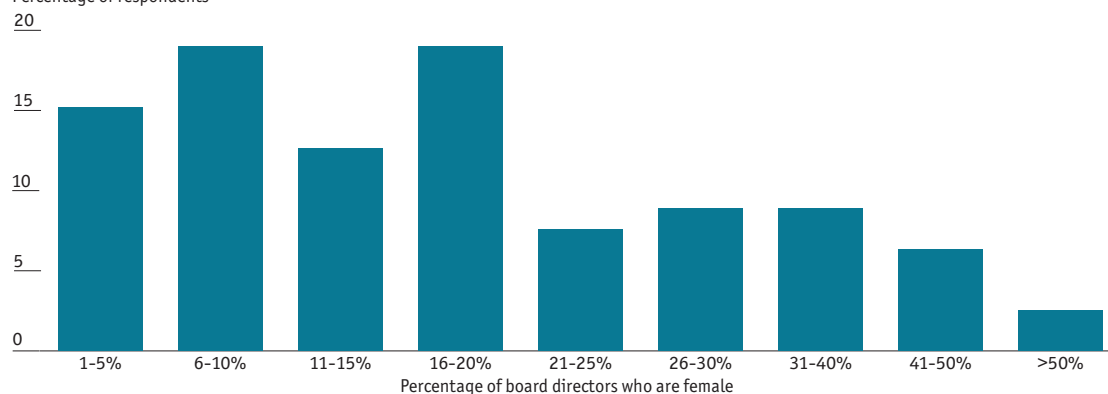
Why was the perception of a glass ceiling so widespread in Singapore compared to the other Asian geographies? The focus group discussion in Singapore identified a number of possible explanatory factors, some of which are validated by data while other perceptions appeared to be less well-grounded and even contradictory. According to the discussants, despite the modernity of Singapore's business culture, Singaporean society scores surprisingly poorly when it comes to female representation on company boards (this is validated by McKinsey's research, which indicates only 7% female representation on boards in Singapore, but with a higher percentage of women—15%—at the executive committee level). The Singapore focus group discussants complained that there were relatively few women in senior leadership positions in commerce and politics in Singapore, but felt that in contrast Malaysian women appeared to be more active in senior positions in commercial and political life, despite arguably more conservative social norms in Malaysia—this perception was echoed in a recent Economist Intelligence Unit survey in which 56% of Singapore-based respondents felt that women were under-represented in senior management in their companies, compared to 44% in Malaysia⁷.

In fact the McKinsey research indicated that Malaysian women, in aggregate, are also under-represented in boards (at 6%), and in executive committees (5%). These low figures for Malaysia, though, are challenged by other data sets which show higher participation levels for Malaysian women on boards (at 10.2%, compared to Singapore's 9.5%)⁸. Such variation is likely due to whether the data sample includes a high proportion of family-owned companies, in which female family members are more likely to be visible in the corporate leadership hierarchy. From the more holistic perspective of the WEF's Global Gender Gap Index, the figures are telling: Singapore ranks far more positively, at 54, for gender equity indicators, compared to Malaysia at 111—making the Singaporean perception of relative disadvantage in gender ranking even more puzzling.

There may be other factors behind the Singaporean assumptions. In fact, an overwhelming 74% of Singaporean respondents to our survey indicated that their organization had at least one female board

Percentage of board directors who are female

Percentage of respondents



Source: Economist Corporate Network

⁷ See *Mind the Gaps: Perceptions of Gender Equality in Corporate Southeast Asia*, Economist Intelligence Unit

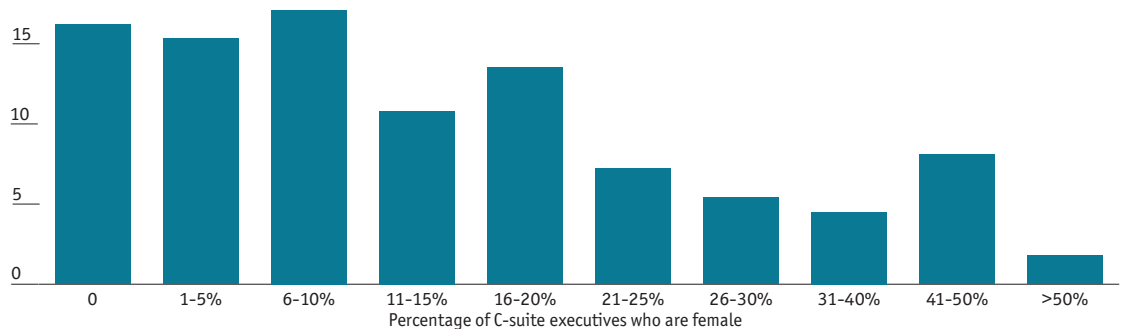
⁸ source: <http://www.diversityaction.sg/resources/facts-and-numbers/as-at-end-2015/>



Percentage of C-suite executives who are female

Percentage of respondents

20



Source: Economist Corporate Network

member, suggesting at least some visibility for female corporate leaders. The cumulative responses (all geographies) were also affirmative, with 70% of aggregated responses claiming at least one female board member within their organizations. The presence of females at the board level in theory should be a positive factor in reinforcing female commitment to the job, but a less conspicuous “hands on” role for female board members may be undermined by the reality of an overwhelmingly male senior leadership for daily operations (92% of aggregated respondents said they report to a male CEO, whereas 100% of Singaporean respondents did).

The presence or absence of senior female role models is often viewed as instrumental in fostering mid- and junior-level female engagement (particularly if the senior female is an active mentor of younger female talent), but this impact may be negligible compared to overwhelming familial pressure for young women to marry rather than focus on their careers. Discussants in all cities made several references to social pressure on young women as a re-enforcer of the glass ceiling. This pressure is societal, but more commonly takes the form of nagging by their families to avoid becoming “leftover women”⁹. Ironically, along with social norms, the buoyant job market in the region may also work against young women’s advancement: job-hopping at an early stage in the career may impede the acquisition of solid work skills, so that if a career break is taken later to deal with family matters the subsequent re-entry into the work force, with a weak c.v., will be much more difficult.

Other social pressures in Asia can also undermine women’s leadership ambitions and constrict the talent pipeline for more senior positions. The extremely competitive educational system in many Asian countries often compels women who are mothers to absent themselves from the workforce or to take less time-consuming jobs so that they can devote more energy to “Tiger Mom” tasks, such as coaching their children through exam preparation¹⁰. These career breaks occur at a later and potentially more critical career stage for women than maternity leave, with the result that for them the C-suite remains well out of reach. This career barrier is informally known as the “maternal wall”, as opposed to the glass ceiling. The semantic differentiation mirrors the survey results: when asked if their organization suffers from a mid-level drain of female talent, 64% of all respondents said no, but of those that responded in the affirmative, the most common explanation was due to work-life issues,

⁹ Terminology applied to unmarried women in China past the conventional age for marriage. See Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*

¹⁰ See Amy Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*



lack of flexibility for childcare and the need for career breaks. A higher percentage of China-based respondents (72%) thought that their organization did not have a drain of mid-level females, but of those women that abandoned their careers in China, most did so for family reasons.

The “maternal wall” correlation with a hyper-competitive educational system was especially high in Singapore. Paradoxically, an estimated 80% of companies in Singapore in fact do offer “flexi-hour” work arrangements, but very few employees actually avail themselves of this benefit (judged by the discussants to be not more than 20%). This low take up is not surprising given that flexi-hours are seen by Singaporeans as an unorthodox choice signaling a reduced commitment to the job. Moreover, discussants in Singapore were unanimous in asserting that the promotional path in the local corporate culture remains biased towards conventional quantitative measures, such as long, in-office working hours and participation in after-work collective social activities.

Indeed work and travel schedules in major Asian commercial hubs where C-suite executives have regional and even global responsibilities can be particularly onerous, sapping away ambition and energy in long working days, evening conference calls and social engagements. However more personalised blockers can also be significant. Flexi-hours and working from home may appeal as textbook solutions for better work-life balance, but a lack of a home office and privacy, due to the small average size of many homes, may be practical impediments to their adoption. Vocational groupings can also be subject to gender stereotyping, which in turn affects socialisation within the corporate culture. Females entering male-dominated industry sectors may have to navigate intimidating social barriers to advance their careers. Discussants in each city raised the issue of male drinking culture and karaoke sessions as deterrents for females to break into power networks, and women’s failure to participate in these activities can impede their career advancement.

Psychological inhibitors

As noted above, within the Asian context, traditional childcare and elder care duties are often stretched by homework monitoring chores, and further burdened by cultural norms which leave the bulk of household duties to the female. The reality of disproportionate family responsibilities for Asian women is often compounded by assumptions on the part of employers that women will not be able to cope with demanding work assignments—women are routinely questioned during job and appraisal reviews about their childcare arrangements, while men are assumed to balance career and family life with no questions asked, and no complications anticipated.

Failure to “lean in”

When it came to identifying factors that inhibit women from achieving leadership positions, 58% of all respondents cited family responsibilities. However, this was followed closely by negative factors, namely lack of confidence (56%) and exclusion from power circles (44%). There were some interesting response variations based on geography, with Hong Kong respondents appearing more self-assured. Amongst Hong Kong survey respondents, 69% claimed that the key barrier to success or promotion



for women was the male-dominated work environment, with the second most popular responses split between women's exclusion from power networks and their heavy family responsibilities. In third place was lack of female confidence, followed by a male promotion bias.

Notwithstanding the comparative poise of the Hong Kong respondents, why are women in general so lacking in self-confidence, and why are they so intimidated by social barriers? The issue of self-imposed inhibitors sparked considerable discussion within the focus groups. It was felt that negative stereotypes mocking female leaders as bossy, aggressive "iron ladies" aping male leadership styles may repel young women from aspiring to senior roles within the organization, and indeed senior women leaders themselves may be resentful of assumptions that they relied on special assistance to progress in their careers. Other perceptions of female leadership traits may be equally stereotyped, focusing on empathetic maternal behaviours that do not align with the leadership qualities sought by promotion boards. Thus a lack of effective, positive female leadership models is a discouragement, particularly for young women worried about marriageability, and fearful of the impact of long working hours on their personal lives.

Popular cultural reinforcements for stereotyped gender roles can also be pernicious and demotivating, as referenced by one focus group discussant who cited the infamous t-shirt sold by JC Penney with the logo *I'm too pretty to do my math homework, so my brother has to do it for me* (which was pulled from shelves after a social media backlash). Unconscious bias can also be a barrier for men—several respondents mentioned gender stereotyping regarding parental leave for men, or males who are the stay-at-home partner.

Several participants in the focus group discussions noted the hesitancy of female Asian employees to speak up, and ascribed this lack of confidence for a typical woman's need to be 100% confident before raising her voice, volunteering for a task or accepting a new challenge. It was felt by many that cultural factors were to blame for reinforcing these behavioural patterns, as in traditional Asian culture women were not encouraged to be outspoken. Traditional gender roles can also inhibit women from competing for advancement, with discussants citing instances where Asian women have even rejected a promotion for fear they will be earning more than their husbands. Cultural determinants were also cited in Malaysia, where more conservative religious values are gaining ascendancy in some circles, leading to some regression regarding female roles.



Key drivers for successful advancement

Discussion about the key drivers for successful advancement by women in the workforce included practical as well as psychological factors, but there was consensus in the survey results that psychological factors were seen as more meaningful. Respondents graded a conscious focus on gender balance on the part of senior leadership as the most significant key driver for the successful advancement of women in an organization, and other psychological enablers included sponsors, mentors and role models. Interestingly, flexible work arrangements and avoidance of bias in promotion processes scored lower.

A number of discussants made reference to formal programmes underway within their organizations to foster diversity and inclusion. Some of these programmes were specifically targeted at women, while others were more broadly focused and included LGBT participation within the workforce—in both instances the commitment, leadership and advocacy of the CEO was judged to be pivotal in the diversity and inclusion initiative being given serious attention within the organization.

In comparison with North America and Europe (particularly the UK and Nordic countries), specific targets for female board membership in Asia have been less widely adopted as a diversity objective. Nonetheless, Asian companies and affiliates of multinational corporations are being influenced by global campaigns to promote female leaders and ensure more equitable representation throughout managerial ranks, so some filtering-down of social change is in progress. This process can certainly be accelerated by CEO activism, as well as by key opinion leaders within the company.

Metrics are seen by discussants as key to successful implementation of gender diversity programmes. As seen in the example cited earlier of Singaporean perceptions, data gaps in tracking gender equity issues have complicated the identification of issues and this lack of clarity has hindered progress towards resolving disparities. While quotas were viewed unenthusiastically by some discussants, they were acknowledged to be effective at forcing change and initiating momentum, and if such change management is strongly supported by senior leaders it has a better likelihood of becoming self-reinforcing. Without the overt impetus of quotas, many discussants felt that change would be glacial (one discussant noted that on a “business as usual” timeline, it would take 90 years to get to a 30% female representation at her organization’s board level).

Quotas are also useful for focusing managerial attention on gender imbalances, as the statistical reporting underpinning gender quota management gives an essential data tool for identifying problem areas. Creating a “talent map” of high potential female candidates within an organization and screening hiring and promotional results for gender bias in benchmarking exercises can detect vocational groups or occupational classifications prone to imbalances.

Other beneficial management practices cited by discussants included redefining classic leadership attributes to include the management of diversity, and the promotion of gender balance for direct reports as a key performance indicator for promotion, as well as constant monitoring of female



attrition rates and pro-active coaching for female leadership candidates. Examples of such coaching programmes included specific training for women in negotiating strategies and client management, particularly for non-traditional work roles or industry sectors. Regardless of the specific programmes adopted, discussants emphasised that they need to be integrated as core workforce planning practices within the organization for maximum impact.

Change within the workplace can be more easily enabled through technology, with IT supporting a non-office work presence. Underlying this shift is a broader trend to a “results-only” work culture but such flexible timeframes may not apply to all industries. However even office-bound workplaces could benefit from practical suggestions for a more family-friendly environment, such as the provision of a room for nursing mothers, and “gradual return to work” projects aimed at attracting female dropouts back into the work force. One example cited of a “return to work” project was aimed at both men and women who had been out of the workforce for over two years— applicants were enrolled in a three month “internship” programme to upgrade their skills and re-orient themselves within the organization before eventual job placement. Other discussants described innovative use of maternity leave vacancies which gave junior candidates valued opportunities to take on stretch assignments. Such positive assessments of maternity leave on the part of employers are currently being challenged in China, where maternity leave vacancies are posing new managerial complications: maternity leave was recently extended to 128 days, and Chinese couples are now permitted to have a second child under national family planning laws. Young female graduates are already reporting that recruiters are favouring male candidates so as to avoid costly maternity vacancies.

For Asian women facing their school-aged children’s “examination crunch”, a sabbatical may be an appropriate solution. Similarly, flexibility in offering shorter-haul travel assignments may make it possible to retain female managers who would otherwise balk at lengthier travel commitments. External support in the form of more generalized mentoring and female executive networking programmes, such as board diversity initiatives sponsored by business chambers and social organizations, were also cited as extremely helpful for boosting female leadership candidates.

Female leadership traits were also analysed, with many discussants observing that different competencies, such as a more collaborative leadership style, may be displayed by female leaders— but that these may not fit the classic male leadership mould. Such qualities are more likely to be apparent in the course of “360 degree” feedback exercises, which offer a more holistic view of personality and capabilities. In any case, redefinitions of leadership attributes may also be overdue, to ensure that there is no gender bias. While fully “gender blind” promotional practices may be unrealistic, a more inclusive measure of talent is likely to yield a richer range of leadership competencies¹¹.

The growing clout of Asia’s women as consumers was also felt to be a key driver for their advancement. Despite the overt sexualisation of much popular culture, the spending power of the female consumer in Asia commands respect from manufacturers and marketers—and Asian women should not hesitate to use this to their advantage. Positive portrayals in advertising and the media of working women with a healthy work-life balance could do much to alleviate the psychological burdens facing younger female employees. In particular, working mothers in Asia, who may be struggling

¹¹ See <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/is-blind-hiring-the-best-hiring.html?>



to combat “Tiger Mom” peer pressure to abandon their careers, could be encouraged by the wider dissemination of recent research showing the affirmative impact of working mothers in breaking down ingrained cultural attitudes: daughters of working females do better and in general secure higher managerial positions than daughters of females who don’t work outside the home, while sons of working females acquire better socialisation skills and demonstrate more gender neutral behaviours¹².

Conclusion

Women in Asia live and work in a fast-paced, economically vibrant region, where many traditional social norms still hold fast. Apart from cultural differences, Asian women are also subject to the same dilemmas and social forces as working women elsewhere. This can be summed up as the debate between “lean in” (following the analysis of Sheryl Sandberg, who has advocated full commitment by women to both work and family life), and “lean out” (taken from the work of Anne-Marie Slaughter, who argues that systemic societal imbalances in turn erode work-life compromises).¹³ Equivocal responses from our survey indicate that this lively debate is also taking place in Asian boardrooms and households, placing conflicting pressures on Asia’s working women, as they navigate stereotypes and epithets (Tiger Mom, Iron Lady, leftover women) in search of their own identity and unique work-life balance.

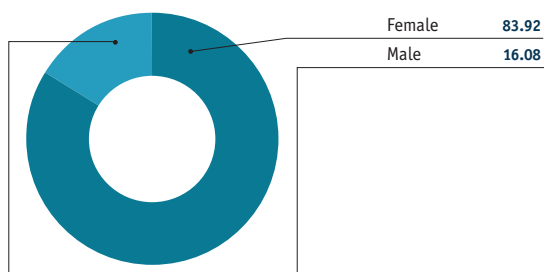
¹² See <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/kids-benefit-from-having-a-working-mom>

¹³ See Sheryl Sandberg, “Lean In” and Anne-Marie Slaughter, “Unfinished Business: Women Men Work Family”

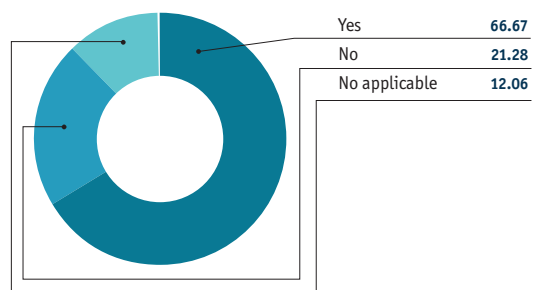


Appendix: Survey results

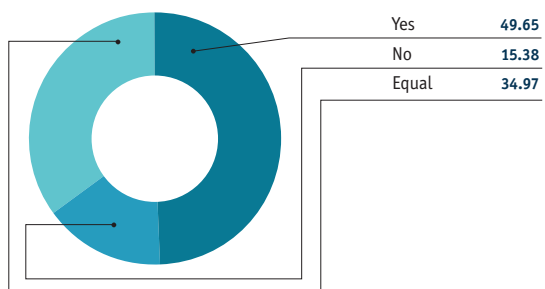
What is your gender?
(% of respondents)



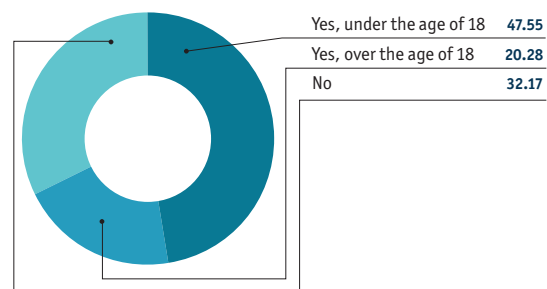
Does your spouse/partner work?
(% of respondents)



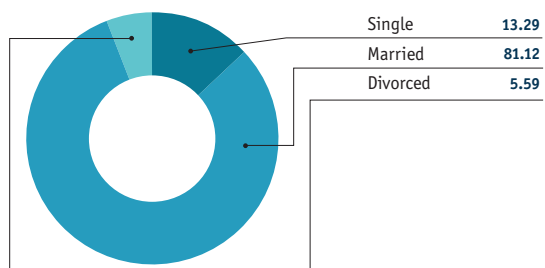
Are you the main breadwinner in the household?
(% of respondents)



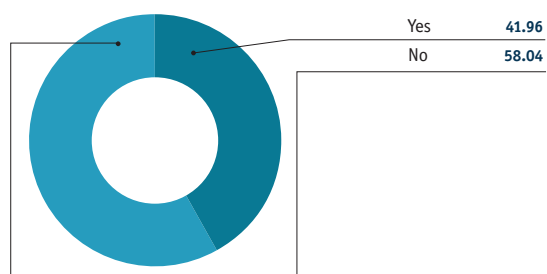
Do you have children?
(% of respondents)



Marital status?
(% of respondents)



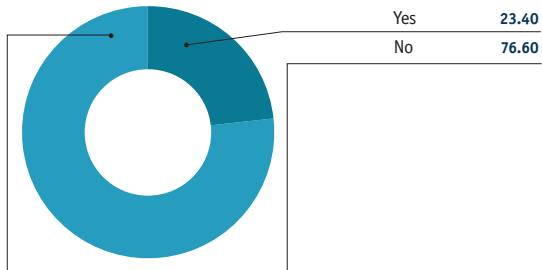
Do you have responsibility for elderly?
(% of respondents)





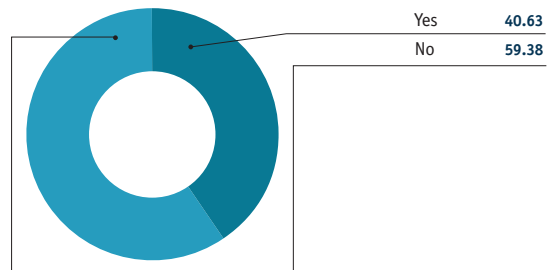
Have you taken a career break for family reasons?

(% of respondents)



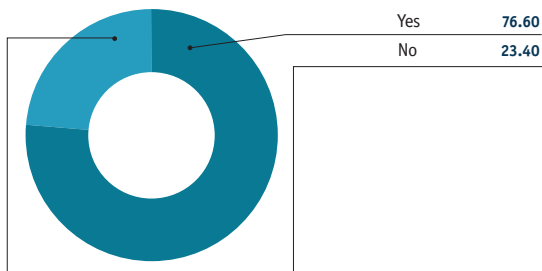
Do you have access to affordable daycare?

(% of respondents)



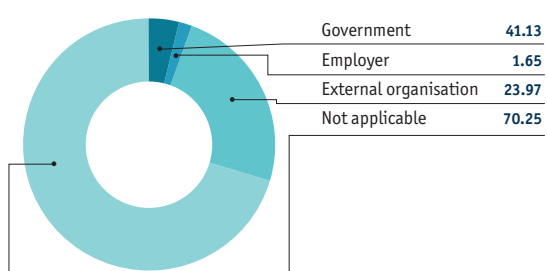
Do you employ household help?

(% of respondents)



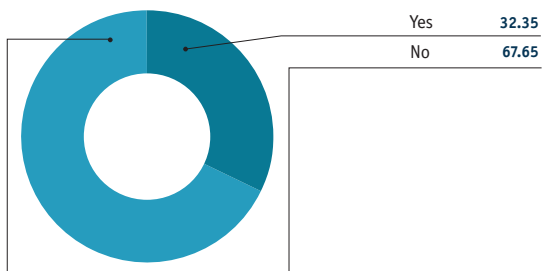
If you have access to affordable daycare, who is this provided by?

(% of respondents)



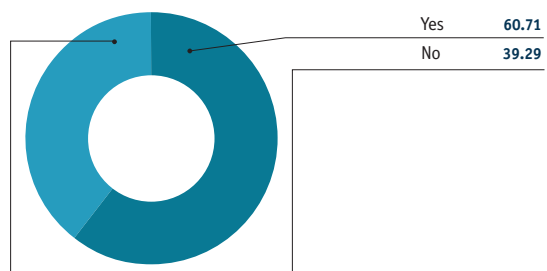
Do you have family members who help with childcare?

(% of respondents)



Does your company provide parental (family) leave?

(% of respondents)

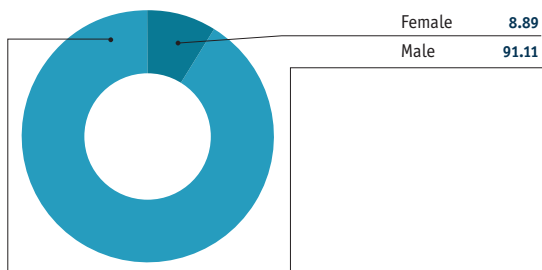




Women in Leadership in Asia Pacific

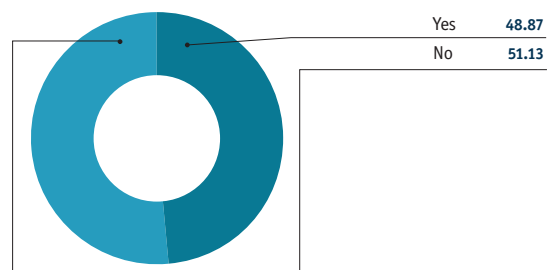
What is the gender of your CEO?

(% of respondents)



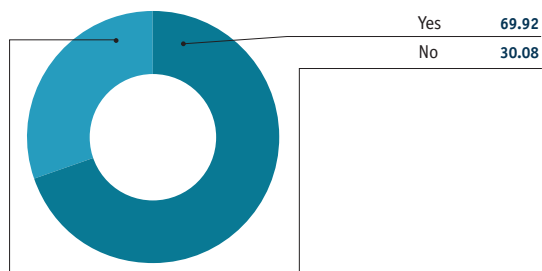
Do you think there is a glass ceiling in your organisation?

(% of respondents)



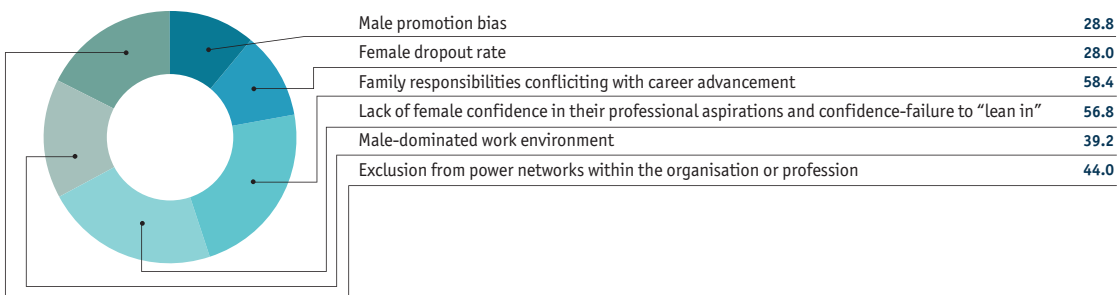
Does your organisation have any female board directors?

(% of respondents)



What do you perceive to be the key barriers to success/promotions for women in your organisation? (Please tick all that apply.)

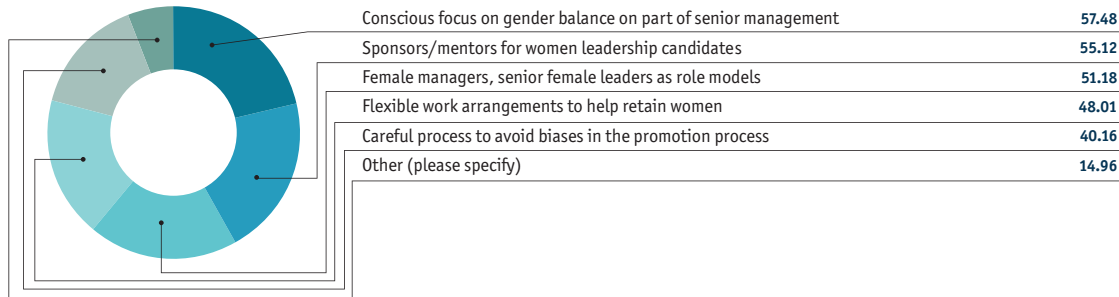
(% of respondents)





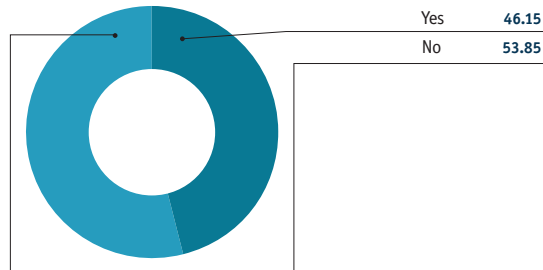
What are the key drivers of successful advancement of women in your organisation? (Please tick all that apply.)

(% of respondents)



Does your organisation have a noticeable drain of mid-level female employees?

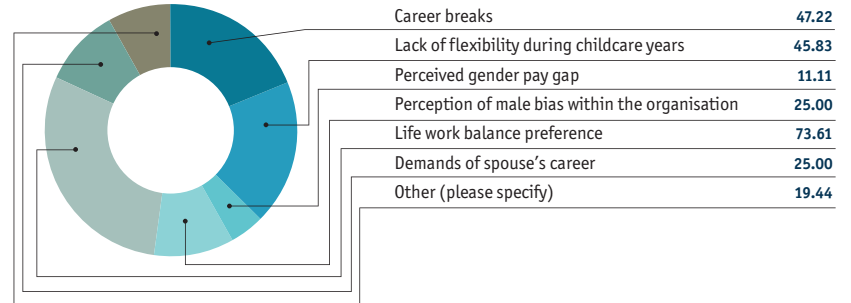
(% of respondents)



If yes, what are the perceived reasons for this?

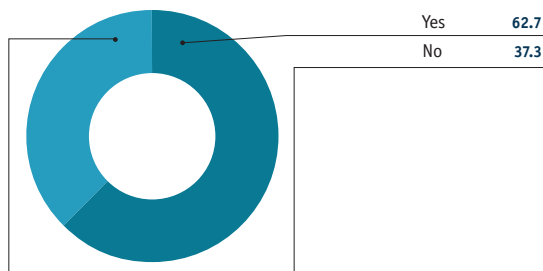
(Please tick all that apply.)

(% of respondents)



Is your organisation taking active steps to support women leaders?

(% of respondents)

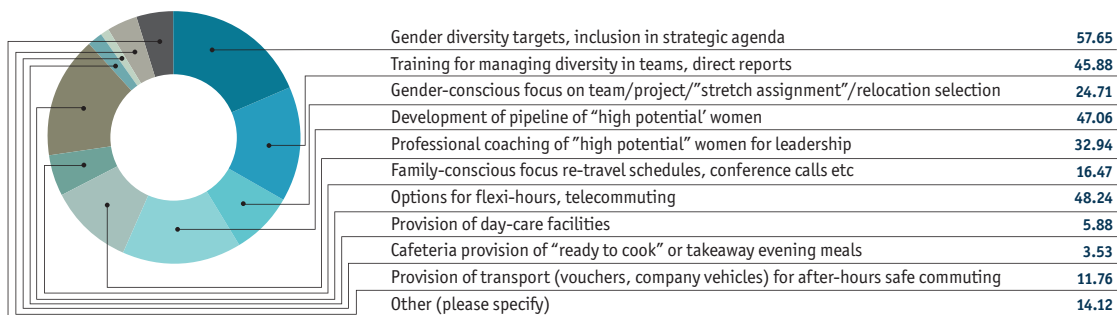




Women in Leadership in Asia Pacific

If yes, what are the steps? (Please tick all that apply.)

(% of respondents)



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