



Rethinking the Workplace for Today & Beyond

Gender Effects of the Pandemic

Insights from a peer-exchange forum hosted by
NielsenIQ & The Conference Board of Asia



Introduction

In March'22, NielsenIQ India and The Conference Board of Asia hosted a session with business leaders to gain insights on how employers across Asia are addressing challenges that have arisen from the hybrid work model for women and caregivers.

The forum was attended by 55 business Leaders, Entrepreneurs, Strategic Consultants, HR heads, D&I Leaders spanning diverse sectors across Asia including Consumer & Industrial Products, Finance, Logistics, Media, Research, Technology, Telecom, Tourism, etc.

The agenda spanned sharing of research insights by the two host organizations, small group discussions, and peer exchanges. Experts from both NielsenIQ India and The Conference Board Asia shared perspectives on the evolving work landscape, challenges faced by working women in Asia and impact of COVID on work culture in general.

The objective of the session was to explore possible actions that could effectively mitigate the gender-based impacts of remote work in the context of the pandemic. It was also intended to validate findings from the earlier reports published by NielsenIQ and The Conference Board of Asia.

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Key Questions Discussed

- 1** What effects are you seeing on your women employees from the pandemic and hybrid work?
- 2** What steps have you taken to support employees?
- 3** What challenges are you facing when implementing policy and guidelines?
- 4** What changes can you commit to making when you go back to your organization?



1. Impact on women employees

Majority of the participants were optimistic about positive outcomes of remote working for working women. It was felt however, that women continue to bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid work even under the hybrid model, and that the pandemic has aggravated some pre-existing gender-based biases in unpaid work allocation, be it at office or home.

It was noted that women continues to struggle with juggling work and home responsibilities due to school closures and poor childcare infrastructure in some countries across the region. The prevalence of a “presentee-ist” (preference for physical presence) work culture in Asia, and performance metrics that favor physical presence in the office, women often feel excluded when working from home. As offices begin to re-open - even partially, men seem more willing to return to physical offices than women in Asia.

Asia-specific cultural factors such as the phenomenon of “tiger moms” - i.e., mothers who choose to drive their children hard to excel in academics - and baby boomer generation leaders who might have a bias for working in brick-and-mortar offices, add to the challenges that women face.

On the positive side, the increasing prevalence of the remote working model has enabled more women to participate in the workforce and take advantage of professional development opportunities including online conferences and workshops that could expand their own visibility and networks. It has facilitated greater work-life balance since it has enabled them to reclaim personal time for themselves and their families, by conserving energy and resources that would otherwise have been expended on office commutes.

2. Measures in Motion

- Most participants' organizations are adopting customized approaches to address the unique challenges and contexts of women employees. They need to be careful however to ensure objectivity and preempt grievances and perceptions of discrimination.
- The importance of leaders championing policy and process changes and visibly *walking the talk*, are critical success factors.
- Manager coaching and training will be essential to shift their performance assessment management frameworks and paradigms to focus more on value vs. outputs.
- Maintaining an open-door policy, strengthening Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and training managers on building psychological safety and detecting early distress signals, will be critical elements of the solutions portfolio.
- In parallel, building inclusive leadership capabilities at all levels in the company is important i.e., focusing on listening, psychological safety-building, unconscious biases, authenticity, and empathy.
- Modelling of boundary-setting behaviors by leaders and managers is critical. Some participants reported that their companies had instated mandatory log-off times as well as weekly/monthly time-offs. Most companies have crafted hybrid working guidelines detailing time schedules at work and home, as well as meeting guidelines that are aimed to be empathetic to employee wellbeing.
- Some companies mandate the presence of both virtual and in-person moderators and have streamlined training programs for managing virtual meetings and conferences.
- In addition, coaching and mentoring support for employees have been instituted along with regular and frequent touch points. The objectives are to enable them to be more forthcoming about their challenges and encourage them to seek help from their managers and/or colleagues. One participant's company has set up an "ombudsman"- like team to mediate between employees and employers when difficult situations arise, as and when needed.

3. Challenges in Implementation

The disproportionate attrition of women employees under remote work models has brought to the fore, gender inequities in the corporate world. While Human Capital teams are making commendable efforts to engage leadership teams in tackling the emergent challenges posed to women by remote working arrangements, a large-scale organizational change management effort will be necessary to build conducive mindsets, cultures, and inclusive leadership to drive success.

Most participants emphasized the importance of enlisting male allies and champions in gender equity conversations. Policy and process changes will be effective only when men are willing to champion women in the workplace and at home – for example by shouldering a larger chunk of domestic responsibilities.

When formulating policies, companies must be cautious about exhibiting unconscious biases towards single individuals and non-parents, to avoid feelings of exclusion.

Psychological safety of employees has been a concern in hierarchical cultures across Asia where position, gender, and age often dictate organizational culture. For instance, in China a back-to-office push has been driven largely by baby-boomer generation leaders and performance management systems that continue to favor those who show up to the office in-person. Honest dialogues, clearer options, and targeted HR training programs are required to align management's expectations with those of employees.

HR will need to rapidly integrate tech and digital solutions to streamline routine work. Smart processes enabled by automation and AI can be key differentiators.

Remote work models are currently mainly offered specifically to office-workers. Care must be taken to also provide alternate forms of flexibility to non-office employees. The disparity between the “haves” and the have-nots” could create interpersonal tensions and feelings of inequity.

4. Committing to Action

It was acknowledged that HR and leadership needs to listen more and address the unique cultural challenges that make implementation harder.

Supportive policies are needed to integrate multi-level solutions for both male and female employees.

Data gathering and analytics must drive the understanding of attrition patterns, and help devise better retention outcomes. Technological innovations and infrastructure, are vital in executing such operations.

While the pandemic itself was hard on women, participants were unanimous in that remote work opportunities have proved invaluable to women's self-advancement and their increased participation in the workforce. This presents a huge opportunity for companies to commit to actions and leverage female talent.

“ Hybrid work is here to stay... the sooner we adapt the better ”

Insights Summary

- Culture and mindset shifts are critical: The impact of the pandemic on women employees will require a holistic, integrated effort at the domestic, corporate, and government fronts.
- Psychological safety is key: Create safe environments for healthy and meaningful dialogue between employees.
- Enlist male champions: Male allies and champions are needed at all levels to garner support for remote work policies.
- One size doesn't fit all: Build guidelines and empower management at every stage. Create bespoke guidelines for middle and line managers to ensure good practices.
- Create awareness of biases: Consider interests of women and parents but all employees, while re-distributing work.
- While challenges for working women during the pandemic have been many, the opportunities far outweigh these if companies take the right actions in a timely manner. Being aware of these hurdles and moving swiftly to drive changes, will contribute to successful outcomes.





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