

EO Files (June 2011)

“THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET - Reflections in Brief”

Power of One

Although true gender equity requires effort by all, Hong Kong women must take the lead to reject stereotypes and discrimination. History shows that every single act counts.

In 1919, a young Chinese woman named Deng Chunlan published an open letter calling for the admission of women to China’s universities. She also presented a revolutionary plan to improve the condition of women: “Liberate the schools. Liberate the workplace. Liberate the governing regime. Liberate ourselves.”

Deng’s call for liberation implored society to remove the institutional barriers to women’s involvement in public life. In the century that has passed since, many of these barriers of Deng’s time have been lowered, if not totally eliminated, in Hong Kong. So, what more is to be done now?

In truth, despite our progress, much remains to be done to achieve true gender parity. Now is not the time to be complacent, for barriers remain for many women, less visible but very real. And in this, more than ever before, women must lead the way towards their own equality.

Thanks in part to the compulsory education policy established since 1978, today’s girls have ample opportunity to education. They have taken full advantage of this, and female enrolment in tertiary education has outnumbered male enrolment since the academic year of 1996-97.

And yet, a number of women still struggle for education in Hong Kong. Some ethnic minority girls cannot advance in their studies due to language and cultural barriers. Some young women face difficulties and bullying in school due to their gender or sexual orientation. Many women, especially those who are in their late 40s onwards, only received primary education. Many of them now work in the cleaning or service industries, and struggle to improve their situation with limited access to retraining opportunities.

In the workplace, we also see mixed progress. On the one hand, women form nearly

half of the workforce. On the other, the female labour force participation rate remains low, particularly when compared to other developed economies. The vast majority of the lowest paid and most vulnerable workers are women, whose rights continue to be undermined by the lack of job security and wage protection.

There are also a number of issues that women continue to face at work, including unequal pay, sexual harassment, and pregnancy discrimination. And the glass ceiling remains, barring many women from reaching the top. In the Women's Commission 2010 survey, still a quarter of female respondents said they do not want to be too successful at work due to family responsibilities.

And what about gender equality in political leadership? Women remain underrepresented among top-level leaders. This is caused in part by apathy: in the aforementioned survey, more than half of female non-registered voters did not register because they were "not interested". It is also caused by stereotypes: nearly 40 percent of respondents agree that men perform better at political leadership than women.

And while having top female leaders is clearly a positive aim, it is not a panacea. As it has been shown in many countries, having female heads of state does not automatically translate to greater gender equality. The key issue is not the leader's gender, but her/his commitment to gender equality. It is for this commitment that we should fight.

What we need then is greater demands on leaders and candidates, male and female, on their dedication to gender equality. The right leaders should be willing to mainstream gender as a core consideration for policymaking and recognize that gender equality is the tide that lifts all boats.

To move further ahead in our progress towards gender equality, we need a new way of thinking. Despite our considerable advancement, we sadly remain tethered to many of the same tired stereotypes underpinning gender roles. For this to change, a collaborative effort is necessary.

Employers need to adopt a more family-friendly mindset and practices. Men need to re-think their biases and fairly share the burdens of the household. They also need to stop shunning gender equity as only a women's issue, and start taking active ownership of it. After all, parity between men and women leads to positive outcomes

for everyone, including fewer conflicts, happier families, and stronger workplace relationships.

Most importantly, women need to take on Deng Chunlan's century-old call to "liberate themselves". They must embrace the opportunity to advance, to go all the way to the top. They must let neither society nor themselves hold them back from becoming role models and leaders. They must not give in to apathy, but speak up and believe in their own capacity to lead in greater numbers.

Oftentimes, indifference stems from the misconceived belief that individual action, taken alone, would have a negligible impact not worthwhile of one's efforts. But history has shown the world over that genuine, deep-seated change is often the result of grassroots activism, of simple acts that go on to inspire greater transformations. There are now many admirable women fighting for this cause, but more will be needed. Even the individual choice of not accepting stereotypes, of breaking out of one's comfort zone, could help change others' perspectives. Everyone can be a role model.

As we measure the progress that we have made over the last century, we see that the road ahead is still long. But the goal of true gender equality is not unreachable. We need only to work together to get there.

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(Note: This article was originally published in the South China Morning Post on 21 June 2011.)