

The Road to workplace equality: Discrimination and breakthroughs faced by women

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ABSTRACT

As society progresses and concepts are updated, women's status in the workplace has risen significantly. However, the deep-rooted gender stereotypes for a long time make women still vulnerable to prejudices and restrictions in the male-dominated society. Through a questionnaire survey, this dissertation explores the tremendous pressure and developmental dilemmas currently faced by female laborers in terms of job opportunities, income levels and position advancement. The findings show that women generally face significant gender discrimination in the workplace, unequal employment opportunities, and difficulties in balancing family and work. These problems not only hinder women's career development, but also have a profound impact on their overall quality of life. The reason for undertaking this topic is that despite the growing call for gender equality globally, unequal treatment in the actual work environment is still prevalent and requires systematic research and countermeasures. To address these challenges, this paper proposes some preliminary solutions, including promoting and strengthening anti-gender discrimination policies, ensuring women's equal rights in employment, pay and promotion, encouraging enterprises to implement diversity and inclusion policies, and providing more flexible working arrangements and family support policies. By analyzing the data from the questionnaire survey and discussing the solutions, this thesis aims to gradually eliminate gender discrimination in the workplace, achieve true gender equality and promote the overall progress and development of society.

KEYWORDS

Workplace discrimination; Workplace dilemmas; Gender equality; Women in the workplace

1 Introduction

My first experience with societal unfairness came when my mother, despite her decade-long exemplary performance, was passed over for a promotion in favor of a less qualified male colleague. This revealed the harsh reality of workplace inequities faced by competent women. Despite significant progress in education and social status, women in modern society, particularly in China, still encounter substantial challenges in their careers. According to the World Economic Forum, women globally earn only 77% of what men earn, and it could take until 2255 to close the gender pay gap. Surveys show that women not only face lower wages but also persistent gender discrimination during hiring processes, often being asked about marriage and child-bearing plans, which hampers their career development and exacerbates inequality. In comparison, the U.S. hiring process, which omits personal details like gender and age, reduces bias and promotes fairness. In China, however, mandatory disclosure of personal information during job applications can lead to discrimination. Women also shoulder more family responsibilities, making it difficult to balance work and personal life, which hinders their career progress. The "glass ceiling" effect remains prevalent, with women excelling in performance ratings but falling behind in potential ratings, limiting their advancement to senior positions. This dual burden of family and career responsibilities adds to the challenges women face, highlighting the urgent need for solutions. This paper proposes a series of solutions, including policy reforms, corporate responsibility, and raising social awareness, aiming to support women in the workplace and promote gender equality. Through deep analysis and practical recommendations, this study offers guidance to policymakers, business leaders, and society to achieve tangible progress toward gender equality and contribute to a more inclusive, fair, and prosperous society.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Gender differences in the labor market

The theory of employment discrimination is widely used in studying gender differences in the labor market, with economics and sociology focusing on this phenomenon. From an economic perspective, employment discrimination refers to the unequal treatment of workers with the same productivity characteristics based on their demographic group (Bai Gelema, 2016). Occupational gender segregation, a key indicator of gender equality in the labor market, involves the concentration of workers in different occupational categories based on gender (Maria Charles, 2004). Studies in Western labor markets show that women are often concentrated in low-paying, low-prestige "feminized" jobs, and higher gender segregation correlates with greater income inequality between men and women (Maria Charles, 2004). In this context,

occupational gender segregation reflects unfair treatment in employment, career choices, promotions, and pay due to gender differences (Yao Xianguo, Xie Sitheng, 2004), making it a form of gender inequality.

2.2 Main factors affecting female employment

At the macro level, marketization and urbanization have led to widening gender differences in the labor market, with women's employment probabilities declining more than men's and slower income growth for women. As China becomes more open to the world, export enterprises increasingly prefer women, especially as their scale grows, which has boosted female employment to some extent (Zheng Yanyan, Li Lei, 2018). Additionally, with improvements in women's education, the digital economy has opened new opportunities for women, especially in flexible and emerging forms of employment (Song Yueping, 2021). This highlights the role of economic and social development in shaping female employment.

At the family level, childbearing, childcare, and elderly care influence women's employment. Fertility-related factors impact women's occupational status, and maternity support policies help alleviate work and child-rearing conflicts. Research shows that formal and intergenerational care promote women's labor participation, with effective maternity policies reducing the "motherhood penalty" (Zhuang Yuxia, 2020).

Socially, traditional gender roles that assign women to family responsibilities weaken their economic participation. Mothers are seen as "ideal caregivers" and men as "ideal workers," which hinders women's labor force involvement (Yao Yanlan, Feng Xiaotian, 2020). More modernized gender perspectives correlate with higher female labor force participation and income levels (Zhang Chuanchuan, Wang Jingwen, 2020).

3 Research Methods

3.1 Research thought

With the development of The Times and social changes, women's status and role in the workplace are constantly improving. However, gender discrimination in the workplace persists and has a profound impact on women's career advancement. Examining this phenomenon, a number of potential questions emerge: Why does sexism persist in modern society? Do women face more barriers and unfair treatment in the workplace than men? What kind of discrimination do they face? How does this discrimination affect women's career development and mental health? In addition, in the face of workplace gender discrimination, what strategies and attitudes should women adopt to cope with and overcome these challenges?

This paper makes assumptions and analyses on these problems. From a gender perspective, women are often treated unfairly in the workplace because of gender stereotypes, which are mainly manifested as inequality in recruitment, pay, promotion, and so on, or pressure from families. In the face of these challenges, women can respond by seeking support and advocating for equality policies. Through these discussions, this paper aims to reveal the root causes of workplace gender discrimination and provide feasible suggestions for solving this problem.

3.2 Research method

In this study, we employed quantitative research, using a well-designed questionnaire to explore societal perceptions of women's career development and workplace gender discrimination. We chose this method to better analyze respondents' views and objectively reflect the challenges women face. The questionnaire includes closed questions on basic information and open-ended questions for personal experiences, allowing us to gather diverse quantitative data. Our sample includes respondents from various genders, age groups, employment statuses, and industries, offering a broad perspective on women's workplace experiences. By analyzing the results, we identified key themes on career challenges, gender roles, and workplace support, providing valuable insights into common issues and ways to improve women's status.

4 Research Analysis

The survey for this study included a broad and diverse group of participants, ensuring a wide range of experiences and perspectives were captured. The survey consisted of multiple-choice and short-answer questions, and responses were submitted anonymously.

In the questionnaire, we used a 5-point scale for some questions, with 1 representing "strongly disagree"; 2 means "disagree"; 3 stands for "neutral"; 4 means "agree"; 5 stands for "strongly agree".

4.1 Discrimination in hiring

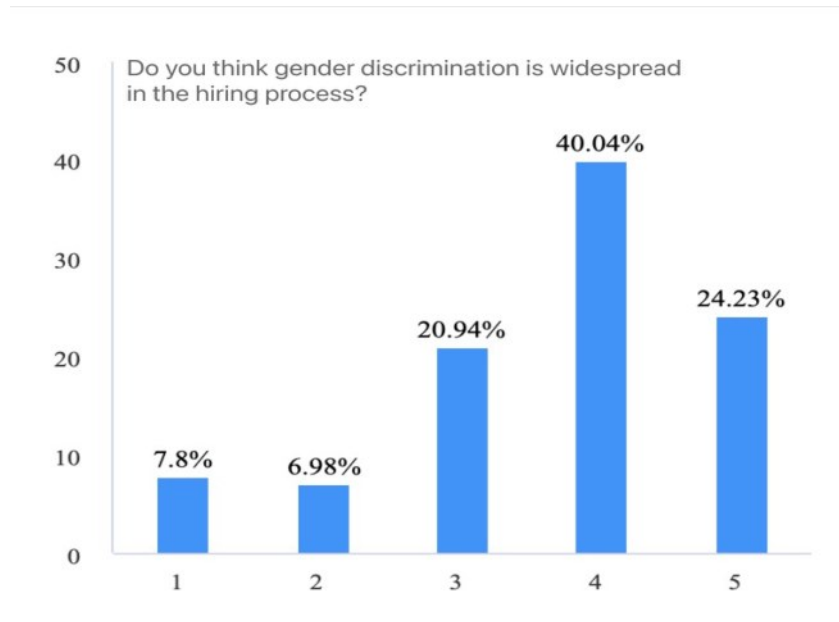


Figure 1

The survey data shown in the Figure 1 shows that the respondents have some experience of the widespread gender discrimination in the recruitment process. From student groups to adults who have worked in the workplace for decades, the vast majority of participants rated the likelihood of sexism as high, with 64.27 % of respondents choosing a 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale. This finding highlights the ongoing challenges women face in gaining equal employment opportunities.

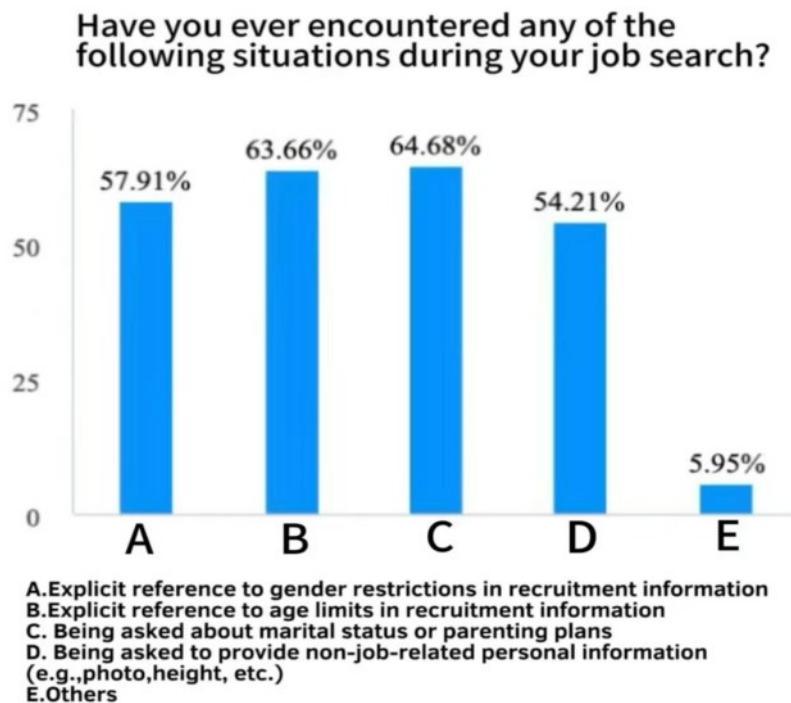


Figure 2

Further analysis of the data from the Figure 2 shows the multiple forms of discrimination faced by job seekers in the job search process, reflecting the systemic problems that exist in the current employment market. First, gender and age restrictions in job postings are particularly prominent, with 63.66% and 64.68% of job seekers having encountered them respectively. This phenomenon implies that many employers still follow the traditional gender and age bias in the recruitment process, and may tend to assess the competence and suitability of candidates based on gender or age stereotypes.

Secondly, 57.91% of job seekers were asked about their marital status or childbearing plans. Employers may be

concerned that female job seekers are unfairly evaluated or excluded due to marital or maternity-related disruptions in work engagement or high turnover rates. Recent studies indicate that employed mothers in the United States face an average wage penalty of about 5% per child, even after accounting for typical human capital and occupational factors (Anderson, Binder, and Krause, 2003).

In addition, 54.21% of job applicants were asked to provide non-job-related personal information, such as photos and height. Such requests indicate that some employers may be biased against physical appearance or other non-job-related factors in the recruitment process and try to screen candidates by such information. This not only violates the spirit of equal employment, but may also further aggravating the unfairness in the recruitment process.

4.2 Discrimination in workplace

4.2.1 Benevolent sexism

In the workplace, women often encounter benevolent sexism, which, under the guise of care and protection, reinforces traditional gender roles and limits their development. Unlike hostile sexism, benevolent sexism manifests as excessive courtesies, special favors, or lowered expectations for women, subtly maintaining gender inequality. This form of "kindness" can result in women being viewed as unfit for high-pressure or leadership roles, negatively impacting their career advancement and personal growth.

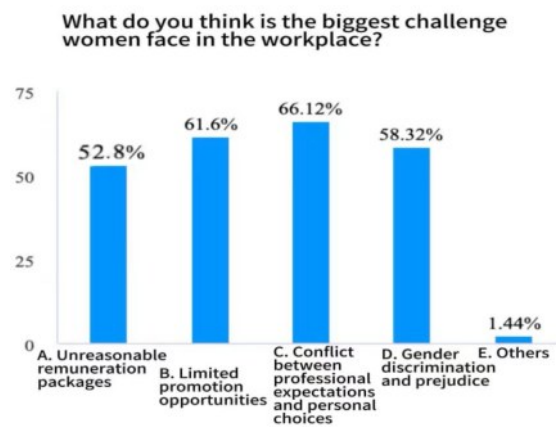


Figure 3

In the questionnaire, I categorized A. Unreasonable remuneration packages and B. Limited promotion opportunities as forms of benevolent sexism. As shown in Figure 3, over half of respondents view this seemingly well-intentioned care as implicit discrimination against women in the workplace. While it may appear as special attention or protection, this "goodwill" undermines women's status and self-confidence. It often results in women being excluded from key decisions or challenging tasks, driven by the assumption that they are less powerful or capable than men. This bias not only restricts women's opportunities but also leads to their long-term marginalization in the workplace.

4.2.2 The work-family balance dilemma

Gender behavioral differences stem from societal stereotypes, with women traditionally seen in caregiving roles due to

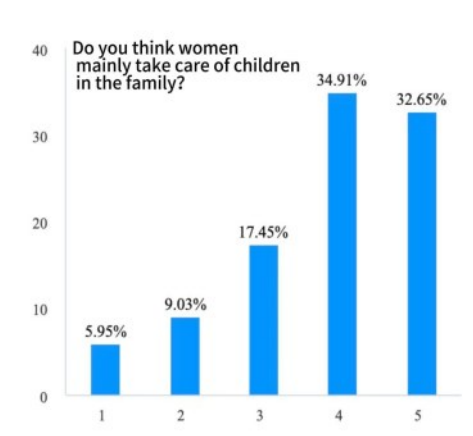


Figure 4

physical differences and reproductive functions. These roles are reinforced by culture and socialization, leading to the perception that women, particularly mothers, should handle child care. This belief adds pressure on women, as indicated by 67.56% of survey respondents who see women as primary child care providers at home.

In the workplace, women should not only do well in doing work but also take care of their children in family life. For women, in graph 1.3, 66.12% of people believe that the inseparable dual pressures of work and family make them too busy and trapped. This is also the most frequently selected option in this question, which shows the great impact of conflict between professional expectations and personal choices on women's workplaces.

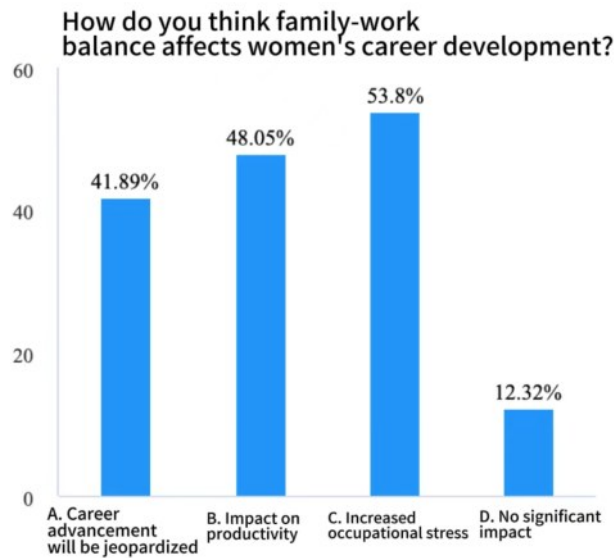


Figure 5

The Figure 4 presents data on how respondents perceive the impact of family-work balance on women's career development. 41.89% of respondents believe that family-work balance will jeopardize women's career advancement. 48.05% of respondents feel that family-work balance impacts women's productivity. The majority, 53.8%, think that family-work balance leads to increased occupational stress for women. Finally, a smaller proportion, 12.32%, believe that family-work balance has no significant impact on women's career development. Figure 5 highlights the unique challenges women encounter in their career development, particularly in balancing work and family responsibilities. For many women, the added demands of childcare and family care create immense pressure that directly impacts their productivity at work. These busy routines significantly reduce their rest time, leading to insufficient sleep, which negatively affects their work performance.

4.2.3 The glass ceiling

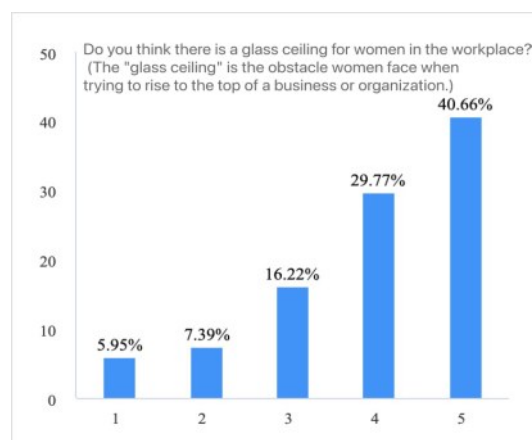


Figure 6

The term "glass ceiling" refers to an invisible barrier that stops certain people, especially women and minorities, from being promoted to top positions like managers or executives within a company. This barrier isn't usually written down in any rules but is instead created by common practices and hidden biases in workplaces, particularly in male-dominated

industries.

According to Figure 6, 40.66% of respondents strongly agree that a glass ceiling exists for women in the workplace. In 2023, women made up 46.9% of the U.S. labor force, yet only 30.6% held chief executive positions (Julia Kagan, 2024). The glass ceiling persists due to gender stereotypes, workplace culture, work-life balance challenges, and structural inequalities. Stereotypes and implicit biases often lead to the perception that women are less suited for leadership roles, while male-dominated networks and lack of mentoring impede their advancement. Additionally, balancing career and family responsibilities is a common struggle, with many organizations lacking supportive policies. Historical exclusion and economic disparities further hinder women from reaching top leadership positions (Debra Meyerson, Joyce K. Fletcher, 2014).

4.3 Findings of questionnaire survey

4.3.1 Current situation of women in the workplace

Through the questionnaire survey, it is evident that women still face varying degrees of gender discrimination in both job-seeking and career promotion. The survey indicates that many job applicants are required to provide personal information, such as gender, age, marital status, or other details unrelated to the job position, which can exacerbate gender discrimination in the workplace. Additionally, women often face disadvantages in career advancement, encountering barriers like the "glass ceiling" that limit their promotion, salary growth, and career development opportunities. Women also face more restrictions in their career choices, with industries considered male-dominated, such as engineering and finance, presenting greater challenges for women to enter.

4.3.2 Challenges faced by women in China

In China, despite continuous improvements in women's education levels and significant progress in promoting gender equality, gender stereotypes persist. Traditional beliefs often regard men as possessing greater leadership and decision-making abilities, leading to underestimation and bias against women's capabilities in the workplace. This results in additional obstacles and challenges for women in their career development. Women frequently encounter difficulties in balancing work and family responsibilities. Conventional views in China suggest that women should shoulder more familial duties, requiring substantial time and energy for caregiving and household management. Such stereotypes can place increased pressure on women, forcing them to choose between career advancement and family obligations.

4.4 Solutions to workplace discrimination

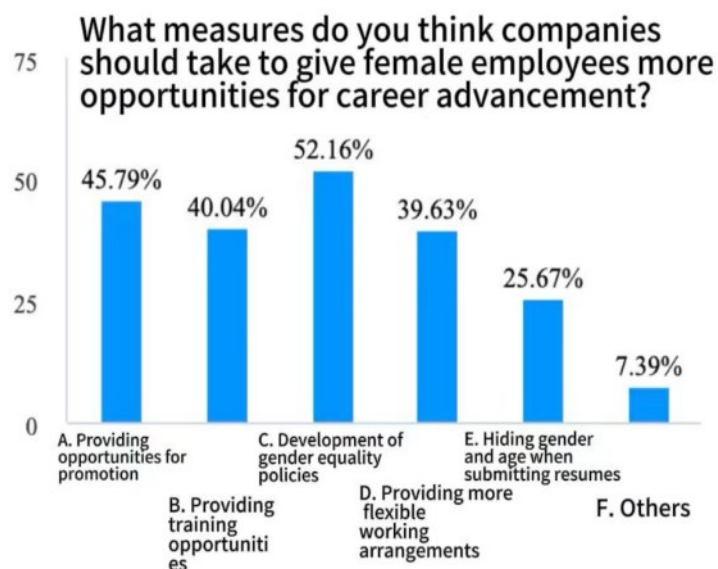


Figure 7

This section will focus on how to deal with and resolve gender discrimination in the workplace. Gender discrimination remains a persistent problem in many work environments, affecting employees' career development and the overall work atmosphere. This section will explore how to address this challenge through systematic strategies and cultural shifts aimed at advancing gender equality and inclusion in the workplace.

4.4.1 Providing opportunities for promotion

From Figure 7, Offering opportunities for advancement is the highest bar in the chart, indicating that "offering opportunities for advancement" is the action that most people think the company should take. More than half (52.16%) of respondents believe that providing more promotion opportunities for female employees is key to advancing their careers. Analyzing the way promotion opportunities are distributed can help reveal potential biases and barriers. By examining transparency, objectivity, and fairness in promotion decisions, organizations can identify and eliminate possible inequities to ensure that every employee has equal opportunities for advancement based on their abilities and performance.

4.4.2 Providing training opportunities

In second place was "providing training opportunities", which received 45.79% support. This shows that in addition to direct promotion opportunities, providing female employees with the necessary training is also an important way to enhance their professional abilities and development opportunities. Organizations can address gender discrimination through dedicated training programs to raise employee gender awareness and promote a more inclusive and equitable work environment.

First, gender equality training can help employees recognize the various forms of gender discrimination, including unconscious bias, gender stereotypes, and the impact of gender inequality on career development. In addition, providing equal vocational skills training, especially in fields traditionally dominated by men or women, can help break down barriers to gender division of labor and ensure that all employees, regardless of gender, have the opportunity to grow and succeed in their respective career paths.

4.4.3 Development of gender equality policies

As can be seen from Figure 7, 40.04% of respondents believe that companies should establish some policies related with gender equality to ensure that female employees have equal rights and opportunities in their career development by developing gender equality policies.

The increase in policies, such as improved maternity leave protection and work-life balance, has had limited results. Collective agreements have been instrumental in incorporating generous maternity leave protection and parental leave policies into national legislation in Northern Europe and other European countries, thus contributing to high levels of female Labour force participation. In Greece, collective bargaining increased the length of maternity leave for covered workers. In the European Union, 49% of trade unions have collective agreements that promote work-family balance. In Japan, work-life balance is also on the collective bargaining agenda. In 2017, the Japanese government released an Action Plan to achieve Work Style Reform, in which unions and employers agreed on the two main issues of reducing working hours and equal pay for equal work. (International Labour Organization, 2020)

4.4.4 Providing more flexible working arrangements

Support for this option was 39.63 % from Figure 7. Provide flexible working arrangements to meet the needs of employees and their families, especially taking into account the characteristics and needs of women. These arrangements can include telecommuting and flexible working hours. Flexible working arrangements should be based on consultation with employees and their representatives.

4.4.5 Hiding gender and age when submitting resumes

Support for this option was 25.67 %, indicating that a subset of people believe that hiding age information in hiring and promotion processes, as well as allowing employees to remain anonymous when submitting resumes, could help reduce gender bias and create a more level playing field for female employees.

In a research, resumes with male names are 40 % more likely to get an interview than similar resumes with female names. Some HR believe that some fields are generally better suited to men, while others are better suited to women. Being influenced by gender bias can be detrimental, as it may cause to overlook extremely talented candidates simply because of their gender identity.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Women's path to equality in the workplace has been characterized by many challenges and notable progress. Historically, women have faced various forms of discrimination in the workplace for career advancement, and customary

or invisible biases that have hindered their professional growth. These challenges are deeply rooted in persistent gender norms and stereotypes that view women as less capable or less engaged than their male counterparts. Despite these barriers, there have been notable breakthroughs in the pursuit of equality in the workplace. The increased visibility of women in leadership positions and the focus on gender issues by social movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp have also contributed to changes in workplace culture. These movements have revealed the pervasiveness of gender bias, prompting organizations to take more substantial steps to create more equitable work environments. At the same time there has been the emergence of laws that raise awareness of workplace discrimination while managing and limiting gender inequality.

Ultimately, achieving equality for women in the workplace is not just a matter of fairness, but a key component of building a more just and productive society. As we move forward, the lessons learned from the challenges faced and the breakthroughs made will be critical in shaping a future where gender equality is a fundamental and achievable reality.

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