

Interview with Betty Zhao, Director of the Beijing Chapter of Ladies Who Tech

Betty Zhao is the director of the Beijing Chapter of Ladies Who Tech, a community-driven network encouraging women to discover their potential in Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), and promoting gender diversity and inclusion through leadership, career, digital upskilling and community network. She explains the network's aim and purposes, and why social bias has to change so women can study and pursue careers in STEM.



WIPO: Can you introduce yourself, your professional and personal path?

Betty Zhao (BZ): My name is Betty Zhao, the director of the Beijing Chapter of [Ladies Who Tech](#), and co-founder of Shanghai FengEn Technology, a start-up focusing on population ageing technology. My interest in science and technology developed as I grew up and entered the workplace, working for different corporations, and developing my curiosity. I started being fascinated with technology and innovation, mostly hardware and software technologies. I ran several start-ups and before that was a senior executive at Sky Solar Holdings. I also worked for international utility companies and was the first representation in China for EDF Trading Limited, a leading global energy market-trading firm based in London, United Kingdom, recognized for its emission reduction products.

WIPO: When was Ladies Who Tech created?

BZ: Ladies Who Tech was created in 2017 by Jill Tang and Charlene Liu and is registered in Shanghai. When I came back to China in 2019, I joined the network and opened the Beijing Chapter.

WIPO: What needs did the network try to serve?

BZ: Ladies Who Tech was established with a mission to close the gender gap and promote gender diversity and inclusion in Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) industries in Asia.

WIPO: What are the aims Ladies Who Tech?

BZ: We believe in challenging the status quo by inspiring and encouraging more women to discover their potential in STEM. We want to create a comfortable place for women to participate in STEM activities and develop careers following their aspirations.

WIPO: How many members are now in the network? And who are they?

BZ: We currently have about 50,000 members located in 14 different cities, not limited to the Asian region. Mostly are in mainland China: Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu, Shenzhen, Wuhan, XiAn, Hangzhou, Kunming, Chongqing, Hong Kong, one in London, and one in Singapore. We also have chapters in Malaysia, and Taiwan. Ladies Who Tech is also present on popular digital platforms, such as Weixin, LinkedIn, Facebook, Red, and Bilibili.

We welcome all professionals and genders to join this diversity and inclusion journey, some of them are white-collar, international expats, international students, and last not least many innovation lovers, startups, and entrepreneurs.

We believe we need more men to join the network and understand how to support women as a great allyship.

WIPO: How does the network function?

BZ: In Beijing, I have a team of 25 volunteers, most of whom have their own company or start-up. All the chapters have a slightly different function. Ladies Who Tech is still in a kind of start-up journey. We have not set strict requirements but have some guidelines to help communities organize themselves. Last year, following the Covid-19 crises, we turned to online service, and now have 20 different digital platforms with different content, such as videos, podcasts, advertising our goals to empower more women in STEM industries.

We have no staff and minimize running costs. We are sponsored by companies and governments' grants and support. The funding strategy depends on the chapters.

Nowadays, sponsorships remain the important source of funding of community.

WIPO: What are the main activities of the network?

BZ: We are running different marketing initiatives both offline and online. We have differentiated themes for different audiences, with different purposes, for example, "Corporate in Action" aims to inspire more people from international women role models and encourage job opportunities and a gender-friendly working environment. We also published a [White Paper](#) study focused on upskilling in digital economy in China, presenting the current situation of women in the varied age group across regions and industries in China, and the urgent needs of individuals in the digital economy.

The [Club Dreambuilder](#) is meant as an enabling and engagement program for Chinese women entrepreneurs, providing knowledge building, up-skilling, and fellowship support.

A support system is very important, of course, you can do it all by yourself, but surrounded by people with a common interest, you can go further.

WIPO: Would you say that discrimination against women in the workplace has evolved over the last 10 years?

BZ: The answer is yes and no. Before the Covid-19 crisis, the focus in China was on reducing the pay gap, achieving financial independence, and making sure that job descriptions are non-discriminatory on gender and age. The pay gap, however, has not been bridged and as long as this is the case, we may see discrimination against women locally and globally. The Covid-19 crisis is a great example. Because women have a lower paycheck, they bear more responsibilities in their home, averaging 28 weekly hours of unpaid housework without much acknowledgment. The Covid-19 crisis only worsened this situation.

WIPO: What kind of specific challenges do women face in the STEM industries?

BZ: Challenges include fewer job opportunities, fewer choices, and less voice power. There is a glaring lack of middle women leadership support in the industry in general. This situation is inherited from the past industrial evolution where most jobs were power-intensive and left women out of the workforce. Today's work environment has changed and so have job opportunities and women have to be brave enough to embrace the changes.

WIPO: Would you say that the situation is the same in the Asia Pacific region?

BZ: The situation might be slightly different across the Asia Pacific region. Southeast Asia for example is more focused on the service industry so job offers and study courses on finance, or law, might attract more candidates. Some issues such as age discrimination might not be too sharp in the service industry, but in the software industry, in China for example, after 35, age discrimination might hinder your ability to work in that industry. Challenges are even more acute in rural areas with a lack of accessibility to the internet, to mobile phone technology. The lack of equipment and resources, and the chance to be exposed to different thinking and people on the internet severely limit opportunities for women in rural areas. The lack of internet coverage is also a recurrent issue. In some places, the electricity supply is already an issue, with frequent shortages. Securing stable internet access is close to impossible.

Before the Covid-19 crisis, Ladies Who Tech have facilitated an initiative to collect second-hand smartphones and laptops to distribute to rural areas to support women and children's education. We are trying to help the digital transformation through which women can have better skills and a better income.

WIPO: Would you say that those challenges are similar to those met by women in other industries?

BZ: Not necessarily and it depends on the nature of the industry, whether they are labor-intensive or capital-intensive. There are far fewer women graduating in STEM due to an unconscious bias that girls may not be good at numbers. This is a belief that is passed on from grandparents to parents, to children. This bias might stop girls from making choices allowing them to fulfill their dreams and pursue their true interests. In engineering class, you might be the only girl. The lack of recognition of this unfounded bias results in girls' hesitancy to think outside the box and their common practices.

WIPO: Is intellectual property protection important for the network members, and do you promote it?

BZ: IP protection is very important. Ladies Who Tech has a protected trademark, with font and color, as well as different logos. We promote IP protection for women entrepreneurs, raise their awareness of the key role of IP in their success, and help them understand how to protect themselves.

WIPO: What is in the future for Ladies Who Tech?

BZ: The next milestone is more about building a sustainable business model alongside community development. We are looking forward to working on creating a better connection between community members (both corporate and individuals); Establishing intersection points for them to find Ladies Who Tech easily (social media/in-person based); Offering Ladies Who Tech value proposition to the market (for corporate and individuals); and Creating the best approach on synergy development with community partners.