

The Achievement of Gender Equality is Non-Negotiable

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The promise of achieving gender equality was dazzling when I started my working career three decades ago. Now I know the reality is less perfect.

What has been your experience?

I invite you to consider your own views on the achievement of gender equality.

My early views were shaped in the 1960s and 1970s when I was growing up in Hong Kong. I watched my mother and aunts go to work outside the home. They appeared quite glamorous.

I watched everyone – boys and girls – go to school after universal education was implemented in the late 1970s. In subsequent years, more and more girls became better and better educated.

In more recent years, there are even signs of a gradual closing of the stubborn gap between women's and men's wages.

So, are we there, or almost there?

Today, do girls have all the educational and other opportunities boys have?

Are girls just as competitive in life?

And, do girls expect success in love and adventure in equal measures to boys?

Do you think "feminism" is passé? Does the word conjure up an old social movement of 20th century that is no longer relevant now?

If you think women have essentially achieved equality, then perhaps there is no need to fuss about whether we need a women's movement or not.

Instead, we should talk about and celebrate the achievements of individuals rather than for women as a whole.

Are young women taking too much for granted today then? They sure start the race strong, but will they stop suddenly in the tracks because of children, or are the tracks changing too with the advent of more flexible working hours?

Should we be concerned about delaying marriage and having children? So what if the fertility rate has declined if women who want children in their 30s and even their 40s can still conceive with the help of modern medicine? Surrogacy is also now available as a service, and of course adoption is also an option.

It seems both sexes are spending a larger and larger part of their lives single, whether because they have not married or are divorced.

If you want children, not being in a relationship is no barrier. Single parenthood is quite respectable today.

Social tolerance for different lifestyles and orientations, including same sex relationship, is wider than ever before. We really feel like we have many more choices.

So, do we now have it all? Or, do we nearly have it all?

What has shaped your views about womanhood and the choices we have?

Su-Mei Thompson just reminded us that we do have a lot, but we have not achieved equal opportunity in Hong Kong. The Women's Foundation report, *Closing the Gender Gap*, has much more to say about where the gaps are.

As a matter of public policy, there is therefore a way to go.

You don't need me to tell you that. We know there is much to do.

The question women of my generation need to ask is whether we are content with what is on the table. Do we still have something to grumble about?

I worry about my sense of contentment. Do you? Do we feel we have enough? Do we feel we have done our bit? If yes, then someone else can carry on.

What I want to say today is that THAT is not the point.

What life is like for each of us depends on many variables. It certainly depends on our own personality and attitude, the personality of our partner or spouse, and whether he or she is supportive. If we have children, the temperaments of our children make a big difference. Affordable domestic help is truly a miracle in this part of the world. If we work, then how helpful bosses are makes a difference too. Moreover, having sufficient financial resources certainly helps.

But, no social movement can bring us happiness as individuals. The women's movement of the past generation has been liberating for sure. We should never forget this. Our generation broke the mold.

But it is not a guarantee for bliss.

That dazzling promise I saw thirty years ago for women was in fact one of opportunity to face life's challenges on our own terms and to try different things in between successes and failures, heartbreak and joy. Walking a different path may be uncomfortable, disconcerting and lonely but it is on our own terms.

That is what the woman's movement has given us.

Come to think of it, I still have something to fret about.

- Some jobs are paid far too little. Like teachers, where women dominate. Men don't go into teaching in schools because the money is no good. Yet, we all talk about how important teachers are. Can the new women's movement focus on raising pay for teachers?

- Public health. A public opinion survey Civic Exchange did in 2008 showed the elderly and women in Hong Kong were the most concerned about the impacts of air pollution. Older people really feel bad, and women have to care for both children – who are also badly affected – and older members of the family. Can the new women’s movement focus on improving public and environmental health in all the areas that bring well-being?
- Work-life-balance. Among professionals, the fact is, work-life-balance is a huge issue. The culture of round-the-clock dedication to the employer is alive and well in Hong Kong and elsewhere. Can the new women’s movement keep bleating about it?
- Lastly, the commercial image of women. These images are often horribly contorted. There are images of very thin and pale women. There are images of women in sultry dishevelment. There are even images of women touting fashion items who look like they have just been battered.

A serious form of contortion is footwear. Right now, fashion is going through another phase of extraordinarily high heels. Why are we willing to tottering around, ruin our backs and fork out lots of money for the discomfort?

Why does fashion do all this to women? Why do we let fashion do this to us? Is this not a form of gender stereotyping?

Is it too hard for the women’s movement to deal with fashion and advertising because they are a part of the world’s economic model based on consumption?

On reflection, I do have a few more things to fret about still.

Let me try to settle some old scores.

Firstly, I would like the government, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Women’s Commission to raise awareness among the indigenous villagers of the New Territories that the women enjoy equal inheritance rights to rural land. This was a law I had a hand in changing in 1994 but I never felt the government followed through with the machinery of government to inform the women of their rights.

Secondly, I would like to see the EOC and WC become bold leaders of the issues *Closing the Gender Gap* highlighted.

Thirdly, Hong Kong has a new Equal Opportunities Commission chairman – a former high ranking government official with a good record but no real background in the subject matter. The previous two chairmen did not push the equal opportunity cause or distinguish themselves. Since Anna Wu stepped down as chairperson in 2003, I regret much time has been lost, and we now need Mr W K Lam to make up for lost time.

Come to think of it, I must make an appointment to see him.

I still have something to fret about.

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