

BY ERIKA WANG



A panel of women executives at an AmCham Shanghai event last year. At right is Sarah Butler, managing director of Greater China at Booz & Co.

When Family Comes First

Balancing work with family responsibilities can pose a burden to the most successful executive women in China

Ningbo native Lisa Sun spent two decades at several multinationals in China, climbing the ranks in the human resources sector. Three years ago, however, she was forced to make a tough call. Her son, who was in primary school at the time, was diagnosed with a medical condition that required her full attention.

For her, it was not one of those decisions made in corporate boardrooms but a personal one. She got out of the regular workforce to become a freelancer for a year so she could care for the boy. “Because I have a husband, I’m a mother, I’m a daughter-in-law and a daughter, when my parents or parents-in-law get sick or my son needs my attention while my husband is busy, I have to make a choice to give up

something and take care of them first,” Sun said.

While working women throughout the world face decisions like this every day, in China deeply seated cultural norms and traditions place greater pressure on women to care for parents or in-laws, forcing successful women to shorten their career or come up with innovative solutions to balance work, life and family.

At the same time, issues of childcare, hiring a babysitter or a finding a suitable childcare facility are less critical. Sarah Butler, managing director of Greater China at management consulting firm Booz & Co., notes that when Chinese women first have a child they enjoy support from extended family, but later over the next five to 10 years, they have the responsibility of looking after their parents.

A 2012 global study by Booz & Co.,

Empowering the Third Billion, finds that 95 percent of Chinese women have eldercare responsibilities and 58 percent help support their parents financially. The report, which looked at the state of women's empowerment in the workplace based on existing data of 128 countries, moreover identifies eldercare pressure among the major factors that hold women back at senior levels in China.

The challenge Sun faced is a familiar one for Nancy Hasi, China country manager of U.S. integrated supply services provider Wesco Distribution. A native of Beijing, Hasi headed back from Pennsylvania in 2008 to establish the China office of Wesco, in Suzhou. When her mother was diagnosed with cancer, Hasi, an only child, shouldered the responsibilities to ensure her mother was looked after. But caring for her mother and serving as general manager of a Fortune 500 outfit in China proved a difficult balancing act, she says.

"I had a conversation with my mom when she was sick and I asked her: 'Would you like me to support you more to get you the best medical care or to spend more time here with you and put my career on hold?'" she recalls. "My mother's wishes in her final days were my No. 1 priority. In the end, her wishes were for me to keep my career on track. I, of course, tried my best to do both. I am sure these are the types of challenges that career women face regularly. Managing a career and family life is truly a never-ending balancing act."

Sally Hasler of The Women's Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to improving the lives of women and girls in Hong Kong, says that research shows that "more women drop out of the workforce to take on the burden of elderly care." Fifteen percent of China's population, or 200 million people, are elderly. This figure is projected to triple by 2040, according to some estimates.

To reduce the stress on working women looking after elderly parents, Hasler says that the government could consider expanding medical care for parents, multi-generational housing and adding medical services in housing estates and residential districts.

Amy Sommers, Shanghai-based partner at international law firm K&L Gates and an American who has worked in China for more than a decade, says that as well as pursuing systemic change, a grassroots approach is needed to shift cultural expectations. "I am hearing from Chinese women that they feel a sense of obligation and responsibility for care towards both children and parents," she says, "and that this constrains the pursuit of their professional ambitions."

Noting that 30 or 35 years ago in China, family and household duties were often shared by both spouses, Sommers adds that "the trend away from this model is not written in stone and acknowledging that one's parents or husband might prefer that one be the primary caregiver doesn't mean women have to acquiesce in accepting that role." She adds: "While it can be intimidating to challenge and risk disappointing those we care about in our personal lives, this



Nancy Hasi, China country manager at Wesco Distribution

'A Company Full of Love'

CEO Joanne Cao talks about running a firm in China

Women in China today enjoy opportunities and rights in the workplace that were unimaginable just a few decades ago. According to the 2013 Grant Thornton International Business Report, 51 percent of senior management positions in listed and private companies in China are held by women, compared to 25 percent last year and more than double the global average of 24 percent.

Globally, the proportion of businesses employing women as CEOs has risen from 9 percent to 14 percent, and 21 of the Fortune 500 CEOs are women. In China, one such company led by a female CEO, health insurance services provider MSH China, shows why the country continues to make headlines for women in business.

Women comprise 85 percent of the employees at MSH

China, notes CEO Joanne Cao. A Xi'an native, Cao joined the multinational in 2003, shortly after obtaining her master's in the United Kingdom. She became CEO less than a decade after, at the age of 32. During her time with the company, she has seen it grow from five people to almost 300, with 200 staff in Shanghai and others in major cities including Beijing and Guangzhou.

Soft-spoken and composed, Cao's unequivocally feminine style permeates through the company culture.

"Women can be elegant and still be a leader, you don't have to look very strong, you can look very gentle but still do things well," says Cao. "In our company, we don't need to be harsh and aggressive."

In fact, Cao notes that among the company's core values is



Sally Hasler

may be an area where each woman has to decide what she wishes to accept and then negotiate and strategize to pursue it."

While most women learn to haggle the responsibilities of family and career, they must also deal with another issue: age. The mandatory statutory retirement age for women in non-managerial positions is 50 or 55 for managerial roles while the ceiling is 60 for men. This simple difference gives men an added edge in the minds of employers.

"What we're picking up is some discrimination against appointing a woman to a senior management role because they may not be around," notes Booz & Co.'s Butler. A 2010 survey by Chinese recruitment firm Zhaopin.com found that 76.4 percent of male managers and 63.3 percent of female managers prefer to promote male staff.

Faced with the prospect of being made redundant before reaching one's career goals or being stuck in middle management, many women have used this obstacle as an

opportunity: they become entrepreneurs. In fact, China has among the highest rates of women entrepreneurs in the world: 29 million, or a quarter of the national total, according to figures from the All-China Women's Federation. And according to Shanghai-based magazine *Hurun Report*, half of the world's richest self-made female entrepreneurs hail from China.

This feat is even more impressive given that it was just in 1949 when the Communist Party took power under the helm of Mao Zedong that women officially attained equal rights and opportunities. At the time, women made up 7 percent of the workforce. Today, women comprise 49 percent of the population and 46 percent of the labor force.

For those career-minded women who are able to manage family and work expectations, the rewards can be satisfying and meaningful, says Marjorie Woo, founder of Leadership Management International (LMI China) and CEO of Keystone Group. Woo and her firms have trained more than 10,000 executives in



Marjorie Woo

love. “I’m very happy that we built this company full of love,” she says. “A few years ago, our staff got together to vote for core values, and love came up as No. 1 ... I don’t think any other company has such a core value but I’m very happy about that because it’s coming from them.”

Walking through the Shanghai office, which takes up two floors of a modern building, we stumble upon the lactation room, a reminder that women rule at MSH China. The staff is young and smiley, and lining the walls are photos of various company trips, runs and other activities, including weekly yoga and belly dancing classes and biweekly book club meetings. A special section of the walls is reserved to recognize top performing “company stars.”

So what is it like for a man to work at a company with

mostly women?

Thomas Hsu, business development senior manager, says: “Working in a company with a predominant female staff

creates a more family-oriented atmosphere. At the same

time, as a male, you need to be more careful when you communicate and build good relationships and respect everyone’s emotions and feelings. However, you feel special as your female colleagues show you more care and want to hear your opinions.”



leadership development over the past three decades, and coach 2,000 managers annually. “Very often a female role is perceived to be more of a supporting role, putting other people’s interest ahead of her own and being more nurturing, so that taking on a leadership role ... takes adjusting one’s self-image as well as time in getting used to or internalizing that,” the Shanghai native points out.

Maureen Hurley, executive vice president and chief administrative officer of Buffalo, N.Y.-based food products supplier Rich Products Corporation, knows the feeling all too well. She recalls her climb up the ladder: “In the early 90s I was asked to take on responsibility of our communications and PR area, in 2001 take on responsibility of our global HR area, and then in 2005 I was responsible for our corporate services ... With each role I took on, my very first reaction was: ‘I can’t do that, I don’t know anything about it!’”

For her, what made all the difference was the support she received from her boss. “It was really

more because of his encouragement that I’d say, ‘Ok, I’ll try.’ And each time I took on a new role I’d say, ‘You know, he’s right, I can do this.’”

Despite cultural expectations and family obligations, at the end of the day there is always room for a career for those women who are willing to make it work. Sun, who took time off for her son, rejoined the workforce as HR director at MSH China, and she attributes much of her return to the company culture [see sidebar], which allows her a flexible schedule (she works from home two days a week) so she can balance her time with her family. For her, it’s a good compromise.

Amid the ongoing debate on equality and contributions from women, Hasi perhaps sums it up best: “When I look at a report saying a certain percentage (of women) does not contribute to the economy, I say: ‘No, they contributed indirectly to economic growth – they support their family, they support their husband’s career.’ Is that not a successful woman? It’s a successful woman!”

