

“NO MORE BABIES”: WOMEN QUIETLY LAUNCH THE ULTIMATE SUSTAINABILITY REVOLUTION

A former investment banker and lawyer, Nicole Yuen is founder and CEO of the Women Workplace Index. Here, she speaks with Huawei’s Executive Editor-in-Chief, Gavin Allen, about why women in some parts of the world are no longer having kids.



Nicole Yuen

Founder and CEO of the Women Workplace Index

What is the Women Workplace Index?

Nicole: It’s an organization founded to track progress in the disclosure of workplace policies and practices related to women by listed companies and other employers. It is the first and only certification regime dedicated to these issues in Asia. We are starting in Hong Kong and expanding throughout Asia.

We welcome all employers to join our certification regime. Participation is voluntary. They will be asked to fill out a questionnaire about women’s workplace issues, such as whether they have a policy on anti-sexual harassment, their maternity and paternity leave arrangements, return-to-work facilitation, or whether employees can work outside of office hours.

And of course, other areas of interest include equal pay, representation of women at various levels of management, and so on. All the information provided by the employer will appear on our website.

If you get certified under our regime, it is a recognition that you’re a responsible employer aware of workplace issues for women and that you are trying to track your own performance and progress.

And then there’s disclosure. We’re not here to judge you. We do not want to say that, for example, if you have 5% women’s

representation in your management team, then you’re bad, or if you have 20%, you’re good. Industries are different. For example, law firms have more women; construction and mining companies have fewer women.

We just want to encourage companies to disclose so that the public will see you – and we will show you – particularly to the Gen Zs and the millennials, who wants to spend their money with companies that have a social purpose.

Is there a danger that if it’s voluntary, only the companies with a good PR story will disclose?

No problem – we’ll showcase them. That will produce a domino effect. For example, there might be three or four fast-food companies, and one will come out and say, “We are a Women Workplace Index employer.” And if I have a choice whether to have lunch at this place or that, I’ll go to the place with women-friendly policies. The Gen Z and the millennial crowd will go there; the women will go there; the male allies will go there.

Exactly because of this, we are starting with listed companies because they are already subject to obligations under the listing rules to disclose a lot of this information.



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And explain why it's important for companies to focus on enacting policies conducive to women in the workplace?

Well, after all, women make up 50% of humanity. Yet, women's representation in the workplace does not measure up, and in decision-making roles, it is still appallingly low.

But I am not just talking about women's empowerment here.

Think of it this way: the only fundamental difference between a man and a woman is that women can have kids. And what do women get for it? Three weeks, four weeks, one month, and maybe one year of maternity leave. That's it.

We make this fundamental contribution to the continuity of humanity, yet nobody recognizes that fact. This is not about the empowerment of women. It's about allowing women to perform the role that we are built for and, at the same time, giving them an equal workplace — an environment that allows them to realize their potential and contribute to society to the fullest. Because, as we have seen,

without the latter, women no longer want to have babies.

As the Women Workplace Index expands, we hope that many companies will join us to become certified employers. We are here to raise awareness of these issues among employers and to help them start this journey. If an employer says, "Sorry, we don't have any such women-related policies," okay, fine, we'll help by providing you with one. If you do not have a training video on these topics, we'll give you one to show each new hire.

And in that way, slowly but surely, the whole culture and the workplace landscape will change.

So you're nudging these companies in the right direction?

Absolutely. The workplace landscape is now completely in conflict with our values about family and needs an overhaul. Traditionally, society has hoped and thought that most women would stay home to take care of the family. But as

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women's educational levels rise and they are able to contribute more and attain more success in the workplace, birth rates decline.

Replacement-level fertility is represented by a number: the number of children a productive woman must have in order to sustain a society. The number is 2.1 children.

But Asian countries, except for Indonesia and the Philippines, are all below the 2.1-child replacement rate. South Korea has the lowest fertility rate in the world: 0.8.

Hong Kong, Singapore, and Macao are around or below 1.0; China is 1.2.

India is only about 2.0, down sharply from 3.96 in 1991. More women are graduating from universities in India now than men. It's climbed from about 30% of women graduating from college in India to more than 50%. No doubt, this will cause India's fertility rate to decline further. Women will say, "I want my choice; I want to work. It's more exciting, more interesting. We won't give birth."

Women are smart. We've called for women's empowerment for so many years, but nobody's given it to us. So, quietly, we do our own revolution, saying, "You won't give it to us with respect to career and education? Sorry, no more babies."

So you attribute declining fertility rates to a lack of women-friendly workplace policies?

World Bank research cites three main reasons why world fertility rates are down.

One is greater use of contraception; two is a decline in childhood mortality, so you don't need to produce so many babies. But the other big reason is that women want a career or an education, and they choose to get those things instead of, or by postponing, having kids. That is a key reason why fertility rates are going down — to such an extent that, as we see now, Asian societies are no longer sustainable.

This goes far beyond empowerment for women. We produce babies not only for ourselves or for our families, but for all of humanity.

And it is not only about giving birth. Caring for the elderly is another responsibility that falls mainly on women, especially in Asia.

Now, what if, in this silent revolution, we say, "Forget it; we no longer want to take care of our parents or grandparents"? We'd send them to a care home, exactly as in Western society. Not only would this create more economic pressure on the government to pay for elder care, but it would also fundamentally change our values about family, especially in Asia.

But doesn't a lower global population offer a more sustainable future?

It's about embracing diversity. Without that, we will lose what we treasure so much: the diversity of humanity.

Asia, in particular, has a huge demographic problem. We are having the fewest births and, at the same time, growing older the fastest. We understand we don't want an explosion in the world population, but we also

cannot afford to have such an extreme disparity of birth rates in the various regions in the world. We want a humanity that is diverse; we want people across the world of different origins, with different learnings, different wisdom, etc.

And that means enabling women to be able to have a career and be at home.

Yes, to fulfill their duty to give birth and raise children, and at the same time to work and contribute in the workplace to the fullest. Women are compassionate. We take care of the old people, and we take care of the young people. We are a gelling element for the family. And we are also very good at our work.

At this moment, the question we ask is: change the system or change the women?

If you don't change the system, the system will change the women. More and more of them will say, "If the workplace is not conducive to both work and family, one will have to give. Then I'm not going to give birth, and I'm not going to take care of my elderly relatives."

After all, ask any woman if she wants a baby. Most will say, "If I could, if I had the money, if I had support, if I could also have a good career, then yes, I'd have a baby."

As we embrace a world where sustainability becomes the cornerstone of public and private efforts, women should not need to choose between family and work. Instead, the system should be coming to meet their beliefs and their values.