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## International Women's Day: Hired when she was seven months pregnant



Ms Claire Hua appreciates the flexibility her work affords her. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN



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**SINGAPORE** - After working in the banking industry for about a decade, Ms Claire Hua took a break in 2018 to pursue her own interests and try for a baby.

A year later, she was headhunted for a return-to-work programme at TD Securities, a wholesale banking division of TD Bank Group that has been in Singapore since 1979.

Just before her interview, she discovered she was pregnant.

"I automatically assumed that that would put me out of the running for a programme that was six months long and that would be interrupted by a pregnancy," says Ms Hua, who is in her 30s.

To her surprise, the company not only continued with the interview, but also subsequently hired her in July 2019.

"I'm pretty sure it's very hard to find another employer willing to take you on when you are in your seventh month of pregnancy and to also say, 'Let me know when you want to come back and what you want to do.'

"So I felt extremely comforted and supported in that way. And that carried on when I returned," says the American, who is a permanent resident here. Her mother is Singaporean and her father is Vietnamese American.

She recalls that when she joined, she was the only pregnant woman on the floor.

"Everybody would walk by and go, 'It's time for you to go home' or 'Don't work too hard, prioritise family'. It's a work family looking after me," she says.

Now a vice-president in its Office of COO, Asia-Pacific, Ms Hua appreciates the flexibility her work affords her.

Although she has early morning and night work calls, she has pockets of time to drop off or pick up her two-year-old son, feed him dinner and put him to bed.

Mr Jay Jobanputra, TD Securities' managing director and regional head, says it aims to "create a culture where women feel supported, encouraged, empowered and, more importantly, confident in achieving their career aspirations".

But rather than impose quotas on how many women should be hired, "we manage it quite organically here", says Ms Carrie Fong, its managing director and chief operating officer for the Asia-Pacific.

Mr Jobanputra adds: "By simply using quotas, you're not respecting women who are applying for roles."

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About 30 per cent of TD's 411 employees here are women and they fill about a third of management roles.

Its women leaders include Ms Patricia Selvam, a Singaporean mother of three who started 23 years ago as an executive assistant.

She worked her way up to her current role as a senior manager in marketing and regional business management for Asia-Pacific, and says "TD definitely has a culture where they listen to us".

The company also helps female staff embrace the "art of possibility", as Mr Jobanputra puts it.

For instance, not many women pursue technology jobs, but the bank encourages them to expand their skill sets by rotating them into different roles.

"It is important to expand the skill set of all employees, not just women, including in the technology sphere," he says.

"It's a quickly evolving space and critical to our ongoing success. We are here to support and guide our colleagues to upskill, challenge themselves and grow in their roles."

Besides flexible work arrangements and wellness initiatives, TD Securities has a number of employee resource programmes that its female staff can tap, including associate and graduate internships, mentorship and leadership.

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It holds female chief operating officer roundtables with visiting executives, and in recent years, it has also worked with Mums@Work, a social enterprise, on return-to-work programmes.

Ms Fong, a Canadian who has worked with the bank for 18 years, 11 of them in Singapore, says its work culture is empathetic to competing priorities. She has two children aged five and eight and declines to reveal her age.

"I've been on phone calls where I'm riding my bike and sending them to school with a headset saying, 'I'm really sorry, it's gonna be noisy for a moment.' And that's okay. We embrace everyone else's lives and what they are going through.

"I wouldn't say there's no pressure, but I think there's no guilt in taking time with your family."

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