

EO Files (September 2017) “THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET – Reflections in Brief”

Let Hong Kong look beyond money to move closer to gender equality

Is it a bad thing when a wife makes more money than her husband? Apparently some in our society think so. Surely all of us are entitled to freedom of thought, and our society today is indeed characterised by a cacophony of views. But when a view justifies a wrongdoing which may jeopardise, if not directly hurt social justice, then something is amiss.

The wrongdoing I want to talk about here is violence, whether physical or psychological, or more specifically, violence caused by the view that a woman deserves it when she upsets her husband.

Two weeks ago, a young couple were found dead in a luxury housing estate in Yau Ma Tei. Initial evidence suggested that the husband stabbed and pushed his wife from their apartment balcony to the ground floor before he committed suicide by jumping off the same building.

With a dramatic tragedy like this, it is understandable that some newspapers would dig into the personal lives of the couple to try to find out what happened and to hold their readers' interest with sensational details. A couple of newspapers magnified the fact that the wife was making a lot more money than her spouse, and hinted that the income gap was the major reason behind the couple's massive fall out and the eventual tragedy.

Whether an income gap was the true cause of the two deaths is yet to be verified by the police investigation, but by looking at the way those few newspapers reported the stories, they seemed to have already assumed the wife was partly to blame for her own fate because she was more financially successful than her husband. They also suggested that she probably triggered her husband's anger by not handling his ego with greater care.

These particular media reports have caused outrage among a number of NGOs, concern groups and individuals that advocate the rights of women and their protection from violence. While the jurisdiction of the Equal Opportunities Commission lies in the anti-discrimination law, we are concerned about how such reporting may reinforce and perpetuate gender stereotypes and inequality by suggesting that women should be humble and gentle in nature and inferior in front of their husbands.

These stereotypes not only pin women and men alike to patriarchal ideology and dated gender roles, but they are also unrealistic given that women are fast catching up with men in the Hong Kong job market in terms of both numbers and wages.

Recently released government data show that the rise in income for women was much more significant than for men over the past five years. Since better education and higher incomes usually go hand in hand, greater educational opportunities for women and changing social perceptions about gender equality will surely continue to lead more women to enter the workforce. Many women today are achieving a higher socio-economic status than their male counterparts.

Compared to a century ago, the status of women today has already risen significantly. Men, on the other hand, are also enjoying more life choices than the singular role of breadwinner in a family. The “men are more superior to women” and “women should stay at home” mentalities from the old times are no longer practical for the modern society we are living in.

Still, gender stereotypes of different kinds, from billboards showing slim, pretty women and muscular men to gender-assigned toys for children, permeate our society despite the passing of time. Some of them may be more subtle than others, but they all affect our perception of gender roles and identities, and the media often helps to reinforce them.

If we are to see a society that will continue to progress and prosper culturally and economically, we should really make an effort to move past the old ways of thinking and stop suppressing the real desire and potential of women and men of our time. And people will be less likely to harm themselves and others when they do not feel helplessly shackled by stereotypes and socially imposed norms that no longer serve anyone.

Alfred CHAN Cheung-ming
Chairperson
Equal Opportunities Commission

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