

Pressure piles on women in the workplace

Asia needs more mothers in employment but must tackle prejudice and discrimination

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“Are you married?” This was the first question a job seeker surnamed Jiang was asked by a recruiter in Beijing, but her answer “no” did not suffice. “They immediately asked whether I have a boyfriend and where he is,” she said. “It’s a common question for most local companies,” Jiang said. “The question would be ‘do you have children?’ or ‘when do you plan to have one?’ if your answer is yes.”

Jiang’s case is not unusual in China’s job market.

According to Li Qiang, a senior vocational consultant with Chinese recruitment website Zhaopin.com, many female job seekers face questions that are irrelevant to their professional skill set or working experience.

“These inquiries will be focused on their marital status, family planning or work-family balance,” said Li.

The situation is gaining more attention with the launch of China’s universal two-child policy. After more than 30 years of the one-child policy, the change allows all families to have a second child. With more families welcoming a second baby, women are worried that employers may now see them as a bigger burden.

“The maternity leave set by law is a relatively long period of time, especially when the second-child policy has doubled the time costs,” said Li. “Besides, salary required during maternity leave and the possibility that female employees might jump to another company (after giving birth) are also quite risky to companies.”

Since the new policy was launched in 2016, 30 provinces in China have extended maternity leave to an average of 138 to 158 days, according to an inspection on implementation of the new family-planning policy. Mothers in the southwestern Tibet autonomous region enjoy the longest period of maternity leave, at up to one year.

The extension was based on the revised Law on Population and Family Planning adopted in 2016. According to the law, all female

employees who give birth are entitled to between one and three months additional maternity leave on top of the 98 days mandated.

Li said extended maternity leave gives working mothers more time to rest and to cope with family obligations.

“But it also means that working mothers will be away from the workplace for a longer time, which will make it more difficult for them to come back,” he added.

Nearly 60 percent of working mothers do not want a second child, according to Zhaopin.

In a poll by the recruiter that focused on women’s career worries caused by childbearing, replacement by others ranked No 1. This was followed by barriers in getting promoted and applying for higher salaries, and the hurdle to make a comeback after childbearing.

“Companies will be more careful when recruiting female employees since they have to deal with higher costs,” Li said.

Golden time

Female employees aged between 25 and 35 suffer the most from this gender discrimination, as they are not just in the golden time of their career development but are also at their peak time of giving birth.

Zhaopin reported that women who are married without children are more likely to face this “reality” in looking for jobs.

In 2017, China’s labor force participation rate of females was 61 percent, as estimated by the International Labor Organization. This is way above the global average of 48.7 percent. The issues faced by career women in China are somewhat shared across Asia and the globe.

On July 12 2017, when Takako Suzuki, a Japanese lawmaker, announced on her blog that she was expecting her first child, it sparked a wave of negative comments. Some said a pregnant woman cannot be an effective public servant and that motherhood would distract her from her government role, as reported by *The Japan Times*.

The newspaper said that the country’s Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare found in a survey that 21.8 percent of full-time employees and



Female graduates attend a job fair at a university in Kunming, Southwest China’s Yunnan province, on Dec 14 last year. China’s universal two-child policy has given rise to fears that employers may now see women as a bigger burden.

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48.7 percent of temp staff have experienced workplace maternity harassment, or *matahara* in Japanese.

Japan is not the only country in Asia where women face such problems in the workplace.

In a poll of 3,000 companies in 2015, more than 80 percent of private firms in South Korea said that only one-third of female employees returned to work after maternity leave, according to *The Economist*.

Government data showed that 26.3 percent of South Korean women were disconnected from their careers in 2016. The country’s National Statistics Office also said that the proportion of nationals whose career stops due to pregnancy and childbirth is increasing.

In Malaysia, according to the Workplace Discrimination Survey by the Women’s Aid Organization, more than 40 percent of the 222 women polled had experienced job discrimination due to pregnancy.

The top five ways employers discriminate against pregnant women are by making their positions redundant, denying promotions, placing them on prolonged probation, demoting and even terminating their jobs, the organization said.

Marian Baird, professor of gender and employment relations at the University of Sydney Business School, noted the enormous potential for women to engage more in the labor market as Asian economies grow and governments seek to increase labor force participation.

Such efforts can be seen in Japan, which needs more female participation in the workforce as it battles an aging population and stagnant economy. To this end, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has proposed an initiative called “womenomics,” which aims to raise in the proportion of mothers who return to work after the birth of their first child to 55 percent by 2020. The number is 38 percent at present.

A change effective since January

to Japan’s dependent-spouse tax deduction system was believed necessary for encouraging more women into the workplace.

South Korea is considering double maternity leave pay, which will enable female employees on maternity leave to receive 80 percent of their monthly salary, according to *The Korea Times*.

Admitting that many Asian countries are paying close attention to their policy frameworks, Baird is impressed how the policy regime in the Philippines is “well developed” despite existing problems for career women and across the economy.

The Philippines ranked the 10th best-performing country in the Global Gender Gap Index 2017 by the World Economic Forum. Despite falling three places from the previous year, it remains the most gender equal country in Asia. In contrast, Pakistan ranked 143rd among 144 countries.

High scores

In a 2015 report, the Asian Development Bank also acknowledged the Philippines, along with Australia, Mongolia, New Zealand and Singapore, on its high sub-index score on economic participation and opportunity, labor force participation, educational attainment, and health and survival.

“Asian countries do have a number of policies, such as maternity leave and lactation breaks, which can assist women at work. The problem is often one of compliance and enforcement,” said Baird.

“In more developed policy settings, governments and employers are now paying more attention to paternity leave policies and to quotas and targets to ensure that women are given the opportunities to participate in the labor market.”

Li from Zhaopin said that in China, the percentage of female employees facing gender discrimination

decreased from 38 percent in 2016 to an estimated 25 percent in 2017.

He attributed the improvement to the economic transformation from manufacturing to services, and from services to knowledge, which boosts the number of new jobs and brings more opportunities for women.

“They are even more competitive than men in terms of innovative jobs since they are more discerning about the changing world and better communicators.”

According to the white paper on Gender Equality and Women’s Development in China published in 2015, one-fourth of entrepreneurs in China are female, while 55 percent of new Internet businesses are founded by women.

During the Global Leaders’ Meeting on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping put an emphasis on promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment. This includes updating policies to stimulate women’s potential, raising women’s participation and ensuring women’s equal share in social and economic development.

Li hopes that the social security system can be improved further, especially with a focus on female employees to help with their worries over child care and career ambition. Measures like maternity allowance, social security and tax deduction, or flexible working hours, are all desired by female workers.

Baird from the University of Sydney agreed that both government and business can play a major role in shifting attitudes toward women, while men need to play a bigger role in domestic and care work as well.

“The major challenge is that the policy framework in most countries is not conducive to assisting women participate in the labor market,” she said, “especially women with care responsibilities, of either or both child care and elder care.”