

ON SECOND THOUGHT
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No one benefits from pregnancy discrimination

Much more needs to be done if we are to relieve the pressure placed upon women.

Last month's appointment of Marissa Mayer as chief executive of Yahoo had the world buzzing, not least because she was six months pregnant with her first child when she was recruited.

The responses differ widely. Some find Mayer an inspiring trailblazer for working mothers everywhere. Others question the ability of a pregnant woman to balance running a multibillion-dollar company and adequately caring for her newborn. Still others criticise Mayer for what they perceive as putting her career before her family.

The heated debate illustrates the challenges faced by many women in juggling career and family. Indeed, the situation for pregnant working women may be worse in Hong Kong.

Pregnancy discrimination remains one of the most common complaints the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) receives under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance, the majority of which are related to employment.

Sadly, the stereotypical assumption that a female employee's commitment to the job decreases as her family grows remains prevalent. In a 2011 survey by the Women's Commission, nearly three-quarters of respondents said that the situation remains stubbornly the same where employers would not hire pregnant women.

It is no better after the pregnancy: in a 2011 global survey by Regus, the office provider, barely one-third of respondent firms in Hong Kong were willing to hire working mothers, lower than the global average of 36 per cent.

In effect, stereotypical thinking surrounding childcare responsibilities remain one of the most deeply entrenched causes of gender inequality.

Traditional gender roles are at work here: the women as the family's caretakers and the men as the primary breadwinners. But who benefits when we hold on to our gender stereotypes?

Not the mothers, many of whom are dismissed or, feeling pressured, end up resigning, only to face difficulties later when they try to return to the workforce.

Not the employers, who lose valuable female staff members that they have spent time and resources training.

Not the fathers, who may want to spend more time at home but feel trapped by the constraints imposed by social expectations on their role at home and at work.

Not the families, given that many rely on dual income and forgo having children as a result of inadequate childcare support.

And certainly not our society, which already struggles with the consequences of our extremely low fertility rate and misses the chance to benefit from a wider pool of talents and capabilities.

So what is to be done? To start with, the government must facilitate and promote family-friendly practices to enable parents to balance home and work. The recent move by the government to provide paternity leave to civil servants, though a welcome first step, is far too timid and miles behind international best practices.

Much more needs to be done, including greater flexible work arrangements and changing the way we evaluate our pregnant workers and working mothers, in both the public and private sectors, if we are to truly relieve the pressure placed upon women to choose between career and family.

By facilitating work-family balance, the government could topple the perception of pregnant women and working mothers as less

dedicated and undesirable workers. This would demonstrate its commitment to breaking down prevailing gender roles and be a major step towards equality between women and men.

The Yahoo board certainly deserves some praise for their, as Mayer rightly put it, evolved thinking. Hong Kong's employers should give their pregnant employees the same opportunity to be judged on their performance.

Unevolved thinking only squanders our women's talent, and surely that benefits no one.

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