

HONG KONG

Asia's world city

January 2007

Women in Hong Kong

“We should act together to uphold pluralism and inclusiveness in our society, and oppose any form of discrimination. . . Before introducing new policies and measures, we will insist on consideration of the different needs and perspectives of men and women and promote equality of the sexes and their opportunities to do their best.”
— **Mr Donald Tsang, Chief Executive, Hong Kong SAR Government (October 2005)**

The status and role of women in the community have come a long way in a relatively short time in Hong Kong. No longer are women finding it difficult to achieve the same status as their male counterparts. But it has been a long climb up the ladder. As late as the 1970s, women were still being paid less than men for doing exactly the same job.

Today, women make an ever-increasing and important contribution to the development of Hong Kong's economic, political and social life. On statistics

alone, more than half (52 per cent) of the population are women. Their participation rate in the labour force is 48.5 per cent (excluding foreign domestic helpers). Women also contribute tremendously through their unremunerated work in looking after their families and voluntary work.

In the civil service, in some ways a microcosm of Hong Kong's society, all jobs are open to both sexes. Gender preference is not specified in advertisements for civil service vacancies. Women now make up 33.7 per cent of all civil servants and are increasingly taking up 'traditional men's jobs'. Being a fire officer or helicopter pilot is no longer the preserve of male recruits, and women are not exempt from the rigorous training regimen of their male counterparts in the disciplined services. Women are slowly pegging back the once male-dominated positions at the directorate level of the administration. They comprise 26.5 per cent of the directorate, and although this figure is still low, it is some 16 per cent higher than it was in the early '90s. Among the 18 Permanent Secretaries, the most senior officials in the civil service, eight are female.

And women are catching up with their male counterparts in the Administrative

Officer grade, which is a corps of multi-skilled professional administrators who form the backbone of the Government's policy and decision-making processes. These much sought after positions often provide an officer with the opportunity of rising to the top in the civil service. Two decades ago, only 16 per cent of administrative officers were women. By June 2006, the figure had grown to 54 per cent.

The situation is not confined to the civil service. Women are achieving prominence in business, in public affairs, in community service and in politics, sport and the arts, but not to the same degree as they have in the civil service. Four of the 29 members of the Executive Council, the Chief Executive's top policy-making group, are women; and they make up 18 per cent (11 members) of the 60-seat Legislative Council, including its President and House Committee Chairperson; and 91 (18 per cent) women are now serving on the District Councils. The number of women serving in appointed non-official posts on Government advisory and statutory bodies was 1,294 (25.8 per cent) as at June 2006. However, while women have reached the upper echelons of business, only a handful have gone to the very top of the corporate ladder.



The Motivation

Several factors have contributed to breaking down the traditional male-dominated employment arena. The main factor in the turnaround was the introduction in 1978 of nine years of basic free education for all children up to the age of 15. In earlier times, and well before the '70s, it was virtually a tradition that many large families of limited means tended to emphasise education for boys. A girl's place was around the home. But the 1978 initiative, coupled with a grant and loan scheme for university students, helped ensure that girls were not deprived of an education because of financial constraints. Now there are generally more young women than men graduating from Hong Kong's tertiary institutions. And in some very competitive subjects, such as business and law, the percentage of female students is substantially higher than that of males (60.8 per cent and 58.6 per cent respectively). In medicine, the percentage of female graduates has increased to 54.1 per cent.

Status of Women

Although positive change for Hong Kong women has gained momentum in the recent past, the Government and the community have been making up for lost time. In 1995 the legislature passed the Sex Discrimination Ordinance to eliminate discrimination on the grounds of sex and to promote gender equality in the community. This was followed a year later with the establishment of the Equal Opportunities Commission, new laws on disability discrimination and the status of the family, and the extension to Hong Kong of the Convention on

the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

In January 2001, the Women's Commission was established to promote the well-being and interests of women. Its members come from a wide range of backgrounds and have extensive experience in various fields. The Commission's mission is: "To enable women in Hong Kong to fully realise their due status, rights and opportunities in all aspects of life." The Commission has adopted a three-pronged strategy including creation of an enabling environment for development of women, empowerment of women, and public education. It also performs three strategic functions in championing women's causes, inspiring and catalysing change, and mobilising community resources.

The Commission has launched a major empowerment initiative — the Capacity Building Mileage Programme (CBMP). This large scale, innovative open learning programme encourages and facilitates women to pursue continuous learning, and is tailored to meet the needs and interests of women. The CBMP has been developed by the Commission in partnership with the Open University of Hong Kong and a local radio station. Most courses are broadcast on radio for free and convenient access. Non-governmental organisations are invited to arrange supplementary learning activities.

In June 2006, the Women's Commission held a conference entitled "Together We Build a Harmonious Community" attended by over 400 participants. It provided an opportunity for people from all sectors to discuss women's issues along with strategies to promote gender equality and the status of women.

Work in Progress

Despite the initiatives, more remains to be done. To ensure that women's perspectives are considered in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all legislation, public policies and programmes, the Women's Commission has developed a 'gender mainstreaming strategy'. An analytical tool — the Gender Mainstreaming Checklist — has been developed and is being rolled out in selected policy areas. As a further step, a Gender Focal Point network has been set up. Each bureau and department designates a senior officer (a directorate officer in most cases) as its gender focal point to raise gender awareness within its organisation, to encourage the use of the Gender Mainstreaming Checklist, and to serve as a contact and resource person for gender-related matters within his/her bureau or department.

It was a proud and historic moment for Hong Kong when windsurfing champion Lee Lai-shan — San San as she is popularly known — became Hong Kong's first Olympic gold medallist by winning the women's Mistral class title at the 1996 Atlanta Games. Lee Lai-shan has become a role model for young women in Hong Kong and an icon for the sport of windsurfing. In 2001, she captured her third world title at the World Windsurfing Championships in Greece. She also won gold at the Busan Asian Games in 2002.

Further information can be obtained through www.women.gov.hk