

WEPs IN ACTION



PRINCIPLE 6

**PROMOTE EQUALITY THROUGH
COMMUNITY INITIATIVES AND
ADVOCACY**

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CASE STUDY: TIMELINE CONSULTANCY INTEGRATING DIVERSITY, INCLUSION AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT INTO CORPORATE MANAGEMENT

LESSONS LEARNED

- Promoting gender equality in any company requires support from senior management.
- Making a strong business case for promoting gender equality and raising gender awareness is helpful for leadership buy-in.

BACKGROUND

Founded in 2002, Timeline Consultancy is a small Chinese company that provides employee relations management services to other companies. Given the focus on employee relations, Timeline pays particular attention to issues of power within companies, including gender relations, and its services are often focused on companies in industries dominated by women workers, such as the garment, footwear and electronics sectors.

The recent introduction of laws, policies and guidelines on gender

equality in China has helped Timeline to recognize the key role of the private sector – its clients – in promoting gender equality. Timeline found, for example, that although most factories have undergone compliance audits and established a set of compliance systems, these are not always fully integrated into daily practice. Managers who have received compliance training are aware of non-discrimination requirements but often do not understand the logic behind them and aren't able to implement them properly. Discrimination therefore remains but is less visible.

ACTIONS

As a consultancy, Timeline promotes gender equality and inclusivity with a wide range of clients and supports them to establish the right systems. In particular, it helps to set up employee representative mechanisms with adequate participation of women employees and carries out capacity building on communication and negotiation for women representatives.

In 2015, the company conducted a project to enhance dialogue and communication between employees and management at a clothing factory in China with nearly 200 workers, over 70% of whom were women. They found that women workers were initially reluctant to volunteer as worker representatives. Following this, Timeline organized a meeting exclusively for female workers and found that their main concerns were issues around a lack of education, lack of confidence, and a belief that such work was not for women and that it might take time away from family duties. After Timeline staff addressed these concerns one by one, a few women workers agreed to put themselves forward. The selected

representatives – three women and two men – were trained on communication and negotiation skills, such as ways of dealing with differing opinions or reluctance from management. The company's human resources (HR) department was trained on how to support the work of the representatives. It supported the setting up of gender-responsive systems and guidelines on how worker representatives should be elected, how often the management should meet with worker representatives, and how often workers should have meetings internally. Policies were drafted and issued, including a Worker Representative Charter. It was made clear that 1) when electing representatives, the gender ratio of representatives should be proportionate to that of the workers; 2) representatives' working hours should be compensated, and meetings with representatives should be held during working hours; and 3) educational level or literacy should not be part of the eligibility criteria for representatives. Also, to ensure leadership buy-in, the company communicated with the management at the start of the project to explain what was planned and the reasoning behind it.



CHALLENGES

Challenge	Solution
<p>It can be difficult to convince companies to invest in gender equality. This is often due to misunderstandings about gender equality and women's empowerment at the senior level. For example, many corporate executives believe that because many or most of a company's employees are women, it cannot have a gender inequality-related issue; or they hold discriminatory beliefs that promoting the agency of women employees may make them difficult to manage.</p>	<p>Timeline works with corporate senior management staff to clarify what gender equality is and promote the importance of addressing the different needs of men and women. It also communicates the business case for gender equality and the risks posed by a company remaining outdated and not adapting to meet the changing environment and employee relations. This involves outlining current employee management challenges and the relationship between these and issues of inclusion and diversity. It highlights that promoting gender equality is both a value and a crucial transformation strategy.</p>
<p>Some managers pay little attention to the lack of female representation in a company because they lack gender sensitivity and believe that female workers are reluctant or unwilling to participate in representation tasks.</p>	<p>Timeline raises the gender sensitivity of managers, making them aware of the benefits of female worker participation, and the need to encourage female employee participation.</p>
<p>Companies can find it difficult to mainstream gender in their daily work, as they may not be aware of issues stemming from unconscious gender bias.</p>	<p>Timeline elaborates on various scenarios where unconscious bias might be present, including in recruitment, promotion, training and security. Through concrete examples, gender awareness of managers is raised, and they are inspired to think critically and analyze situations with a gender lens.</p>

RESULTS

After participating in the training and dialogue activities in the case above, the female worker representatives reported an improvement in their communication skills and self-confidence and felt they had much greater engagement in company issues. "I didn't know how to communicate with managers before," said one worker, "But now I do". In one situation, the management met with worker representatives to discuss how to reduce its defective product rate. A woman representative collected feedback from her team, and the factory accordingly made a series of improvements, which led to a significant improvement in quality. "It hadn't occurred to me before that these female workers could observe and reflect on the production process with such depth,

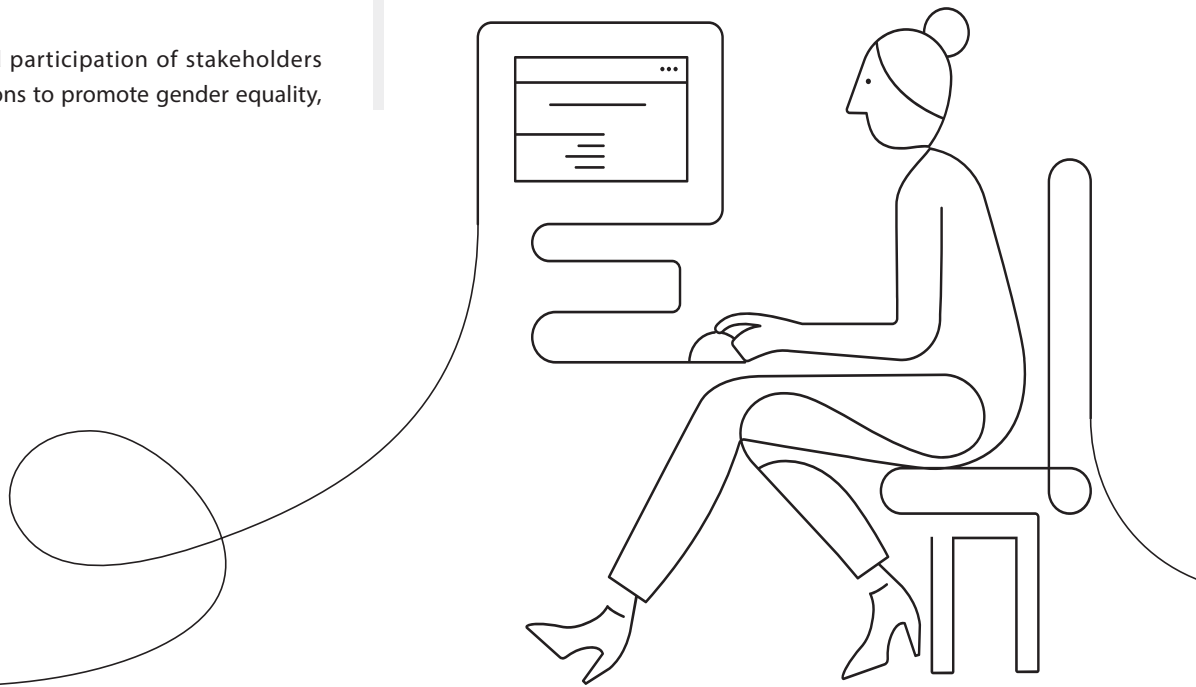
and help us to problem solve," said the production manager. "In the past, even if the workers knew the reason behind a problem, they would not inform management". One senior manager also acknowledged that it had been a learning process, noting "their opinions have made us more empathetic to the frontline situation." This new trust has helped women workers become more at ease with being representatives, which has also strengthened their self-confidence.

As of August 2021, Timeline has provided more than 200 companies with training, consulting and evaluation services related to gender equality, reaching about 10,000 direct beneficiaries, and more than 100,000 indirect beneficiaries.

RECOMMENDATIONS








- It is vital to operationalize commitments to the WEPs and fully integrate gender into daily corporate management, so that these concepts live 'off paper'.
- Many private sector entities don't have much experience in promoting gender equality, thus it is important to encourage companies to share experiences and learn from each other's good practices.
- To ensure success, the broad participation of stakeholders should be secured in any actions to promote gender equality,

including corporate social responsibility (CSR) personnel, corporate senior management, frontline and mid-level management, and frontline workers.




THE ROLE OF WEPs


A signatory to the WEPs since 2021, Timeline has been provided with both guidelines and a rich directory of reference materials and resources in its work with companies, including tools for gender gap analysis and examples of the WEPs in action. The WEPs network provides opportunities to exchange with and learn from other organizations, which has inspired and enhanced Timeline's work.

- Principle 1  Establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality.
- Principle 2  Treat all women and men fairly at work– respect and support human rights and nondiscrimination.
- Principle 3  Ensure the health, safety and well-being of all women and men workers.
- Principle 4  Promote education, training and professional development for women.
- Principle 5  Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women.
- Principle 6  Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy.
- Principle 7  Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality.

 weps.org

 weps@unwomen.org

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