

"On Second Thought" column
LAM WOON-KWONG

Why are gender issues women's work?

By joining the battle against sexual inequality men could be liberated from stereotypes, too

Over the past three years, I have attended many events to promote gender equality. Yet far too often, as I looked around the room, I found myself asking: "Where are the other men?"

March 8th is the International Women's Day, with this year's theme focusing on "The Gender Agenda: Gaining Momentum". In Hong Kong, we have recently seen some heartening steps on this front, such as the debate on statutory paternity leave.

Yet to maintain the momentum, we need to properly engage both men and women in the conversation about gender equality and the fight against gender-based violence. To do this, we must start at the root of the problem - our stereotypes.

Hong Kong lags behind many developed nations on this front. A 2009 Pew survey found that only 19 per cent of Americans felt women should return to their traditional role of taking care of the family. But in a Women's Commission survey published in 2011, nearly 40 per cent of Hong Kong respondents agreed that a man's "job is to earn money, while [a woman's] job is to do household work and take care of the family".

These traditional gender roles are increasingly at odds with our changing competitive landscape. An Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) study last year found gender stereotyping negatively affects men, too, especially those from lower-income groups, who construct their identity around their role as the breadwinner. Losing their job can lead to depression and resentment, which puts pressure on gender relations and families.

Stereotyping also contributes to sexual violence, because inappropriate behaviour is brushed off as "boys will be boys". Sexual harassment is a common complaint the EOC receives under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance, with many victims saying they were blamed for the incident because of the way they had dressed. An EOC survey released on March 5th found that fewer male university students than female were able to recognise acts of sexual harassment.

Most men find sexual violence abhorrent, but still far too few would speak out on this matter, and other so-called "women's issues". In fact, gender equality is everyone's issue. And it is time that men start taking ownership of it.

Men must begin to recognise that everyone benefits when women and men are given equal opportunities. Currently, men still, on average, earn more than women and occupy most leadership positions. But the ground is shifting, and men need to prepare themselves to cope with these changes.

Relinquishing stereotypes would free men from the constraints placed on them by traditional gender expectations. Many men would like to pursue jobs in traditionally female-dominated industries or want to be a stay-at-home dad, but hesitate to do so. Adopting a more open mind to gender roles would not only widen career their options, but also help families better adapt to the changing economy.

Furthermore, family-friendly workplace measures, such as flexible working, are not only for women - they also benefit men. Support from male leaders for initiatives to nurture a wide range of talent, such as mentoring programmes for women or minorities, would help retain employees and provide a diversity of perspectives.

And to truly put a stop to gender-based violence, men must step up alongside women as fathers, brothers, husbands, friends. They must be role models to boys and other men in treating everyone, irrespective of gender, with respect. Globally, we are already

moving on this front, such as the United Nations Secretary-General's Network of Men Leaders, whose eminent members work to prevent violence against women in their areas of influence.

Is a similar initiative possible in Hong Kong? As we mark International Women's Day, I issue my call to Hong Kong's men: It's time to get involved.

LAM Woon-kwong
Chairperson, Equal Opportunities Commission

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