

Exploratory Study on Gender Stereotyping and Its Impacts on Male Gender

Executive Summary

Background

1. The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has commissioned the Gender Research Centre, Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong to undertake the “Exploratory Study on Gender Stereotyping and Its Impacts on Male Gender”. During 2011, two open seminars were conducted to raise public discussion on the issues concerning men’s situation in face of social and economic restructuring. A total of 470 participants attended the seminars and 340 questionnaires were collected. Furthermore, 10 focus group discussion sessions and 9 individual interviews comprising 71 male participants were carried out.

Findings of Focus Group Survey

Men in Pain

2. As we have observed from the sharing of men of different ages, it is found that men in Hong Kong are still abreast of many traditional cultural norms of male identity. However, under the new economic and social environment, the foundation for upholding these traditional ideas is lacking. Traditional and transitional ideas often coexist. Amid rapid changes in gender relationships, it is inevitable that men and women would find themselves at a loss.

3. Firstly, most of our respondents, regardless of their backgrounds, consider paid employment the most important element in the construction of their self-identity. For these men, a paid employment enables them to financially support their family and allows them to take up the cultural norms of gender role prescribed for men. Some men even believe that harmonious family relationships can only be maintained when their income is sufficient to support a living for the family.

4. As for men, it is not their capacity to financially support their family, but also in relative terms: their ability to be a more financially resourceful provider compared with their female partner. In other words, male identity is constructed through their comparison with women and men gain self-esteem only when they have a competitive advantage over women. Consequently, one would expect contemporary men to have more stress because they are not only competing with other men; they are also competing with their female partner and exceeding her. In such an atmosphere, those men who do not meet the expectations will lose face, and have self-esteem and

self-confidence damaged.

5. Although work is important for both the working-class and middle-class men, they project different ideal paths to economic success. As for working-class men, many believe that setting up one's own business is the only path to be successful. For the middle-class men, the cornerstone of the male identity is career. The career for them refers to two dimensions: upward mobility and job satisfaction.

6. Both younger and older respondents agree that structural conditions have created more obstacles for men to live up to the cultural ideal of male identity. The attainment of "hegemonic masculinity"¹ is even more unachievable. Primarily, de-industrialization has stripped many skilled job opportunities from men, who have found it difficult to adjust to the requirements imposed by elementary service jobs. Men's financial capacity and career prospect are greatly challenged. Next, the rising living cost has created more financial burden for men who are culturally expected to support their family. Once again, the change in the status of women makes men difficult to have absolute advantages. Lastly, it is hard for men to cope with the stress.

7. Rapidly rising living standards, property prices and rental costs mean that many Hong Kong households cannot rely on a single earner to support the family. Dual-income families have become the norm. Of course, the pressure on women in dual-income families are generally larger than men do, because women still have the responsibilities for most of the housework and childcare. However, due to commonly long working hours and much more requirements on helping children with their studies, men in dual-income families also feel the pressure.

8. Love with affections and feelings has become a cornerstone in modern marriages in Hong Kong society. However, how should men maintain a romantic relationship? Many of our middle-class respondents are apparently baffled by this question. Some respondents suggest that maintaining a happy marriage is like looking after a plant. Yet some are displeased that in order to maintain a happy marriage, the demand is solely on men that they need to be a good actor. When encountering marital conflicts, men in our focus groups tend to tolerate in order to avoid quarrels with their spouse as they believe a harmonious family is pivotal. Harmony can only be achieved by toleration. In addition, these men want to avoid the pain of trapping in a damaged marital relationship. However, men feel invalidated because they have the impression that their opinions are often rejected by their wife. This toleration does not actually deal with men's dissatisfaction within. It also provides no satisfactory solutions for both parties. Sometimes it even strengthens the impression of his wife's unreasonable image and suppresses more dissatisfaction with the partner.

¹ The notion of "hegemonic masculinity" developed by sociologist R.W. Connell is the normative ideal of male behaviour, endorsed by the society and culture, which male are supposed to fulfil.

A dilemma: Are women competitors or collaborators?

9. Men are apparently upset by women's increasing competition for jobs and salary scale. In fact, what underlie men's disgruntle are men's recognition of self-identity, their concern over earning ability and say in control, their stress to become an exemplary man as defined by socialization, and anxiety brought by the deep-rooted traditional gender ideologies. Men in general think that the distribution of power and status between men and women is like a see-saw that when one goes up, the other must go down. Male respondents do think that the general rise of women's status causes the decline of men's status. Men are increasingly worried about their vanishing power.

10. Due to stress derived from the societal, financial and traditional gender ideologies, male respondents do not perceive that they have received any support from social policies. Male respondents believe that social policies still consider women as the suppressed group and are lop-sided favouring women. Social policies do not provide any protection to men who are becoming the "under-privileged" group.

11. As changes appear in the society, both the husband and the wife in a typical family need to work in order to make ends meet. The wife has in fact contributed to lessening financial strain. Other than financial pressure, men are increasingly aware of the importance to have their share of responsibilities on taking care of the family and children education. Men enjoy taking part in these activities with their wife or their mate as partners.

Findings of Questionnaire Survey

12. Findings of questionnaire survey reveal that men and women are similar in satisfaction with the relationship. Furthermore, both men and women report the largest difference in perceived consensus with their partners is in household chores and ways of expressing affections. However, men show significantly lower consensus with their partners in these aspects than women do.

13. Among the eight types of daily hassles, men are mostly bothered by work and health. At work, men are more concerned about meeting deadlines, work load and job nature. However, men are not as bothered by work as women do. While 40%, 36% and 32% of men are bothered by deadlines, workload and job nature, 50%, 47% and 52% of women are bothered by the respective hassles. When compared with women, men have experienced significantly more hassles in financial matters, intimacy behaviours, sexual orientation and addiction.

14. Men are significantly weaker in using stress coping strategies when compared with

women. Both men and women are relatively more effective in employing coping strategies to solve problems but less effective in coping with psychological stress.

15. Men are weaker than women in their social support network across all three aspects of family, friends and particular persons. The largest gender difference appears in men not having some particular persons (intimate friends) in providing support to him.

Conclusion and Recommendations

16. From the discussions of our respondents, we sum up the major challenges that different men in Hong Kong face:

- With respect to their economic role, all the men whom we have interviewed are influenced by traditional gender norms and the capitalism hegemonic ideal of male identity. For them, the cornerstone of masculinity is some measures of economic success through either entrepreneurship or the obtainment of a job with upward mobility, and the ability to financially support the family. However, they have all realized the gap between this ideal and the structural obstacles to achieve it. This gap constitutes the major source of pressure for our respondents. Secondly, many of our respondents consider the improvement of women's status a threat to them. They are concerned about the competition from women in the job market. Some of them find it difficult for men to work for elementary service jobs. The difficulties that unskilled male workers face stem from their perception about elementary service jobs, which are sometimes not viewed as 'real jobs'. As regards middle-class men, they are concerned about the increasing importance of communication skills in many white-collar jobs and the competitive advantages women have enjoyed in this respect.
- As for cultural perception, most of our respondents still think that it is essential for men to be more successful than their female partners. Many admit that they would feel the pressure if their female partners have a more successful career. Although most of our respondents still dream of having a female partner who could fulfil the "three obedience and four virtues", most have realized that gender relationships have been changing, and that women increasingly have their views and demand to be respected and in charge. Based on the data, we concur the problems are two-fold. First, changes in normative expectations often lag behind changes in positions of women and men in different domains. Second, the pace of changes is uneven between men and women. It has also generated discontent among men who complain that women want to have it all: having new autonomies and power without giving up their traditional privileges.

- Family constitutes another source of pressure for men. On top of financial concerns, men often hold views different from their wives regarding the appropriate ways to raise their children. Moreover, working-class dual-income families face another set of challenges. On the one hand, long working hours have reduced the time parents in these families could spend with their children. On the other hand, unlike their middle-class counterparts who often employ domestic helpers to help ease the burden of household chores and childcare, parents in working-class dual-income families lack the resources to employ external help. The third challenge in family that men face is related to their lack of support during family crises. Due to traditional cultural perception about men as the tough and strong one in a relationship, male victims of domestic violence have found it difficult to seek help: their complaint is either ignored or not taken seriously by related service providers. In cases of divorce, men have found that it is difficult for them to win custody of their children because many judges and social workers still hold the stereotype that women are better care takers of children.
- At the individual level, most men are reluctant and ashamed to seek help when they face emotional problems. Our questionnaire survey shows that although men are more likely to experience hassles in relation to their finance, intimate relationships, sexual orientations, and substance addiction, they have fewer support networks and intimate friends to turn to, and are less likely to seek help when compared with women.

17. To tackle challenges and problems faced by men in Hong Kong, we propose the following recommendations:

- (1) As for cultural aspects, traditional gender norms are one of the major sources of men's pressure. To change these norms, the Government and related organizations such as EOC could work more closely with schools and education bodies to promote gender equality. It helps students explore how traditional gender norms have imposed unnecessary restrictions and pressure on men. Although gender roles in society serve different needs, it should emphasize common concerns and feelings between men and women. Men are not bound to exceed women in career because both alike have strong and weak perspectives. Men can protect others but sometimes they need others' concerns and care. They can be listeners but sometimes want to chat with others.
- (2) Educational settings are one of the most important socialization agents of gender roles and norms. However, biases of gender stereotypes are still common in the education process. We suggest that schools incorporate "gender equality" in their curricula and that frontline teachers and administrative staff need to receive "gender mainstreaming" training.

- (3) The media is another important socialization agent of gender norms. Sadly, the press is now filled with gender stereotypes against women and men. In order to change traditional gender norms, relevant organizations need to work with media agents. There is a necessity of using the media as a platform to promote ideas of gender equality.
- (4) At the policy level, it should develop gender-sensitive social service policies so as to identify different types of pressure undertaken by men and women in the social and economic transformation; to note the different aspects of needs of men and women for social services; to compile sex segregated data on social service recipients as a review on the situation; and to help men and women in adapting to the social and economic restructuring. In addition, “gender mainstreaming” should be incorporated into the training courses for frontline social workers.
- (5) As for the social policies, gender differences have not been reviewed and therefore it is difficult to achieve gender equality in their implementation. Furthermore, when men or women face difficulties, they are bound to affect the other gender’s situation. At the family level, it certainly affects the stability of the family. Therefore, to understand the needs of men is of paramount importance. It is recommended that social policies should be made in such a way that it can take care of gender differences. For example, to review the low participation rate of men in employment and training services; to encourage job seekers and employers to break the gender stereotypes for certain job positions; to provide social services for men’s needs, such as male specialist clinic, sheltered centre for abused men; to develop family leave, paternity leave and other family-friendly labour policies so as to encourage men’s participation in family life; and to review the need of observing the rights of men in law enforcement of family and marriage.
- (6) Based on the Platform for Action adopted at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, the Women’s Commission issued a “gender mainstreaming” checklist in 2002. It is designed to promote a gender perspective at the legislation and policy levels. We look forward to speeding up the work in this area and “gender mainstreaming” will be incorporated into social service organizations. We hope that while our society continues to promote women’s status, we can also take into account changes of men’s status and make appropriate proposals in meeting their needs. The overhaul of the Women’s Commission into the Commission for Gender Equality might be the first step towards the advocacy of equality in both genders.