



Employees work at the headquarters of Ant Group, an affiliate of Alibaba, in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, China.

# China's female entrepreneurs lead fight to topple gender barriers

In a country where women are meant to 'hold up half the sky', female employees still strive for equal treatment, writes **You Xiaoying**

One of the best-known idioms in China is "women hold up half the sky", a political slogan dating back to the late 1950s aimed at spurring women to break free from thousands of years of feudalist tradition and go out to work.

In the following two decades, [posters](#) depicting hard-working female farmers, porters and electric engineers were ubiquitous in the country's towns and cities, representing the height of its women's liberation movement and efforts to boost post-war productivity.

Fast forward half a century, Chinese working women are navigating a new landscape after the country went through high-speed urbanisation. Some of their hurdles are discrimination during recruitment, limited opportunities to get promoted and a lack of support to help them balance work and life.

But changes are on the way. Some companies have started to take actions to create parity for ➤

working women. A new generation of female entrepreneurs and executives have also made their marks in emerging industries.

“China has made remarkable strides towards achieving gender equality in the workplace, with consistently higher female employment rates than the global average,” consultancy McKinsey & Company said in a [2023 report](#).

In 2023, 60.5% of the country’s women were working, compared with 51.16% worldwide, according to [the World Bank Group](#). The figure surpassed that of many developed countries, such

as the UK, at 58.26%, and the U.S., at 56.51%.

The Chinese female workforce is also the world’s largest, amounting to around 351 million in 2023, more than twice that of second-place India.

Yet, there are still many challenges. For one, women in China – especially those at child-bearing ages – face open or hidden discrimination while trying to land a job.

In 2023, a woman in Guangzhou made the headlines nationwide after being sacked on her first day at work. The company had found out she was married and told her that it intended to hire someone who was “stable and will not fall pregnant”, *China Youth Daily* reported. In other cases, female candidates are made to promise not to have a baby within a certain period after being hired – normally three years – according to the country’s *Legal Daily*.

The phenomenon is partly caused by the fact that Chinese companies have long working hours and tend to expect employees to be fully devoted to their jobs, says Chen Shili, an assistant professor who researches gender and diversity at Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University in Suzhou, China. “Companies worry that female employees will need to shift their attention to their families once they have babies.” ➤

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REUTERS/TYRONE SIU





Chinese women are also more easily persuaded to choose domestic roles than their male counterpart, she notes. "There remains a deeply rooted traditional gender value that expects men to be breadwinners and women to take on caregiving roles."

The gender imbalance is even more pronounced in state-owned companies, according to a study by the Asian Corporate Governance Association (ACGA).



## A 2020 study found that 41% of Chinese tech companies had female founders, 13 percentage points above their UK peers

The Hong Kong-based non-profit organisation analysed the 100 biggest companies listed on the Shanghai and Shenzhen stock exchanges in 2023. It found that **20% of the board directors** in private firms were women, but the figure was just 11% for state-owned enterprises.

Women are also under-represented in politics, particularly at senior levels, and Stephanie Lin, an ACGA researcher and co-author of the report, said because directors of state-owned enterprises are nominated by a central government agency or their mother companies, the candidates available for selection are "skewed towards men".

On the other hand, companies with a female-chaired nomination committee in mainland China and Hong Kong usually have a higher percentage of female directors.

It's also a very different picture in China's emerging industries, particularly technology companies.

A **2020 study** by the then SPD Silicon Valley Bank found that 41% of Chinese tech companies had female founders, 13 percentage points higher than their UK peers and 14 percentage points higher than U.S. ones. The portions of female board directors and C-suite executives in these Chinese companies were also substantially higher than in other industries, at 46% and 39%, respectively.

A big reason is that Chinese companies in emerging industries do not have existing "winner's profiles" to define how a company should be run, says Shi Junna, a partner at McKinsey. These companies' contracting formats and working hours are also more flexible, she adds. ➤

Chinese law forbids any gender-based discrimination. It also **prohibits** businesses from asking about female jobseekers' family situation or requiring them to take pregnancy tests. But a **2023 survey** by Chinese recruitment website Zhilian found that 61.1% of the female respondents had faced such queries during job interviews.

Chinese culture emphasises conformity, and this makes companies feel "psychologically safe" to ask disrespectful questions, Chen explains.

As one female lawyer told a Chinese radio programme, the government could do more to encourage companies to hire female workers, including by subsidising employers to find maternity cover.

### CAREER 'BOTTLENECK'

As in many parts of the world, obstacles exist for Chinese working women when they want to advance from lower-tier positions to senior posts.

According to McKinsey, there are similar percentages of women at entry-level jobs in China compared with men, but their representation shrinks to 22% at the middle-management level.

The career bottleneck is closely linked to the fact that many companies' top leadership is dominated by men, who are more likely to promote other men, says Chen.

**Young women attend a job fair for university graduates in Hefei, Anhui province, China.**



REUTERS/DAMIR SAGOLJ

Emerging industries are more socially progressive. Many of China's renewable energy firms, for example, took gender equality into consideration when they were established and aimed to create a more balanced work structure, says Hu Wenjuan, a director at China Sustainability Tribune, who recently wrote [a report](#) on gender issues in climate and energy sectors.

### RISE OF ESG

While the percentage of female employees in a company is important, relying on gender quotas may not be the best way to create true equality, says Li Yaxiong, who researches economics and gender at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University. She points [to studies](#) that have found that quotas have led to mixed outcomes in a range of different European countries.

Companies should analyse each step of their operation – from recruitment to payments – to identify the problems their female employees face and find solutions accordingly, Li notes.

Ctrip, a Chinese online travel-booking platform with more than 36,000 employees, has been a leader in introducing female-friendly work policies. The company offers a range of benefits, including taxi allowances for pregnant employees, subsidies and annual leave for senior managers who choose

to [freeze their eggs](#), and options to work from home or bring children to the office.

Internet giant [Alibaba](#), meanwhile, has gathered a group of its female employees working in high-level technical positions to share their experience with colleagues through seminars. And [Tencent](#) has a similar programme to encourage more women to invent new technologies.

Last year, China's three main stock exchanges mandated some listed companies to make ESG disclosures [from 2026](#), a major step aimed at aligning Chinese companies with their international peers.

"The increasing attention to ESG has encouraged Chinese companies, like Alibaba Group, to address gender equality through robust frameworks and measurable actions," Li says. ●

**Genders are evenly distributed at entry level jobs in China, but women's representation falls to 22% at the middle-management level.**



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