

“Letter to Hong Kong”

By Emily Lau of the Democratic Party

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Last month an article in Newsweek magazine caught my eye. Entitled The Female Factor –it is on how the untapped spending power of women could save the world from recession. Quoting from a study by the Boston Consulting Group, the article said women are poised to drive the post-recession world economy, thanks to an estimated US\$5 trillion in new female-earned income that will be coming on line over the next five years.

According to the report, total income for men worldwide, which is US\$23.4 trillion, is more than double that for women, but the gap is shrinking because the vast majority of new income growth over the next few years will go to women, due to a narrowing wage gap and rising female employment. This could mean that women would be the ones driving the recovery.

A report published by Goldman Sachs in August also declared that women would be the economic engine of the future. The report said spending by women tend to focus more on food, health, education, child care, consumer durables and financial services and that should support the development of human capital to a greater extent than spending by men.

The report said studies also found that overall health in households improves where women earn more than half of the family income and have greater control over the family’s resources. In households run by women, children enter school earlier and child nutrition is better. Mothers also tend to spend more on healthcare, including primary care and vaccination, and tend to invest more in food associated with better health.

In the important area of education, the report said while literacy rates for women lag behind those for men, young women aged between 15 and 24, are more literate than adult women, and the literacy gap between younger women and men is almost universally in the single digits. In countries such as China, India, Iran and Egypt, girls fare nearly as well as boys in primary and secondary school enrolment.

In the quest for gender equality, these figures are encouraging. As the Nobel laureate and economist Amartya Sen said, "There is overwhelming evidence that women's empowerment and economic development has the most far reaching effect in improving the lives of all...men, women and children."

Compared with developing countries, the status of women and girls in Hong Kong is better. A report published by the Women's Foundation in 2006 found that advances have been made. Women are freer to choose the paths of their lives. They are more educated, earn more, have more legal protections and live better than ever before. Changes have also been made in areas such as concern over domestic violence and property rights, but more needs to be done.

To the Women's Foundation, the single most disturbing conclusion was that Hong Kong women do not see discrimination as a social ill that can be changed. Instead they blame themselves for the limitations placed upon their aspirations and their accomplishments.

The failure to see discrimination as a problem amenable to social change is alarming and disturbing. Women cannot see themselves as agents for change if they are not in a position to effect change. This is obvious in the area of political leadership.

In the Legislative Council, only half of the members are directly elected. Of the 60 Legco members, only 11 are women. This is 18 per cent of Legco members and is a far cry from the 50 per cent target proposed by the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The CEDAW Committee also criticized functional constituencies in Legco elections because many of them are male-dominated and may lead to indirect discrimination against women.

The role of women in the business sector is more promising. A survey conducted by an international accountancy firm in 2007 found that 83 per cent of responding companies said they have women occupying management positions. However a survey conducted by the Hong Kong Institute of Chartered Secretaries in 2006 found that 87 per cent of the listed companies

which responded said they have no women independent non-executive directors.

On the international level, a study found that only 1.8 per cent of boards of companies in Asia have women directors. This figure compares poorly with 20 per cent in Nordic countries and 14 per cent in North America.

In Hong Kong as well as in other countries, one way to achieve gender equality is through education. While opportunities for women have widened in the past two decades, gender stereotypes still prevail in many aspects of education. According to the study by the Women's Foundation, one form of gender segregation is in the choice of course of study. The study found that more girls consistently chose the Arts and Humanities while more boys chose Science. While the percentage of female students in law, medicine, business and social sciences was increasing, it was offset by decreasing percentage of male students in arts subjects.

Like the rest of society, teachers may have gender-stereotyped attitudes, and they influence girls (and boys) in subtle ways, such as by encouraging girls to be passive and overlooking boys' aggression. The Equal Opportunities Commission has found extensive gender stereotyping in textbooks. Gender segregation also exists outside the classroom. Physical education in particular is a gendered activity, with the potential consequence that girls are less active throughout their lives.

After reading the Newsweek article, I can't help but feel that women in Hong Kong are not yet poised to drive the post-recession economy. In fact the growing number of women living in abject poverty is an issue of deep concern, although it has no priority in the policy address published by the Chief Executive Donald Tsang earlier this month.

In order to achieve gender equality, the government has an unshirkable responsibility. Women must be more outspoken on the subject and we should enlist the help of men. We must convince the community at large that improving the lives of women will benefit the society as a whole.

I agree with the Women's Foundation that more research should be conducted to analyze the problem and find solution. The government can help

by adopting a gender specific approach in data collection and analysis. To be more user friendly, the government should centralize and organize the data scattered in different department websites. Adopting such an approach to compare situations of male and female under each area of concern is necessary if we want to map out an accurate assessment of women's full participation in society, access to resources and development.

To conclude, I want to quote the former UN Secretary General Boutros-Boutros Ghali: "The full participation of women and girls in society is not just an admirable goal, it is vital. In a world facing increasingly complex problems, no community can afford to waste the talent of half of its citizens." In Hong Kong, we have a long way to go.

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