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Work, Happiness, and the Roles of Women: Survey Report

In July 2013, Lean In Beijing launched a survey called "Work, Happiness, and the Roles of Women in Society" in order to explore the attitudes of men and women in China regarding their professional lives, happiness, and the roles of women in society. Between July 15th and August 31st, Lean In Beijing collected a total of 543 survey responses - 462 responses in Chinese and 81 responses in English. This preliminary report will primarily focus on the relevant data for people who responded in Chinese, so the findings below refer to this group, unless otherwise indicated.

1. Respondents

A total of 422 women and 35 men completed the survey in Chinese; women accounted for over 91% of those respondents.

94% of those surveyed were between the ages of 18-44, with 23-34 year-olds, a group just beginning their careers, accounting for 77% of the total. The respondents generally had a high education level. 86% had a bachelor's degree or above. The pre-tax monthly income of respondents varied widely, from below RMB 3,000 RMB per month to greater than RMB 50,000. The largest group was those making between RMB 5,000-10,000 per month, representing 30% of the total.

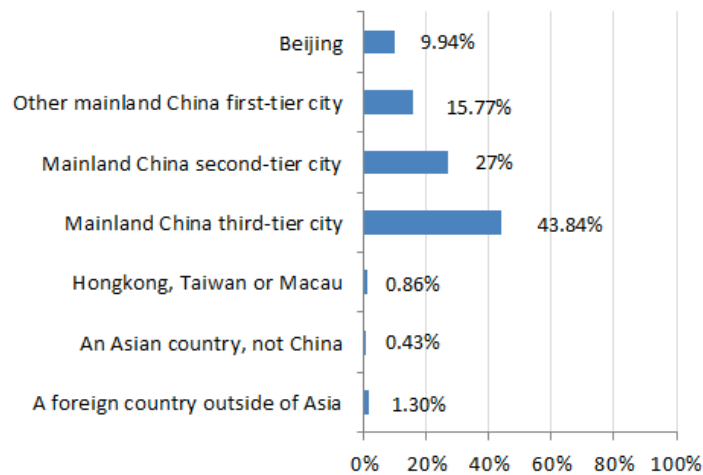


Diagram 1: Hometown

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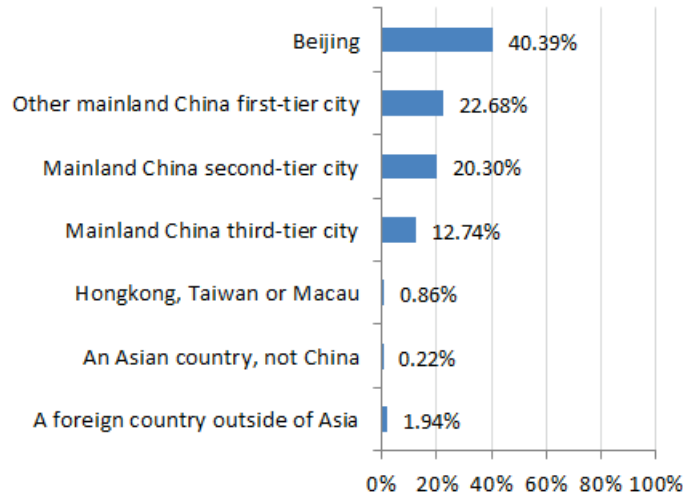


Diagram 2: Current place of residence

About 63% of respondents live in Beijing or other first-tier cities.¹ Another 33% live in second- and third-tier cities or other regions. However, 70% grew up in China's second- and third-tier cities or other regions and only 26% grew up in Beijing and other first-tier cities. Diagram 1 and Diagram 2 compare respondents' hometowns and current cities of residence. The flow of highly educated people from second- and third-tier cities to first-tier cities highlights a clear, single-directional migration trend in China today.

Survey respondents come from a wide range of industries, including the arts, architecture, education, finance, IT, law, and manufacturing. The sectors with the most respondents are the finance (15%), followed by marketing/media (12%) and IT (10%). In breaking down company/organization type, people working in China's private sector accounted for 28% of respondents, while Chinese state-owned enterprises and foreign-funded enterprises followed with about 18% each. Identifying company/organization type in this survey is an important distinction and variable, as the natures of each group, professional and working status, challenges and expectations differ significantly between them. (See Diagram 3)

¹ First-tier cities refer to the most developed cities in China, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Second-tier cities include those that are less developed but still contain much of the modern infrastructure in the first-tier. They include most provincial capitals and large cities in eastern China. Third-tier cities have the lowest development level of those surveyed.

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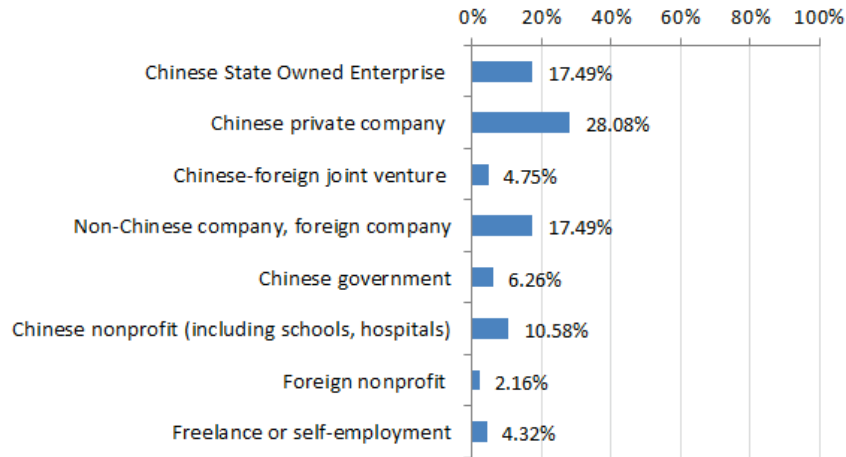


Diagram 3: Type of company/organization

2. Happiness and priorities

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs categorizes human needs into five categories from low to high: physiological (food, sex, sleep, etc.), safety (health, resources, property rights, etc.), love/belonging (friendship family, intimacy), esteem (self-confidence, achievement, respect, etc.) and self-actualization (inclusiveness, creativity, problem solving, etc.). As people in different stages of life will have varying priorities, they will inevitably define "happiness" and "success" from different perspectives. We wanted to find out what brings respondents happiness.

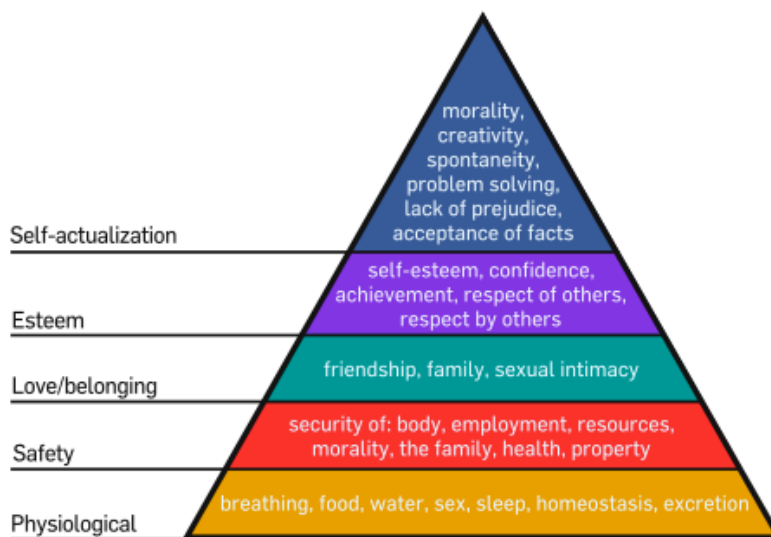


Diagram 4: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

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Hence, we asked two important questions. The first question is, “What are the factors that can bring you the most happiness?” The second question is, “Currently, what are your greatest priorities in life?” The possible answers to both questions were the same and covered all needs on the Maslow Hierarchy with the exception of the first level (“physiological needs”).

Responses to the first question showed that “having fun” ranked highest as the factor that can bring one the most happiness, scoring higher than all other possible answers. The second and third most chosen answers were “meaningful work” and “caring for my parents,” respectively. Other responses that scored in the top 50 percent included “personal health,” “being respected and liked by others,” and “realizing my own potential and creativity.” (See Diagram 5).

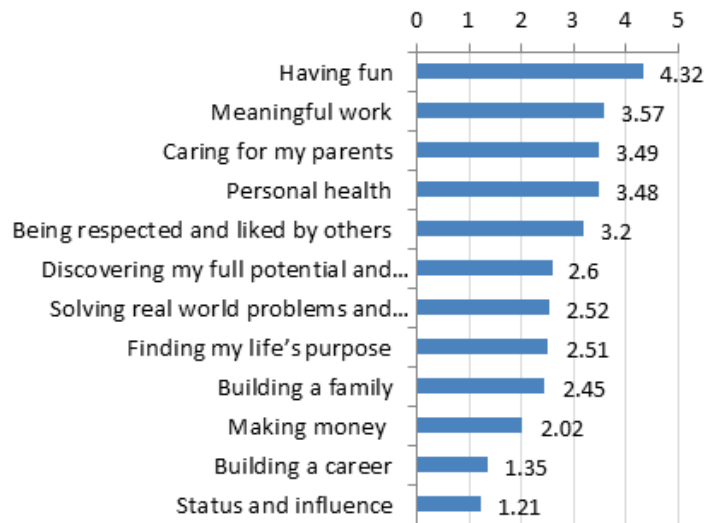


Diagram 5: The most important factors to overall happiness

The factor which respondents felt was most important in their lives—“personal health”—ranked highest, scoring well above the other possible answers. The second and third most popular answers were “finding my life’s purpose,” and “building a career.” Other notable results, those that were chosen by over 50% of respondents, include “caring for my parents,” “discovering my own potential and creativity,” and “making money.” (See Diagram 6.)

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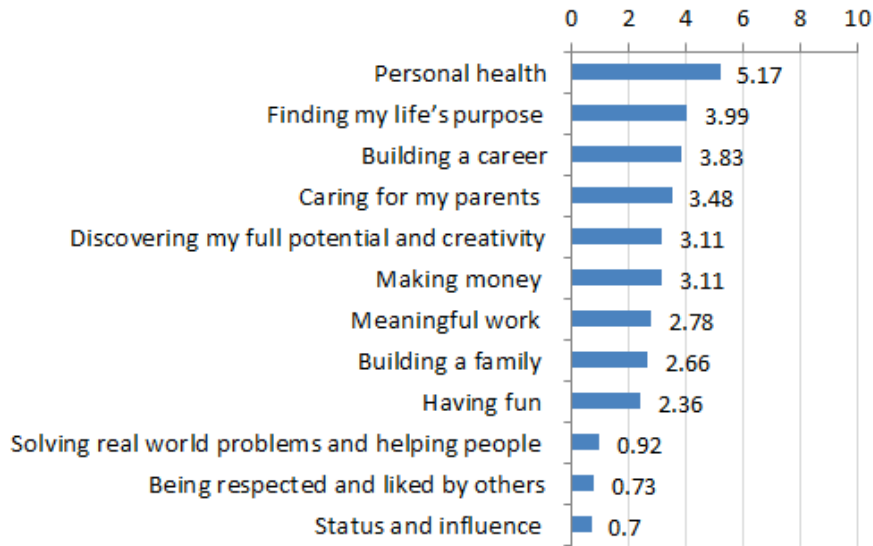


Diagram 6: Top priorities in life at the moment

From the responses, it is clear that the factors listed as “things that bring happiness” and “things that are important right now” have several major divergences. A few answers, such as “personal health” and “caring for my parents,” ranked highly on both lists. However, both of these factors belong to the “safety” and “love/belonging” rungs on the Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Several factors ranked highly as “things that bring happiness,” but were not chosen by respondents as “things that are important right now,” including “having fun” and “being respected and liked by others.”

It is worthwhile to point out that, in comparison with the high importance survey respondents that answered in Chinese attached to “caring for my parents,” respondents that responded in English ranked this factor near the bottom in order of importance. This divergence shows an important cultural observation. In China – and perhaps in Asia more broadly – Confucian values still play an important role as evidenced by attitudes toward filial piety. Regarding another key question, among respondents aged 23-34, 21% support their parents financially. In comparison, among respondents aged 35-44 and 45-54, the percentage of individuals financially supporting their parents increased to 35% and 39%, respectively. This raises the question, will the career choices and career development of young people be influenced by a sense of responsibility towards parents and families? If so, does this sense of responsibility act as a driver or a hindrance towards

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the pursuit of personal goals? Hopefully, future research can help investigate and shed light on this important issue.

3. Ideal job

In terms of what respondents regard as their ideal job, the three responses that scored highest in importance were “well paid,” “allows me to work with people that I can learn from” and “is intellectually interesting.” Other responses that scored in the top 50% of choices include “provides social benefit or helps people,” “has a relaxed or flexible schedule,” and “provides opportunities for promotion and advancement.” (See Diagram 7). It is clear that respondents face strong economic pressures, given that income level was ranked as one of the major factors considered when choosing a career. It is also worthwhile to note that respondents do not see security and stability - which were the traditional benchmarks of a good job - as the most important aspects of an ideal job. Rather, they wish to realize their personal value/worth, and plan to pursue this goal by continuous learning and acquiring useful skills along their career path.

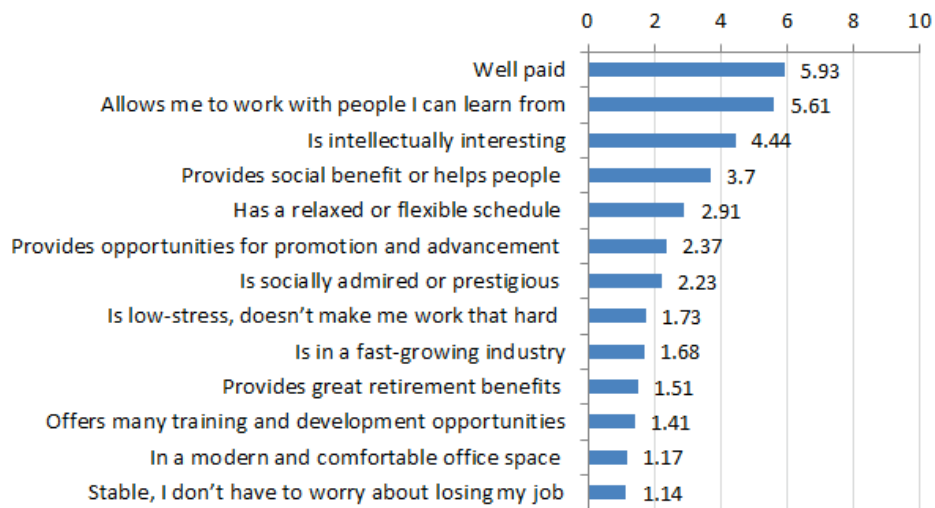


Diagram 7: Ideal job characteristics

When asked to compare their current and ideal job situations, only 36% of respondents were either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their current jobs; 46% were “okay,” and the other 17% were either “unsatisfied” or “very unsatisfied.” Many respondents also noted that this survey was the first time they had spent any time considering the question of how their current work reality compares to their ideal.

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4. Challenges and experiences in the workplace

Most women said that the biggest challenge for them in the workforce was “work-life balance.” This was followed by “maternity issues, maternity leave,” and “partners’ career,” which refers to sacrificing one’s own career for the sake of their partner’s. The fourth and fifth-most frequently chosen factors were “male-dominated workplaces” and “gender discrimination.” (Diagram 8)

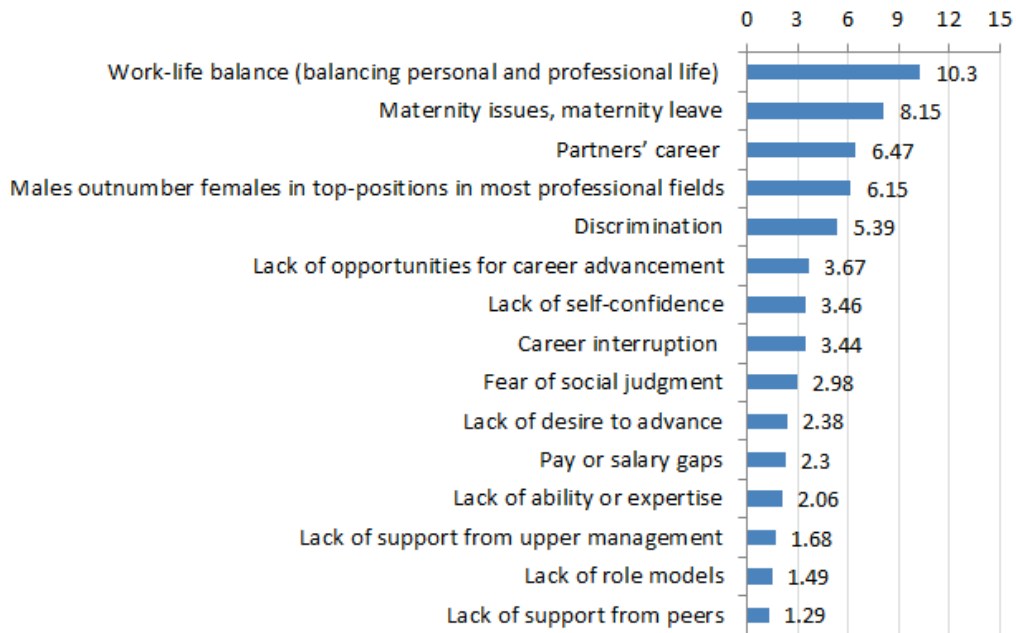


Diagram 8: Top challenges for women professionally

In reality, all of these are challenges faced by women in the workforce. Some challenges are external and stem from inequalities in the larger society. For example, 44% of respondents have encountered gender discrimination on the job. Other challenges are internal. Of the top five challenges identified in the survey, most are from external obstacles or stem from “unavoidable challenges.” As discussed in Sheryl Sandberg’s “Lean In,” women often ignore some issues that arise from personal and individual behaviors and attitudes, such as a lack of upward motivation, a shortage of professional training, etc. According to Sandberg in “Lean In,” these internal obstacles need to be confronted, faced squarely and overcome. Everyone has the agency to change.

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Additionally, according to the survey, while only 9% of respondents were happy with their current jobs and salary levels, only 36% had asked for either a promotion or raise in the last five years. The reason most cited was “my company/organization does not accept individual applications for raises or promotions.” This is the common practice at Chinese state-owned enterprises and government agencies. Employee salaries are mainly determined by job position and seniority. This reflects the impact that work culture has on career development.

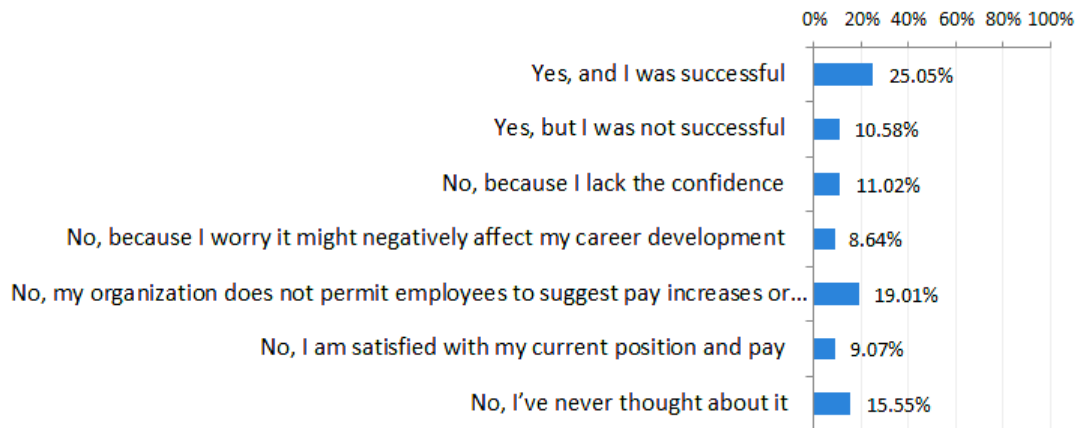


Diagram 9: In the last 5 years, have you asked or applied for a promotion or raise?

Social norms that emphasize collectivism and taking the middle road make workers, whether male or female, likely to avoid drawing too much attention to themselves, thereby making them less likely to ask for raises. Thus, Chinese women face not only a “glass ceiling” obstacle due to their gender but also a “bamboo ceiling.” A “bamboo ceiling,” as discussed in Korean author Jane Hyun’s “Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: Career Strategies for Asians,” children raised in Asian families are less likely to be willing to fight for their own interests and to self-promote, making it more difficult for them to make an impression as leaders. It may be that this cultural characteristic is more important than any purely gender-based obstacles to the advancement of Asian women in the workplace.

5. Marriage and Family

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Many successful women, including Sheryl Sandberg, have spoken of the view that marriage is the most important choice a woman can make for her career. Whether one's partner can provide practical support and encouragement greatly influences if a woman has adequate time to focus on her career. Hence, the survey asked respondents about their situations at home.

About 60% of respondents were in a relationship; 27% of these are married. For women who want a high-flying career as well as familial bliss, they need support and help in several aspects. Amongst those with partners, 45% indicated that they were "satisfied or very satisfied" with their partner's support in terms of household chores; 33% selected "neutral," while 22% felt "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with their partner's undertaking their share of work.

58% of respondents indicated that they did not have help from others, including domestic helpers and relatives, while 42% have some assistance in childcare, cleaning or cooking. 36% of married respondents also receive financial help from their parents. This proportion increased to 80% when their partners also received financial help from their parents.

6. Opinions on "having it all" and "male leadership"

Do women have to choose between career and familial happiness? To this classic question, 69% of respondents answered optimistically, believing that women can have both a career and be able to balance the family demands. One possible explanation for this optimism is that respondents do not consider having a career as having a leadership role in their workplace. Respondents may have considered "having a career" as "holding down a good job."

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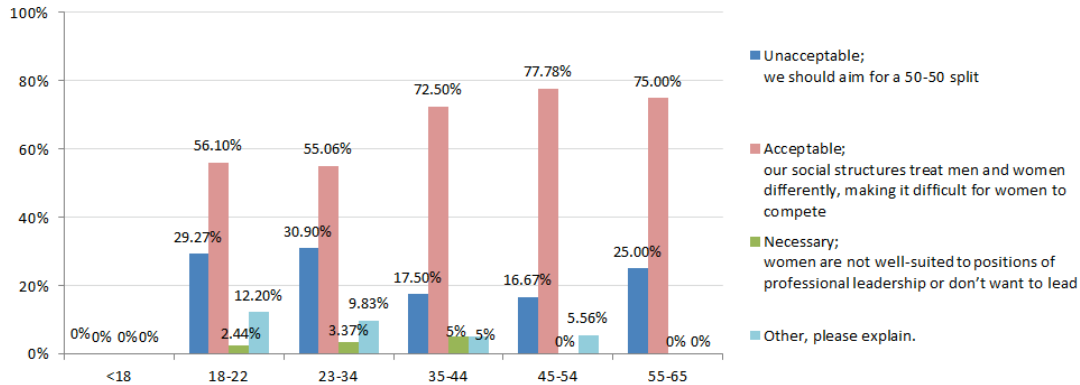


Diagram 10: Males outnumber females in top-positions in most professional fields. What do you think of this imbalance?

On the issue of gender representation in leadership positions, close to 70% of respondents felt that it is “acceptable” that men dominate leadership roles in the workplace. Respondents over the age of 35 were even more accepting of this point of view, with 80% agreeing that it was “acceptable.” Respondents who disagreed tended to be younger, with about 30% of respondents in the age ranges of 18-22 and 23-34 answering that it was “not acceptable” to have men dominate top leadership positions. It should be noted that these two groups also make up the lion’s share of total respondents, at 86%.

According to the survey, at least 82% of respondents work in organizations where top leadership is made up of males. Clearly, this gives credence to the belief that men dominate leadership roles in China. Given the disparity of responses between older and younger participants, the survey results raise the question of whether people simply become more accepting of “reality” after more years of experience in the workplace.

7. The needs for professional groups in China

To better understand the pressures that women face, as well as their needs, the survey asked respondents to identify and rank the issues that they considered most problematic in their lives. As seen in Diagram 11, the issues considered most problematic are “lacking the drive to identify and implement career goals,” “inability to make friends outside of work circles” and “inadequate contact with people within and outside of my industry.” Some respondents candidly responded – “Over years of working, my colleagues eventually become my only friends.”

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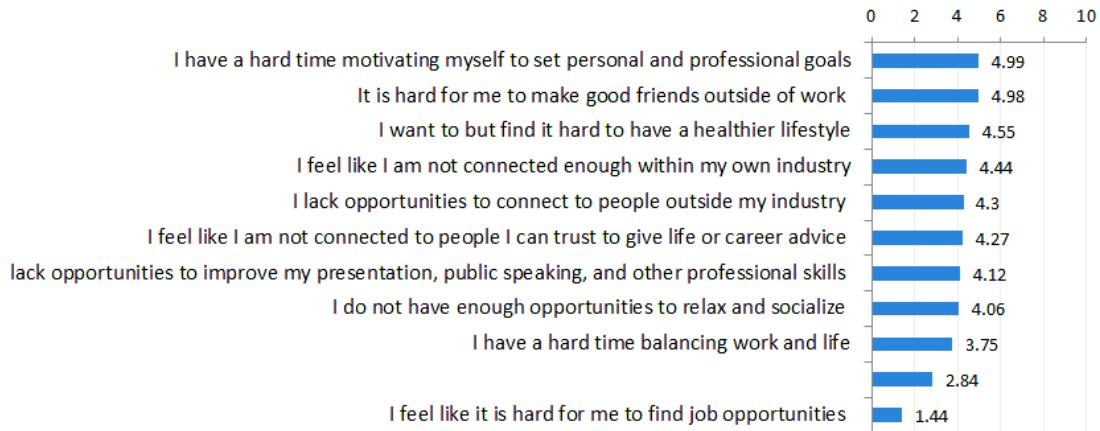


Diagram 11: Problems in your life

A majority of respondents prefer to talk to their friends or spouses, followed by their parents, about challenges at work. A significant number, 15%, prefer not to tell anyone. The issue with confiding with friends, spouses or parents about workplace challenges is that these groups usually lack the career and industry insights needed to give constructive professional development advice. They are better at providing emotional support. Furthermore, 53% of respondents indicated that they have no mentors, though they hoped to have one. Seven percent of respondents reported having mentors, but expressed hope to have more.

These results reflect respondents’ desire to increase their social networks, build relationships within and outside of their industry, and receive more meaningful professional development guidance.

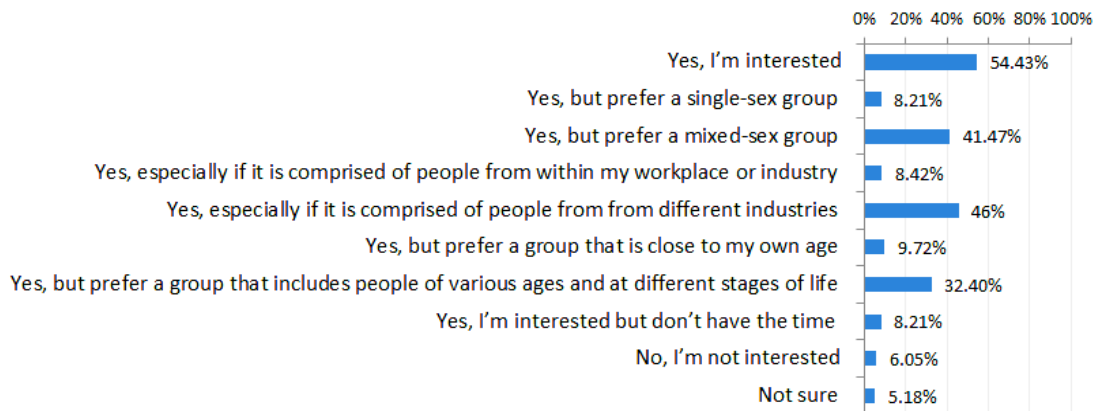


Diagram 12: Are you interested in joining a professional group?

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An overwhelming 91% of respondents had never heard of any organization dedicated to women's professional development, which clearly validates Sheryl Sandberg's belief that women lack support in this area. Such organizations are both more common and more established in Western countries. Some groups have managed to establish their presence in China's first-tier cities, but most mainland Chinese women still lack organizations or networks from which they can receive industry-specific support and assistance despite a serious demand for these organizations (88% of respondents hope to join organizations that can provide them with such support). Hence, one of the aims of Lean In Beijing is to respond to this need. The goal of this group is to provide China-specific professional development support and assistance to women in China.

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