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Lifting the Second Glass Ceiling



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Foreword



Anne Hayes
Director of Sectors

I am proud that BSI is publishing this landmark report, exploring why women may be leaving the workforce early and opening a conversation about how we lift what we are calling the Second Glass Ceiling – whereby women leave the workforce early and not out of personal preference – to benefit individuals, organizations and society as a whole.

We have come a long way in recent decades and no one could disagree that women play a central role in the workforce. But there is further to go. The pandemic disrupted working practices everywhere and the aftereffects of this are still being felt. Some trends – like women and older people leaving the workforce – have been magnified in some countries, while the upheaval has prompted discussion of issues such as well-being at work, culture and flexibility.

It is striking to see from our research that 42%* of working women globally agree that it is uncommon to see older women in positions of leadership. Of course, each experience is different and many women do stop working out of choice. But others do not.

When women leave the workforce early or before they have the opportunity to reach senior positions – whether because of caring responsibilities, structural factors or because their contribution is not valued – this can contribute to significant productivity losses, rob organizations of talented people, and remove mentors who can draw on their experience to guide newer members of staff. Although in this whitepaper we focus on the experiences of women, this is true of all marginalized populations.

* This whitepaper was developed by Malvern Insight. The survey was conducted by Censuswide, who surveyed 5,074 people who self-identify as women (18+) in the UK, USA, Australia, China and Japan

Foreword continued

It does not have to be this way. When employers partner with their people to create diverse, equitable and inclusive workplaces in which women are supported to remain in their roles, this can bring enormous benefit, from productivity gains to enabling innovation.

As our findings make clear, there are straightforward strategies that organizations can take to enable women to thrive in work throughout their lives. These can include embedding flexibility, offering support for workers experiencing menopause, and creating a positive workplace culture that prioritizes people of all ages and in which the focus of well-being programmes goes beyond personal health. Nor is this just for women to address – there is an opportunity for male colleagues and workers of a different generation to play a role and turn ambition into action.

As a purpose-led organization, BSI is committed to advancing the UN Sustainable Development Goals; making a positive impact both through our own actions and by helping those we work with make sustainable choices. Lifting the Second Glass Ceiling can help us all take steps to fulfil these goals, including goal five (gender equality), goal eight (decent work and economic growth) and goal 10 (reduced inequalities).

This whitepaper builds on our world-leading work to increase opportunity for older workers, including the publication of the *Menstruation, menstrual health and menopause in the workplace* standard (BS 30416), and our guidance on creating an age-inclusive workforce (BS ISO 25550:2022). It is the next step on an important journey.

It is a journey I am optimistic about. Two thirds of women globally (66%) believe the next generation will receive the flexibility and support needed to stay in the workforce as long as men. Since I joined the workforce I have seen significant transformation and far greater opportunity for women. Small cracks are already emerging and continued action can accelerate the progress already being made.

Equally, almost three quarters of women said that the presence of senior women would benefit the development of younger women. Creating inclusive environments through education, policies and accommodations can help women build sustainable careers.

The aim of our research is to reframe the conversation around women in work. Rather than see the considerations facing this group as a challenge, we all stand to gain by lifting the Second Glass Ceiling and seeing this as an investment in current and future generations and a means to ensure diversity. Ultimately, it is an opportunity to boost growth, enhance innovation and accelerate progress towards a sustainable world.

Anne Hayes
Director of Sectors
BSI

Executive summary

Women around the world are leaving the workplace faster than men¹, suggesting that a Second Glass Ceiling (SGC), focused less on career advancement and more on career longevity and employee retention, is in place. This is backed up by BSI's Second Glass Ceiling Poll² (SGCP) of 5,000 women globally, which found that 42% agree that it is uncommon to see older women in positions of leadership.

No two women have the same experience and not all will feel that the SGC is a reality. But for those who do, supporting women to remain in the workforce has the potential to increase human, social, and economic sustainability.

Critical Contributors

The World Health Organization (WHO)³ reports that ageism costs society billions. Beyond that, there's the personal cost – economic, emotional, and social. Most concerning, society loses the contributions these individuals may have made in their chosen industries, organizations and the world at large.

Departure Drivers

The drivers behind the SGC can be characterized as:

- External forces – societal, regulatory, or organizational
- Culture and environment
- Stereotypes and expectations
- Rolemodels
- Biology and family responsibilities
- Menopause

Perception and Reality

Government policies have sometimes set the tone, for example around having different retirement or pension ages. Notably, 74% of women polled by BSI agree that businesses need to take steps to support older women to remain in the workforce and 70% say governments have a role to play. Pairing policy changes with initiatives that change behaviour and expectations can offer the biggest societal benefit.

Guidance and Guardrails: how can we lift the Second Glass Ceiling?

- Education
- Opening the dialogue
- Building empathy and training leaders
- Flexibility
- Building a culture of care
- Implementing policies and benefits

Perpetuating Progress

The SGC is in itself a sign of progress – showing that women are making headway in the workplace and, as a consequence, identifying new opportunities for positive change.

There are many questions ripe for exploration, from what is the true definition of work to what actions can be taken at a regulatory and policy level. Governments, legislators, regulators and organizations are already starting to think about many of these issues⁴.

Optimistic Outlook

Small changes are already making a difference. As importantly, a new generation is finding its voice. The SGCP showed that younger women were more optimistic that their generation of women will receive the flexibility and support needed to stay in the workforce as long as their male colleagues.

Conclusion

Lifting the SGC can bring significant benefits to individuals, organizations and society, including facilitating growth and innovation. At a time when boosting productivity is a global priority, ensuring women are supported to remain in the workforce has the potential to be transformative. It offers the opportunity to help organizations retain talented people and ensure that the female leaders and mentors of today can help guide subsequent generations.

Recommendations

01

Recognize the benefits of lifting the Second Glass Ceiling

Individuals, organizations, and society all stand to gain from tackling the departure of women. Ultimately, it is opportunity to boost growth and innovation and accelerate progress towards a sustainable world.

02

Open the dialogue

Ask women what they want – and act on it. Looking at what is driving women to leave the workforce early can help to uncover solutions that can reverse the trends and enable more women to thrive.

03

Ensure support is available and accessible

Women can only access support around menopause or any other factor if it is first available and they are aware of what is on offer. Employers can partner with employees to embed a supportive culture.

04

Flexibility can be an asset

Small adjustments can make a big impact. Where possible, providing flexibility in how, when and where people work can greatly lessen the stress on those who might otherwise choose to leave the workforce.

05

Institute a broader culture of care

Taking a holistic approach to address the needs outlined in BSI's Prioritizing People® model framework can strengthen trust and engagement and, in turn, result in a more resilient organization.

06

Share best practice

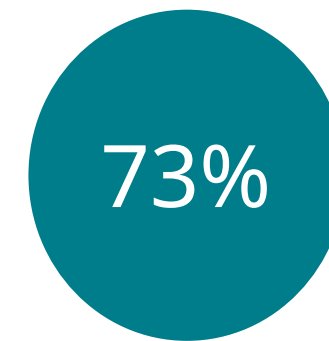
As with lifting the original glass ceiling, collaboration between organizations and a willingness to share what strategies are working can help accelerate progress to a sustainable world.

Key statistics

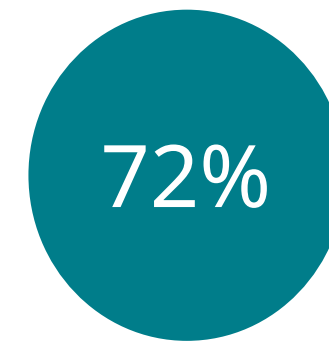
“Menopause is a big issue. Thankfully people are now talking about it but there’s still a real lack of understanding. I’ve seen it where performance is dropping off slightly, because of the issues with memory, brain fog and feeling uncomfortable at work and it goes down as poor performance. Then as soon as somebody says, ‘I’m actually suffering through menopause,’ it’s seen as an excuse. The mindset is not right.”

UK, Female
HR Manager in non-profit and retail

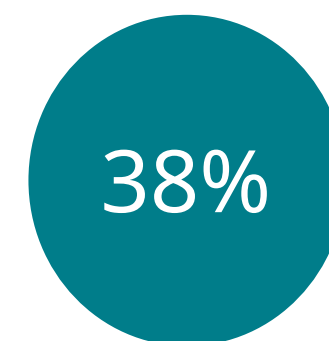
Menopause at work



want employers to have clear processes around menopause, difficult pregnancies, or miscarriage.



want organizations to support women experiencing symptoms of perimenopause or menopause, but 58% feel uncomfortable raising this with an employer.

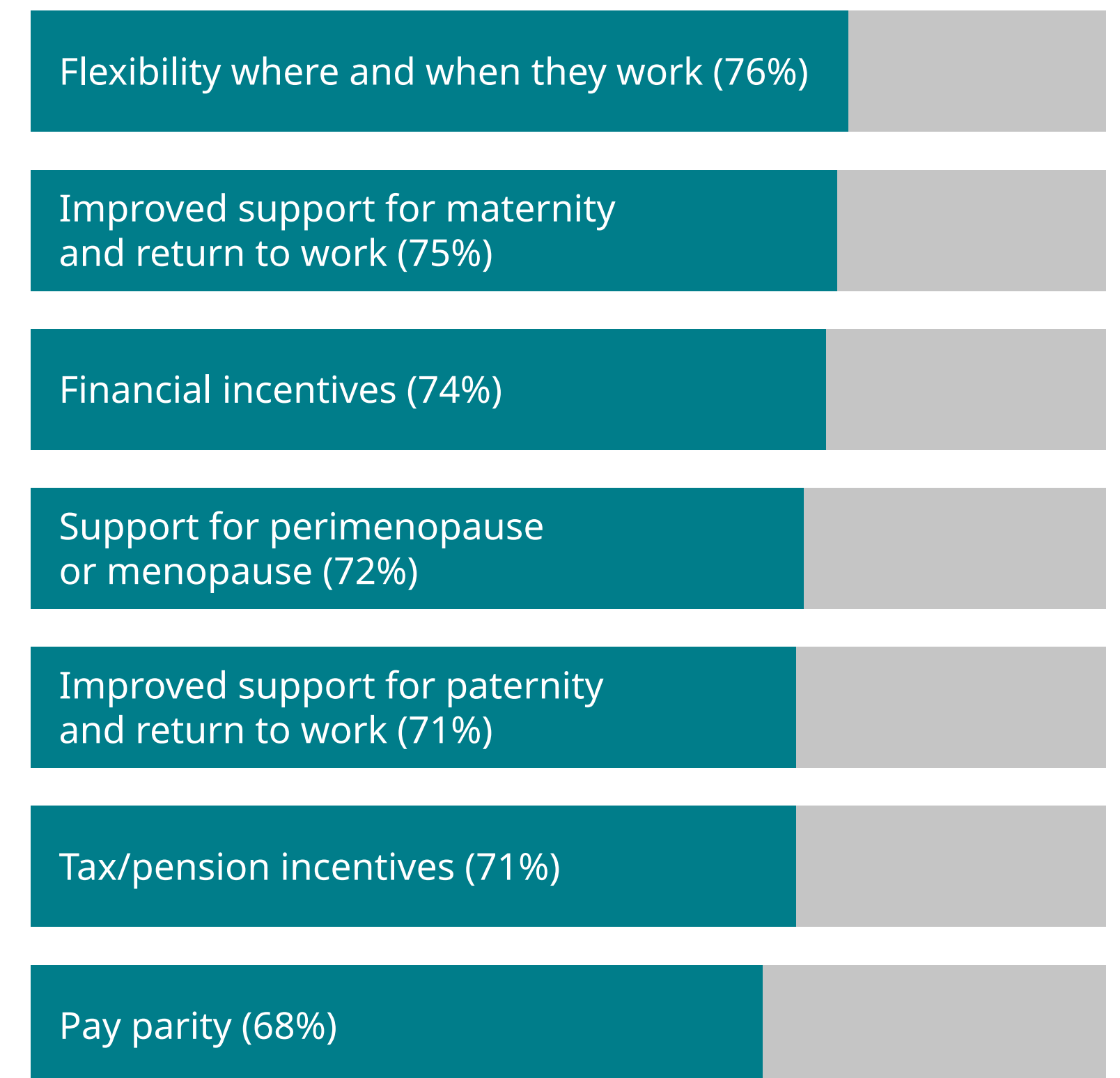


are comfortable bringing up personal health and wellbeing issues with a male employer, compared with 74% with a female employer.

All data refers to the overall SGCP of 5,000 women in the UK, US, China, Japan and Australia

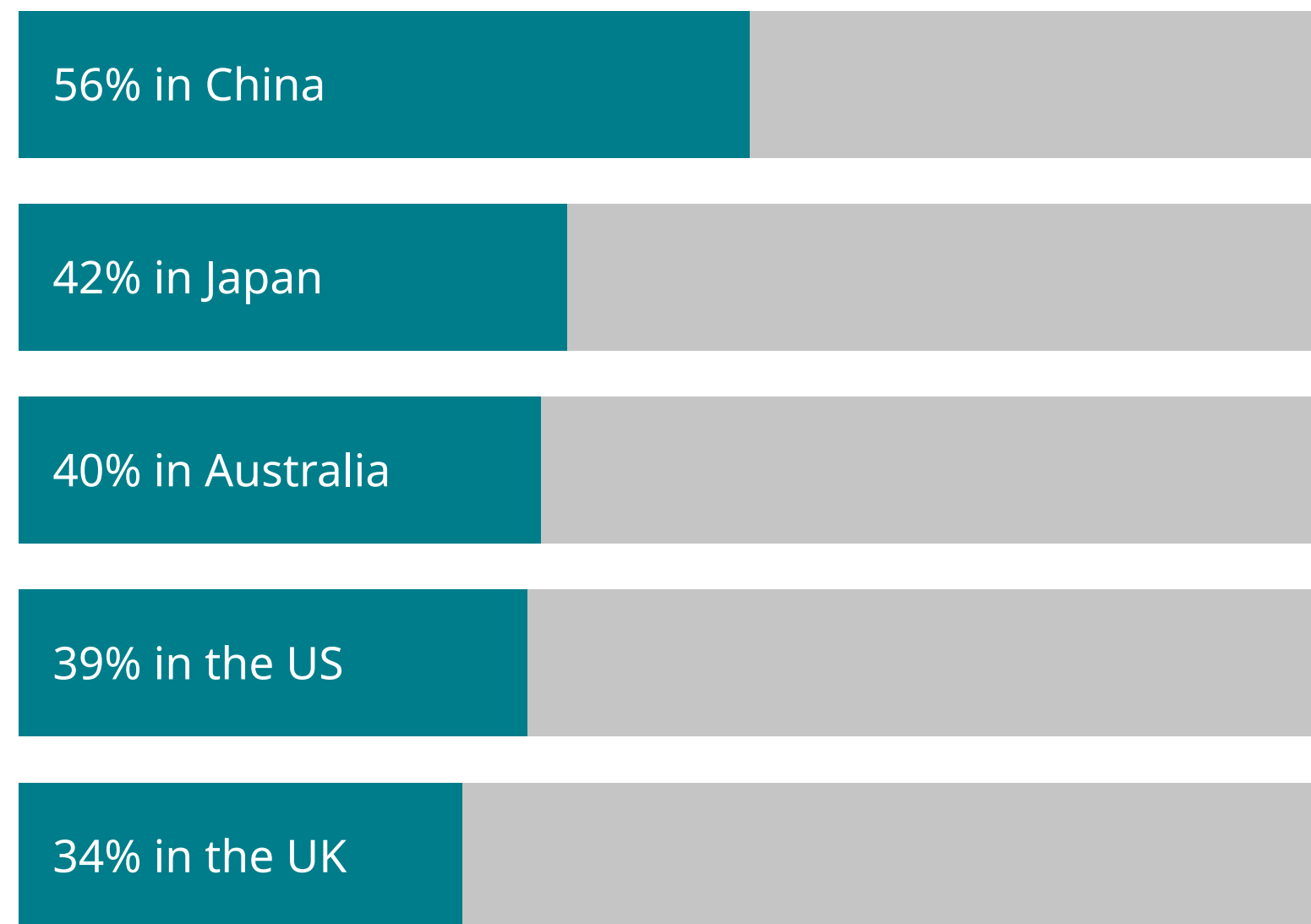
Lifting the Second Glass Ceiling

What would help women remain in work?

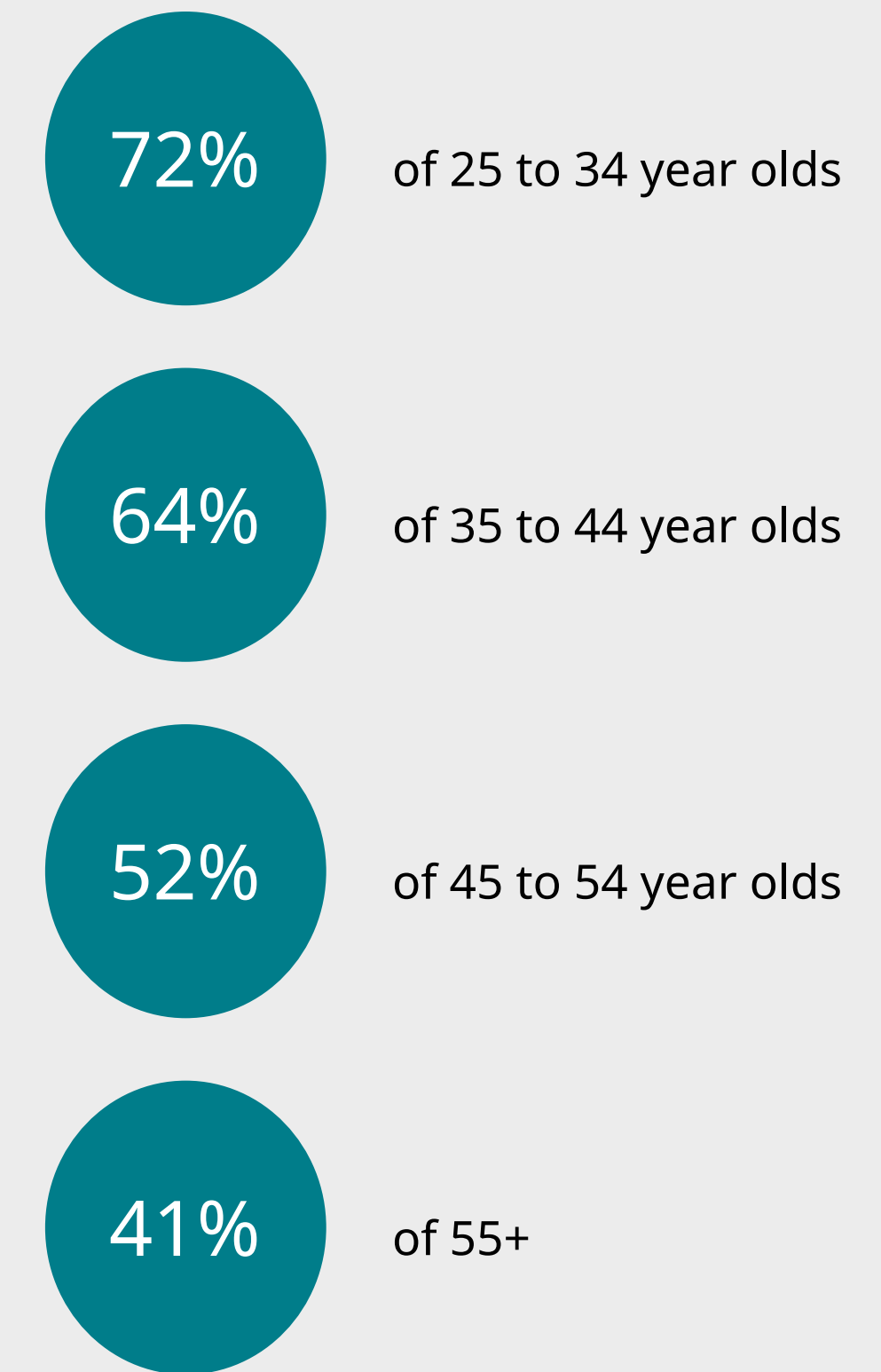
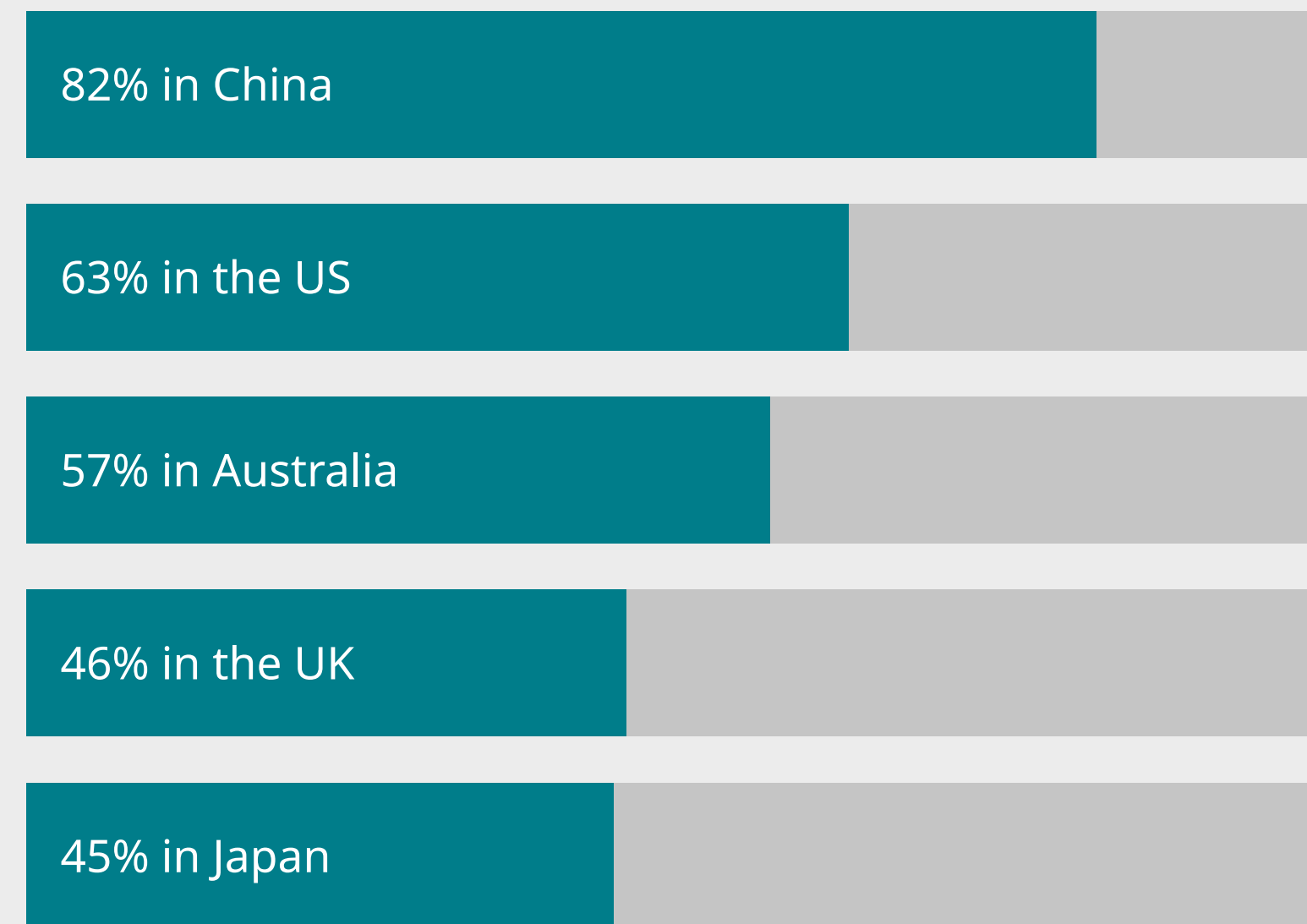


A mixed picture globally

Women who say it is uncommon to see older women in leadership



Women who have had the opportunity to consult, seek advice from or learn from older female employees including a breakdown of the age of these respondents



Introduction

Introduced in the late 1970s and popularized in the 1980s, the term “glass ceiling”⁵ has come to signify the invisible barriers women and other underrepresented groups can face when trying to ascend to senior leadership and decision-making roles in organizations or in public or professional life. The concept reflected a reality of the time where more women than ever were entering the workforce⁶ and looking to advance their careers, but were being presented with specific barriers to doing so.

Much progress has been made in the last five decades. Some form of paid maternity leave is now offered in almost all developed countries except the US, Australia, and Switzerland (with the latter two having programmes with eligibility requirements). While there is still a long way to go, and while gender pay gaps continue to persist, women now make up more than 10% of Fortune 500 CEOs⁷, a leap from the 0% of 1995⁸.

As workplaces make moves to meet some of the needs specific to women, new realities are emerging. Despite the progress that has been made, **women are leaving the workplace faster than men⁹, suggesting that a Second Glass Ceiling (SGC), focused less on career advancement and more on career longevity and employee retention, is in place.**

According to BSI’s Second Glass Ceiling Poll¹⁰ (SGCP) of 5,000 people who self-identify as women in the UK, US, Australia, China and Japan, 42% of working women globally agree that it is uncommon to see older women in positions of leadership – further indicating that a SGC is currently in place. This is most prevalent in China (56%) and least apparent in the UK (34%), a variation that may be due to cultural expectations and structural norms. In China, for example, the compulsory retirement age for women factory workers is ten years younger than the retirement age for men¹¹. Equally, only six in 10 of women surveyed of all ages are confident they will receive the same levels of support as men to remain in the workplace, suggesting some degree of uncertainty over whether the SGC will be lifted in the coming years.

While this paper will focus on the experience of women in general, no two women have the same life (or work) experience and not all will feel that the SGC is a reality for them. Additionally, populations beyond those who identify as women may also experience the SGC. Moreover, not all women want to stay in the workplace later in life. But for those who do, creating a culture of care and embedding a supportive working environment that creates trust and supports women to remain in the workforce has the potential to increase human, social, and economic sustainability.

The term “glass ceiling” is subject to much debate and discussion. For the purposes of this report, BSI is taking “Second Glass Ceiling” to refer specifically to women leaving the workforce early and doing so for reasons other than for personal preference.

6 in 10 women

of all ages surveyed are confident their generation will receive the same levels of flexibility and support to stay in the workforce for as long as their male colleagues

Critical contributors



An examination of the data suggests there is an SGC in existence. According to a 2022 study by the World Economic Forum¹² that examines gender parity across four key dimensions (Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment), it will take 132 years to close the gender gap across the 146 countries surveyed. While North America (76.9%) and Europe (76.6%) have made the greatest progress and should close the gap in 59 and 60 years respectively, East Asia and the Pacific – including China, Japan, and Australia – will require 168 years to reach gender parity.

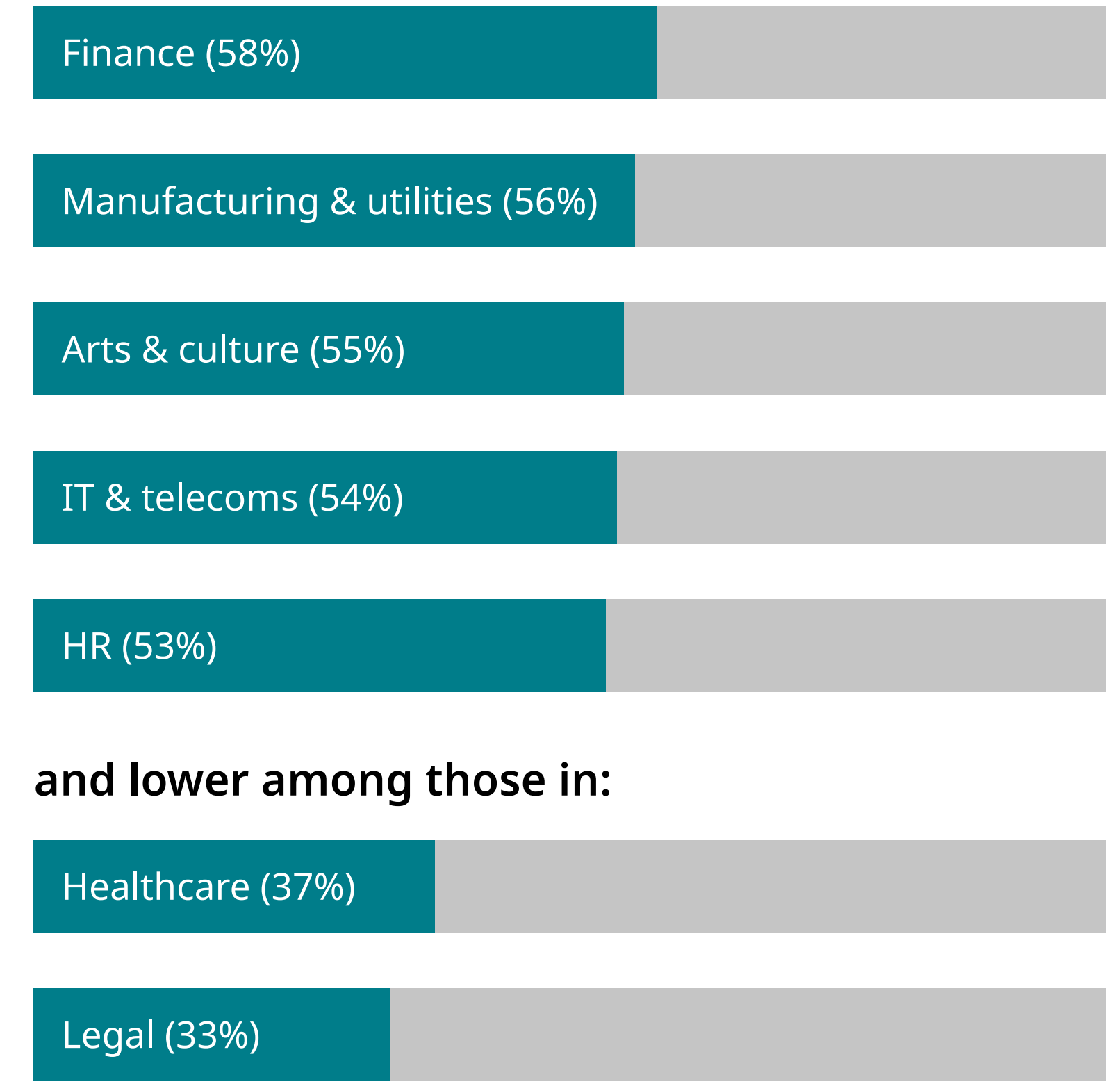
Workforce participation data in the UK illustrates one of these differences. Currently, 89% of male workers are full time (compared to 11% part time) yet under two thirds of female workers are full time (compared to just over a third part time). OECD data¹³ shows fewer women in the workforce than men in all of their countries in 2022. World Bank data reinforces this reality: 54% of women versus 71.3% of men in Japan, 62.1% of women compared to seven in ten men in Australia, 58.5% women versus 66.3% men in the UK, 56.8% women versus 67.5% men in the US and 52.5% of women versus six in ten of men in France. On average, according to the OECD, three fifths of women are in the workforce compared with more than three quarters of men globally.

This data, coupled with the 2018-2022 gender wage gap¹⁴ which exists in all OECD countries and ranges from a low of 1.2% in Belgium to 9.9% in Australia, 14.3% in the UK, 15% in France, 16.9% in the US, 22.1% in Japan and a high of 31.1% in Korea, shows that women are at a financial disadvantage even while working. Staying in the workforce longer would extend their earning potential, enable them to strengthen their financial security and independence, and contribute to economic growth of their organization and country.

The impacts are not confined to individual women or their families. Each woman that stays in the workforce has the potential to positively impact the experience of another, younger colleague as well. According to the SGCP, 73% of women surveyed across four continents agree that the presence of more experienced female colleagues would be beneficial to the development of younger women in the workplace. This is a nearly universal view: only 4% of women polled disagreed with this statement, reinforcing the positive impact older women in the workforce can have on younger generations. If they are impacted by the effects of the SGC, this opportunity risks being lost.

According to LeanIn.Org and McKinsey's 2022 Women in the Workplace Report¹⁵, women leaders do more than men at the same level to support employee well-being and foster diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) – areas that are generally understood to improve trust, retention and employee satisfaction. Also, as the report sets out, these values are known to be important to younger employees, particularly younger women. They also, according to McKinsey, dedicate more time to mentor or support the career development of younger women in the workplace.

By sector, agreement that it was uncommon to see women in leadership was higher among women in:



and lower among those in:

The report reveals that for every woman at the director level in the US who gets promoted to the next level, two women directors are choosing to leave their company for different reasons, including those outlined in the section below. The gap between the number of women and men leaders leaving their roles is the largest McKinsey has seen since they began investigating this in 2015. While those leaders may not be leaving the workforce completely, their departures can impact overall productivity and demonstrate the risks facing organizations that have not established the right conditions for individual fulfillment and organizational resilience.

The potential benefits to organizations in addressing these issues are sizeable. According to a 2022 report from Bank of America¹⁶, above average diversity on the leadership team correlates to as much as 19 percentage points higher revenue from innovation than companies with below-average management diversity. Gender diversity matters: according to the report those with top quartile gender diversity are also more likely to see higher revenues than lower quartile peers.

Estimates in Australia suggest that if 5% more people aged 55 or older were employed, there would be a positive impact of A\$48 billion on the national economy. According to a McKinsey Global Institute study¹⁷ increased gender parity in the region could boost the collective GDP of Asia Pacific economies by \$4.5 trillion a year by 2025, a 12% increase over business-as-usual GDP. In the US, a Mayo Clinic¹⁸ study showed menopause – a key component of the SGC, which we will explore in this report – costs American women an estimated \$1.8 billion in lost working time per year.

While these data points provide a window into the potential economic benefits of ensuring women – and all employees – can be productive in the workplace for longer, the World Health Organization (WHO)¹⁹ reports that “ageism [regardless of gender] costs society billions of dollars but, to date, few estimates of the economic costs of ageism to the wider society and economy, particularly at the level of countries, have been carried out”.

The cost likely can’t fully be determined because of the magnitude. On an economic level, the impact, as the WHO reports, can be calculated in the billions. Beyond that, there’s the personal cost – economic, emotional, and social – to those who leave the workforce early and their families. Specific to women, it can perpetuate gender inequalities and undermine inclusivity efforts. Most concerning, society loses the contributions these individuals may have made in their chosen industries, their former organizations, and society at large. Keeping more women – and people in general – in the workforce and lifting the SGC could drive unmeasurable gains for all and accelerate progress and innovation in all industry sectors and all markets globally.

73% of women

agree that the presence of more experienced female colleagues would be beneficial to the development of younger women in the workplace



Departure drivers



There are potentially as many reasons why women are leaving the workplace as there are women, but the drivers behind the pervasiveness of the SGC can be characterized in a few key areas:

External forces

Whether societal, regulatory, or organizational: external forces can erect invisible barriers that hinder women's ability to stay in the workforce – at all stages of their career. For example, access to paid maternity leave is different in every country – from up to 52 weeks in the UK²⁰ to 98 days in Japan²¹ and China²², 18 weeks in Australia²³ and 12 weeks in the US²⁴. Even when access to leave is available, pay can vary widely pending duration and employer. While some countries are starting to take steps to address this by introducing paternity leave (UK) or paid parental (any gender) leave (US), uptake is slow²⁵ and societal expectation generally remains that it is women who take leave to care for a baby, not men. Post maternity leave, women in the UK continue to provide the majority of childcare – 23.2 billion hours versus 9.7 billion hours for men per year according to the Centre for Progressive Policy²⁶. The Centre estimates these 450 million hours per week to have an annual value of £382 billion (with an additional £50 billion of unpaid adult care).

Simply making paid leave available both for maternity leave and other caring responsibilities could have a measurable impact on women – and all employees – with them being able to stay in the workforce longer.

Historically, retirement ages in some countries have been defined by gender. China continues to have different retirement ages for men and women; countries such as the UK and Australia have been working to align²⁷ their policies though it may take more time for attitudes to catch up to the notion of older women being a productive force in the workplace.

“There isn't enough investment in supporting women back to work after maternity leave not just with hours but reacclimatizing them, investing time in retraining them...and considering them for developing opportunities while they're out of work. The support needs to be there”.

UK, Female

HR Manager in non-profit and retail

Culture and environment

Given historical gender roles, it is generally accepted that the overall workplace experience was designed by men for men. While not necessarily the case for all, evidence suggests women are looking for cultures in which they can be comfortable emotionally, socially, and physically. According to the Leanin.org and McKinsey report²⁸ women leaders are more than 1.5 times as likely as men at their level to have left a previous job because they wanted to work for a company that was more committed to DEI. Although women leaders are two times more likely than men to spend substantial time on DEI work, 40% of women leaders say this work isn't acknowledged in performance reviews. This is just one example of how women can feel overworked and underrecognized in a culture that is not necessarily set up to reward cultural contributions.

While the pandemic and the use of technology has prompted a shift in where work is conducted, the 9-5, 5 day a week working structure is a legacy of a time when workplaces were male-dominated. Beyond DEI, women are seeking cultures that offer flexibility so they are able to deliver on their professional and personal commitments. 49% of women leaders say flexibility is one of the top three things they consider when deciding whether to join or stay with a company, compared to 34% of men leaders, according to LeanIn.Org and McKinsey. The SGCP reinforced this: 81% of respondents with young children agreed flexibility in the workplace would be valuable.

McKinsey also revealed women leaders are twice as likely as male leaders to be mistaken for someone more junior and 37% of women leaders have had a co-worker get credit for their ideas compared to 27% of men. Equally, research by behavioural scientist Dr Paola Cecchi-Dimeglioh²⁹ indicates the presence of gender bias in performance reviews, whereby we may underestimate a woman's performance and overestimate men's performance, so women often have to do more to achieve parity. These situations, whether conscious or unconscious, reveal biases and discrimination. When paired with the gender pay gap explored earlier, they have the potential to become career trajectory headwinds.

Physical comfort can be challenged by traditions as well. There is evidence that suggests office temperatures³⁰, for example, are calibrated to men's metabolic rates and wardrobes and therefore can feel inhospitable to women. Being mindful of these unconscious biases and/or historical norms and making new decisions with inclusion in mind may help employers get the most out of their employees in the short and long term.

It is of course important to note that many roles that women of all ages inhabit involve physical labour, whether on a construction site, in healthcare or in the hospitality industry. Alongside the cultural considerations, the physical strain of such jobs may see some women leave before or at retirement age as a result – just as their male counterparts do – and there is a conversation that can be had about retaining experienced male and female workers in such sectors in non-physical roles at this stage.

As BSI's Prioritizing People³¹ white paper explained, when organizations build a culture of care that addresses everyone's well-being, including basic physical, psychological and fulfillment needs, the result can be a more engaged, committed and productive workforce.

Stereotypes and expectations

Societal expectations and historical norms persist, despite efforts to drive greater levels of equity. For example, according to research by Bain³², women in the workplace in China are perceived as less committed, less confident and less ambitious.

Alice Eagly, professor of psychology at Northwestern University and lead author of a study into gender stereotypes noted³³ in a Northwestern Now article that though women and men are now seen as equally capable, stereotypical gender attributes about men being more agentic (being more in control of their own goals or actions) remain. “The perceptions of women as communal and men as agentic have not eroded since the 1940s, contrary to conventional wisdom about convergence in gender roles,” Eagly said. “Rather, communal stereotypes have changed but increasingly towards portraying women as more compassionate, affectionate, and sensitive than men. Men are still viewed as more ambitious, aggressive, and decisive than women, and that agency stereotype has not substantially changed since the 1940s.”

This can be seen in the value ascribed to certain roles. Those that have historically skewed female such as teachers³⁴ and nurses generate less income and may also offer less career progression than more traditionally male-dominated roles requiring similar levels of education. The conclusion is that these roles are perceived to have less worth than a banker or IT professional – while there is a question to be considered over whether the lack of career progression opportunities in such sectors could in itself be a factor driving the SGC.

“The industry I work in has always been quite old-fashioned and I’m very keen to try and change that... but I think we’ve got a very good [gender] mix. In an ideal world it would be nice to have some female presence in that top management area but it’s just the way it’s worked out rather than any conscious decision making”

UK, Male, 50s

Chairman of family-owned manufacturing business

Role Models

When there are fewer women in senior leadership positions, rising through the ranks can be a daunting challenge and can contribute to a lack of confidence and a departure at an earlier stage than men. In China, for example, nearly 60% of women said they hesitated to reach out to senior leaders³⁵ – the majority of whom will still be male – for opportunities out of fear they'll make a mistake.

Many books have been written about phenomenon such as Imposter Syndrome and the Confidence Gap. While seeing others in leadership roles may not single-handedly empower women to overcome these issues, exposure to successful women has the potential to imbue the belief that more is possible.



Biology and family responsibilities

In the SGCP, 29% of women cited caring responsibilities – for parents or children – as a barrier for staying at work. Some women will choose to focus on being caregivers, but for others it may be less a choice and more an economic reality, linked to women’s salaries or the cost of external care provision.

The cyclical reality is that just as children mature to care for themselves, elderly parents often require care. This suggests that caregiving is not just a single phase of life but a continuum that plays out through a woman’s lifespan. China had the highest responses with 41% of women mentioning care responsibilities as a barrier to work. These results mirror a Bain study³⁶ in which 83% of women in China said family duties prevent them from being fully dedicated to work. BSI’s best practice guidance on carer-inclusive organizations³⁷ sets out that 349 million people worldwide are estimated to be care-dependent³⁸, and that “in most countries... the majority of these carers are women”. Estimates from across different countries indicate that 57% to 81% of all carers of older adults and others requiring long term care are females and are likely to work outside the home³⁹. It goes on to highlight that “this can result in women leaving paid work to meet the demands of their unpaid care work and/or experiencing workplace inequalities”.

The last few years have shown how caring responsibilities can upend women’s careers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, women left their jobs at higher rates⁴⁰ than men – often to care for family – and, in the US for example, are not returning as quickly as they left. In fact, according to the US Chamber of Commerce⁴¹, there are still an estimated one million women missing from the labour force. PWC’s Women in Work Index⁴², a study across 33 OECD countries, determined that higher female unemployment and a greater proportion of women leaving the labour market due to the COVID-19 pandemic set back progress towards gender equality in work by at least two years. In 2022, the Index fell for the first time in a decade.

There is a circular logic at play. Gender pay gap evidence demonstrates women earn less than men so this – along with pervasive societal expectations of women as caregivers and men as breadwinners – means they are the ones to leave their jobs to care for family, making it harder for them to return to work and reach leadership levels (First Glass Ceiling) and easier for them to leave the workforce for good if and when new needs arise (Second Glass Ceiling).

One SGCP respondent, a female HR manager in non-profit and retail in the UK, stated, “I don’t think [shared parental leave has] been successful and I think some of the reasons for that are because historically men earn more than women so it makes more sense for families for the main breadwinner to stay at work and therefore the person who isn’t earning as much – normally the female – takes maternity leave and therefore puts back her career effectively 12 months.”

Once women make it through their childbearing and child caring years (and in some cases, fertility struggles), their focus often turns to the need to care for aging parents. Often this comes at the same time as they’re experiencing the biological, emotional, and physical changes brought on by menopause.

29% of women

cited caring responsibilities – for parents or children – as a barrier for staying at work

Menopause

Menopause, which can exhibit in more than 30 symptoms, creates another moment of potential divergence for people experiencing it on their career paths. Hammam et al in their “Menopause and Work narrative literature review”⁴³, found that adverse (physical) working conditions (e.g. no ventilation, inflexible hours, no possibility to change workload tasks) were related to increased health complaints among those experiencing menopause. Discussing this with supervisors was uncommon because of a lack of opportunity or time, or social and cultural barriers. The SGCP revealed that on average 21% of women – 28% in China, falling to 16% in the US – specifically mentioned health issues related to menopause as a barrier to staying in the workforce. Researchers at the University of Southampton⁴⁴ analysed data from a longitudinal study of over 3,000 women and found that those who reported at least one disruptive menopausal symptom at the age of 50 were 43% more likely to have left their jobs by the age of 55. This has the potential to impact a large swath of the workforce: to illustrate this point, it is estimated that approximately 6,000 women in the US⁴⁵ reach menopause every day.

How much menopause factors into a woman’s career trajectory is unique to each woman, but the SGCP data suggests the stigma that surrounds discussing menopause and the impact of menopause-related symptoms can be a contributing factor. 58% of women in the SGCP agreed it would be difficult to raise issues related to menopause with an employer (and only 14% disagreed). Having more female leaders in the organization (or trained representatives) could help reduce the stigma and open the conversation: 52% would be uncomfortable addressing issues such as menopause, health issues related to menstruation, difficult pregnancies, or miscarriage with a male manager while only 17% said the same of a female manager.

“Probably five years ago [menopause] wouldn’t have been something that was very easy to talk about within the business, but that has changed quite dramatically, and we do have people available for conversations... We make sure people know that people are available to talk to. I still think people find it quite difficult to do that, that’s the impression I get,” explained a male SGCP respondent in his 50s, the chairman of a family-owned manufacturing business in the UK.

As the data makes clear, women leave the workforce for a variety of reasons. Women tend to marry younger than men – Worldbank data⁴⁶ from 2010/2011 shows that women marry at age 32 compared to 33.2 for men in the UK, 24.7 compared to 26.5 in China, 29.7 compared to 31.2 in Japan, 27.5 compared to 29.2 in the US, 25.6 compared to 27.7 in France, 20.7 compared to 24.9 in India, and 29.9 compared to 31.4 in Australia – and may choose to retire at the same time as their older spouse. Others, for example, want to spend more time on philanthropic endeavors or have reached their financial goals.

There is also progress to celebrate: while the gender pay gap still exists, it is narrowing⁴⁷. Countries like Iceland have been lauded⁴⁸ for their gender equality policies and focus on the representation of women in leadership roles, supported by quotas. As women in the workforce age, relevant issues such as maternity leave and menstrual leave are being addressed. Menopause is now gaining attention in many countries as the first generation of women who were told they could “have it all” are now in their 40s and 50s. The North American Menopause Society, the British Menopause Society and the Australasian Menopause Society all offer toolkits and/or guidance to help employers and employees to address menopause-related challenges, while BSI recently published the *Menstruation, menstrual health and menopause in the workplace* standard (BS 30416)⁴⁹, which set out practical recommendations for workplace adjustments.

Perception and reality



The SGC can be understood as a product of what happens in formal and informal work settings. The SGCP revealed that 42% of women agree it is uncommon to see older women in positions of leadership, yet 32% disagreed with that, suggesting personal experience dictates perception. Agreement with the statement was highest in China (56%) and lowest in the UK (34%). By sector, agreement is higher among women in finance, manufacturing and utilities, arts and culture, IT and telecoms and HR (in each, more than half agreed) and lower among those in healthcare. There is some local variation by sector: for example, in Japan, agreement is high among women in retail, catering and leisure (55%) but low for the same sector in the UK (less than one in three).

Men too can influence perception: In China, where most leadership circles and social norms are male-dominated⁵⁰, networking opportunities for women can be harder to break into thereby creating the impression there is no leadership potential.

Government policies (and their legacies) have sometimes set the tone for the narrative. By having different retirement ages for men and women or making pensions accessible at different ages based on gender, legislators may have helped to reinforce the expectations that experienced women have less to contribute to the workforce than their male counterparts. The UK has already addressed this discrepancy, aligning pension access⁵¹ to all citizens in 2020. Other countries, like Iceland, have introduced specific policies⁵² to drive gender equality and care for even the most marginalized women.

It may take some time for society to adjust their perceptions. As one UK female SGCP respondent who is an HR manager in non-profit and retail, said, “Women are kind of written off at a certain age... It goes back to the fact that women used to retire at 60 and people still have that mindset that women are going to retire at 60 and men are going to go on forever”. Some of these policies are now being adjusted to reflect greater equality and consistency. Women are looking for this trajectory to continue and to work for organizations that can influence their experience to do so. 74% of women polled by BSI agree that businesses need to take steps to support older women to remain in the workforce and 70% agree that governments have a role to play. Policy changes are a first step; pairing these with initiatives that change behaviour and expectations can offer the biggest societal benefit.

This is true around the world, although execution may differ slightly. As an American female C-Suite executive said: “There are differences all around the world, sometimes based on culture and sometimes the dynamics of a given country. Different countries have different approaches to the workforce, and women have different opportunities.”

74% of women

agree that businesses need to take steps to support older women to remain in the workforce



Guidance and guardrails: how can we lift the Second Glass Ceiling?



One of the broadest opportunities to accelerate progress – in all cultures – lies in **education**. Whether at the individual, organizational or societal level, increasing awareness of what is driving women to leave the workforce early can help uncover solutions that reverse the trends.

For example, when it comes to menopause, it appears that few women or their male colleagues currently receive training on menopause-related health considerations and their potential impact on work⁵³. Educational programmes or better awareness of support on offer could provide women the support they need to stay employed. 69% of women believe it is helpful for organizations to have specific policies in place to address personal health and wellbeing issues, such as menopause, but only 7% are currently aware of these policies, according to the SGCP. Likewise, 75% of women polled would welcome support from an employer to help them remain in the workplace (in the context of menopause, menstruation, difficult pregnancies and miscarriage).

In a Mayo Clinic study⁵⁴ in Australia, most women felt manager and employee education, greater employee support, and workplace flexibility in terms of hours worked and temperature control were needed in the workplace. 66% of the women in that study did not feel comfortable discussing menopause symptoms with their immediate manager.

Menopause is one stage in the continuum of why women leave the workplace. Understanding the various points in time that women leave the workforce and ensuring organizational leadership at all levels is well informed and able to provide supportive solutions, could be a critical driver to lifting the SGC.



Opening the dialogue and making it acceptable to discuss all of the reasons women leave the workforce has the potential to reduce the stigma and usher in a new era of understanding. The New York Times recently quoted⁵⁵ Dr. Ekta Kapoor, a co-author of a Mayo Clinic Study on the impact of menopause symptoms on women in the workplace. She said “the topic of menopause is taboo in general but even more so at the workplace. I’ve heard from women that they don’t want to come across as a ‘complainer’ at work or they’ll bring up menopause and people will roll their eyes”.

Ensuring leaders have the right vocabulary including language that is non-stigmatic can help create a supportive culture. Recent history has shown that **building empathy⁵⁶ and training** leaders to create environments in which employees feel safe raising issues can have a positive impact. The move toward overall well-being and addressing mental health⁵⁷ issues, particularly in Western countries, is a similar development that can be both informative and instructive. Evolving the conversation about menopause from a comedic punchline to a topic taken seriously will show those suffering that there is support.

Of course, menopause is just one area to consider. Opening up conversations about caregiving responsibilities and how employers can be supportive of women’s needs can also help shift the dial.

Indeed, the pandemic revealed the potential benefits of adding greater **flexibility** to how, when and where employees conduct their work. While current trends point toward greater levels of return to office, maintaining some level of flexibility and openness to small workplace accommodations while instituting inclusive policies could reflect the various needs of the entire workforce. This includes ensuring part-time or flexible workers have the same progression and development opportunities, so that women who scale back their hours, potentially due to caring responsibilities, do not face the SGC as a result.

Building a **culture of care**, in which the focus of well-being programmes goes beyond personal health and takes a holistic approach to address the needs outlined in BSI's Prioritizing People^{®58} model, will strengthen trust and engagement and, in turn, result in a more resilient organization. Part of the Prioritizing People[®] model is "sustainable employability" – managing work over the whole life course, enabling longer, good quality working lives. This means ensuring that work and working conditions are sustainable by implementing preventive and protective measures to keep workers physically and mentally healthy; and by embedding the capabilities and capacities necessary to deliver enduring or ongoing employment over the long term, including re-training and upskilling.

Recognizing and addressing the impact of menopause in the workplace – and the various other reasons women may hit the SGC – shows a commitment to creating a supportive and inclusive culture of care. By **implementing policies and introducing benefits** that explicitly acknowledge these issues, providing flexibility and workplace accommodations, making leave available to all workers to care for family when needed, and promoting education and awareness among employees and employers, organizations can challenge stereotypes and foster a culture of empathy and support, while helping women maintain their productivity, job satisfaction and career progression.

"As we think about the shifts that are happening in the workforce and the workplace, there are a lot of mechanisms governments will need to think about – both broad and narrow," said a female C-Suite executive in the US. "Discrimination may show up differently and governments need to be...concerned about protection of equal access to open roles and hiring practices...[along with] tax and benefits implications about working full time and working part time."



Perpetuating progress



The current discussion on the need to address the SGC is in itself a sign of progress. While it doesn't mean the original Glass Ceiling has shattered, it shows that women are making headway in the workplace and, as a consequence, identifying new opportunities for positive change.

There are many questions ripe for exploration. What is the true definition of work? If a full-time employee shifts to part-time, does that indicate a removal from the workforce? What if that employee becomes self-employed or chooses to dedicate the same hours to a volunteer project? How is the definition of the work environment changing and what role do women have – alongside men – to define the future?

How can societies and organizations create empathetic cultures where individuals can express their needs without fear of reprisal and where support is available to those who need it? What do organizations need to do to fully live their diversity, equity, and inclusion commitments?

What actions can be taken at a regulatory and policy level to address hurdles as they arise in the workplace? What broader societal shifts are on the horizon and what might that mean to the work experience? As part of that, how can new technologies be deployed to advantage? What protections are needed given how advances in technology may impact how and where people work? How does history inform our future?

How are women and men advancing and shifting gender stereotypes? Is the balance of child rearing and care for elderly family members evolving? What are the implications of this evolution for men and women in the workforce?

Governments, legislators, regulators and organizations, particularly in the UK and US, are already starting to think about many of these issues⁵⁹.

“The world has made quite a bit of progress in acknowledging transparently that... these barriers exist and that they need to be dealt with”

US,
C-Suite Executive



Optimistic outlook



Small changes are already making a difference. The advent of paternity leave in some countries, while still gaining in acceptance and adoption, has meant both parents could take time off work. The focus on mental health and overall well-being brought on by the pandemic demonstrated the potential to reduce the stigma attached to a topic through discussions and a more open culture. In one example of progress, Spain recently followed in the footsteps of Japan, China, and other countries by offering paid menstrual leave. Studies have recently been conducted in the UK and the US about the impact of menopause on the workplace. The UK has introduced England's first ever Menopause Employment Champion and launched the Women's Health Strategy.

Part of Iceland's success in driving broad gender equality has been in fostering a culture of awareness and dialogue around this topic. The country has encouraged open discussions about gender issues and challenged societal norms and stereotypes and paired these discussions with policies requiring companies to prove they are providing equal pay⁶⁰. This combination of culture shifts and inclusive policies will be key to success.

As importantly, a new generation is finding its voice in the workplace. The BSI SGCP showed that younger women (66% of 18–24-year-olds and 68% of 25–34-year-olds compared with 47% of those over age 55) were more optimistic that their generation of women will receive the flexibility and support needed to stay in the workforce as long as their male colleagues.

Empowering these younger women throughout their careers by providing them with senior women leaders who stay in the workforce offers the potential to drive growth – for individual women, the companies they work for and the societies in which they live. Almost three quarters of women we polled thought that the presence of senior women would benefit the development of younger women in the workplace.

Creating the inclusive environments through education, policies, accommodations, and discussions where women can thrive through all stages of life can help women build sustainable careers and offer the world potential benefit from diverse thought, innovation, and community.

Although the SGC is a new concept brought on by the advancement of women in the workplace, small cracks are already emerging and continued action can accelerate the progress already being made.

“There is more confidence in younger women coming through... Thinking back to 20 years ago we weren't talking about flexible work, shared parental leave, equal pay... Culture change takes a long time.”

UK, Female,
HR Manager in non-profit and retail

Recommendations

01

Recognize the benefits of lifting the Second Glass Ceiling

Individuals, organizations, and society all stand to gain from tackling the departure of women

Nearly three quarters of women say that enabling older women to remain in the workforce can contribute to economic growth. As the research shows, there are myriad benefits to be realized, from retaining mentors who can guide the next generation to ensuring organizations can draw on the widest pool of talent. Rather than see the considerations facing older women as a challenge, we can gain by seeing this as an investment in current and future generations and a means to ensure diversity. Ultimately, it is an opportunity to boost growth, innovation and accelerate progress to a sustainable world.

02

Open the dialogue

Ask women what they want – and act on it

Seven in ten women believe employers have a role in offering support during experiences such as menopause – but as our research shows, there are many push and pull factors driving the SGC. There is an opportunity for policymakers and organizations to start a conversation with individuals around what support could look like in different industries and countries, consider the structural factors in place, and explore actions that break down these barriers. Consultation and participation can enhance engagement and trust in the workplace. Looking at what is driving women to leave the workforce early can help to uncover solutions that can reverse the trends and enable more women to thrive throughout their professional lives. Starting the dialogue can be the first step to identifying meaningful solutions.

03

Ensure support is available and accessible

Employers can partner with employees to embed a supportive culture

Nearly three fifths of women surveyed in the SGCP, say it would be difficult to raise issues related to menopause with an employer, and just 7% report knowledge of formal policies. Women can only access support around menopause or any other factor if it is first available and they are aware of what is on offer. Building empathy and training leaders to create environments in which employees feel safe raising issues can have a positive impact. By making it acceptable and accessible to discuss all the different reasons women leave the workforce, and with clear signposting of where to go for guidance, organizations can usher in a new era of understanding.

Crucially, retaining experienced women at work is not simply an issue for women – there is an opportunity for male colleagues and workers of a different generation to play a role in creating a diverse, equitable and inclusive culture.

04

Flexibility can be an asset

Small adjustments can make a big impact

Not every workplace or sector can make the same adjustments, but, where possible, providing flexibility in how, when and where people work, or indeed the number of hours and whether they work full-time, can greatly lessen the stress on those who might otherwise choose to leave the workplace due to personal circumstance, or mitigate some symptoms of menopause. Ensuring that such flexibility or part-time working has equity of opportunity and is not a barrier to career progression is also critical. This can help ensure an accommodating workplace, and, alongside the introduction of inclusive policies, promote loyalty, longevity and a willingness to adapt to the diverse needs of the workforce.

05

Institute a broader culture of care

Prioritize people

A positive workplace culture that prioritizes people of all ages and in which the focus of well-being programmes goes beyond personal health can have a transformative effect. One of the broadest opportunities to accelerate societal progress lies in education. Communicating within organizations on why women might leave the workplace and what can help them stay can be transformative. Likewise, ensuring leaders have the right vocabulary, including language that is non-stigmatic, can help create a supportive culture. As with wider considerations around inclusivity, taking a holistic approach to address the needs outlined in BSI's Prioritizing People® model framework can strengthen trust and engagement and, in turn, result in a more resilient organization.

06

Share best practice

Collaboration across organizations, sectors and countries can drive progress

Those facing the SGC are, broadly speaking, the first generation to do so. It may well take another generation for meaningful change to occur, but with more than two thirds of younger women optimistic that their generation will receive the flexibility and support needed to stay in the workforce as long as their male colleagues, there is reason to expect it will come. As with lifting the original glass ceiling to enable greater female advancement in the workplace, collaboration between organizations and a willingness to share what strategies are working can help accelerate progress to a sustainable world.

Conclusion

This whitepaper has been written from a starting point of progress – the progress we have seen over recent generations to cement the position of women in the workplace. The question of the Second Glass Ceiling is therefore one that emerges out of success.

Lifting the Second Glass Ceiling can bring significant benefits to individuals, organizations and society, including around facilitating growth and innovation. At a time when boosting productivity is a global priority, ensuring women are supported to remain in the workforce has the potential to be transformative. It has the potential to help organizations retain talented people and ensure that the female leaders and mentors of today can help guide subsequent generations.

While it will take commitment to turn ambition into action, there are many measures that could make a sizeable difference and break down barriers. Supporting people experiencing menopause or enabling employees to confidently raise issues around personal health and well-being could create opportunity for those who have much to contribute. Educating all colleagues about why women might leave the workplace and what can help them stay can create a stronger culture.

Progress starts by opening up this conversation – at work and between employers and employees – and by acknowledging that this is an opportunity for male colleagues and workers of a different generation too. But as we have seen in this whitepaper, the forecast is promising. The next generation are optimistic that they will not face a Second Glass Ceiling to the same degree as their predecessors. We have the opportunity to build on that optimism now to drive change and accelerate progress to a sustainable world in which everyone can thrive.

Market overview

UK

- One in five women (20%) mentioned menopause as a barrier to continuing work
- More than half (54%) of women believe it would be difficult to raise this with an employer

France

- 29% of women work part-time compared to only 8% of men
- Women spend 1.7 times as much time on unpaid domestic and care work as men

US

- 27% of women cited caring responsibilities as a barrier to remaining in the workplace
- 71% of women believe it is helpful for organizations to have formal policies for menopause, health issues related to menstruation, difficult pregnancies or miscarriage

China

- 56% of women agree it is uncommon to see women in positions of leadership
- 41% cited caring responsibilities as a barrier to remaining in work

India

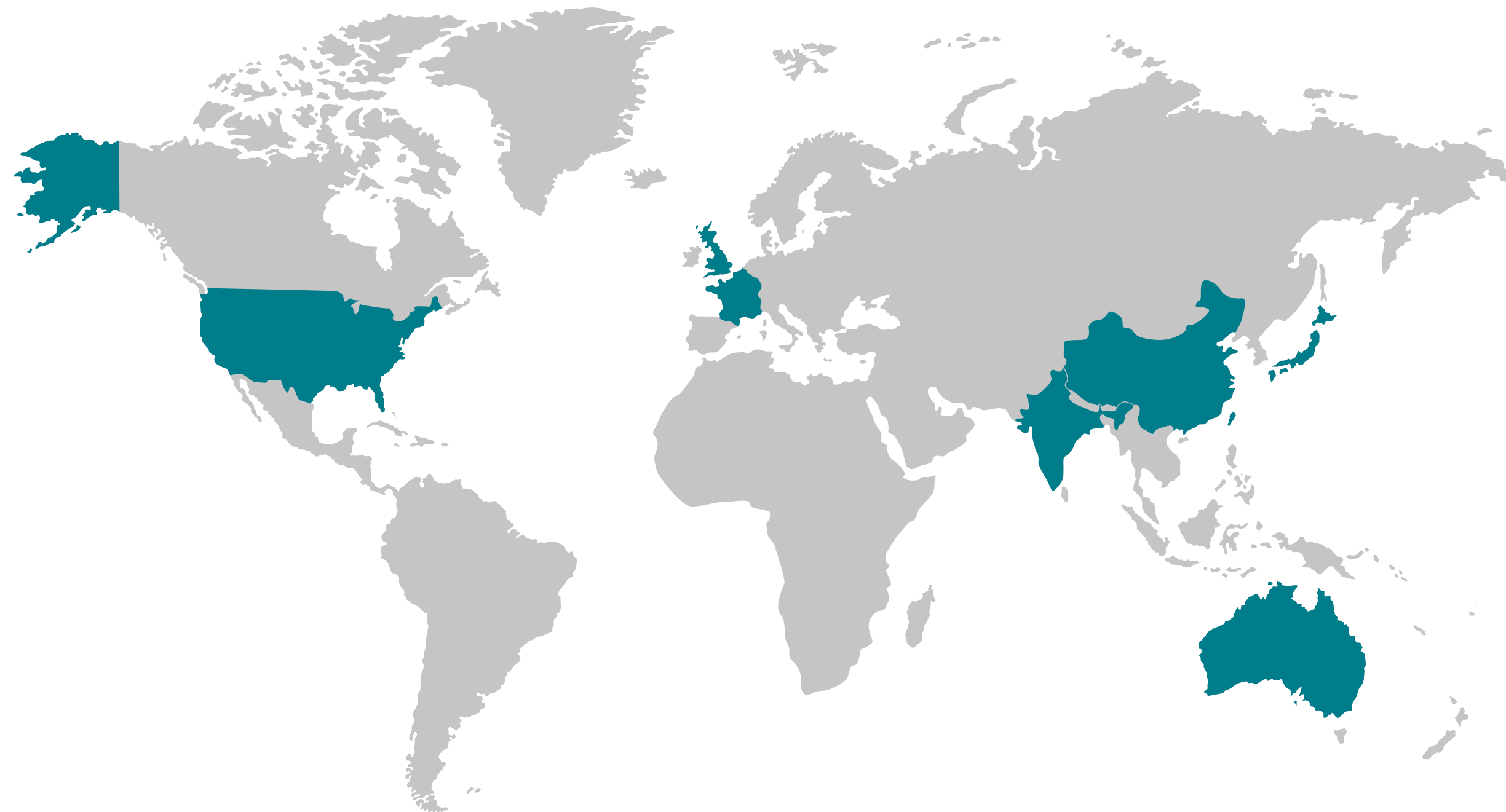
- Workforce participation by women is very low, sitting at 24% compared with 73.6% of men
- Only 16.5% of women in senior and middle management in 2020

Japan

- Only 44% of women are confident their generation will receive the same levels of flexibility and support to stay in the workforce as long as their male colleagues
- 65% would be uncomfortable raising issues related to menstruation, difficult pregnancies, and miscarriage with a male manager

Australia

- 23% of women mentioned menopause as a barrier to continuing work
- Three in ten cited caring responsibilities as a barrier



End notes

About the research

This whitepaper was developed by Malvern Insight, a UK-based consultancy focused on global insight-driven strategy and brand proposition development, drawing on a survey of 5,000 women across four continents, one-to-one interviews with senior global executives conducted online between May and June 2023, and in-depth evaluation of economic and social data.

The survey was conducted by Censuswide, who surveyed 5,074 people who self-identify as women (18+) in the UK, USA, Australia, China and Japan between 11th and 17th May 2023.

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