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The Changing Status of Women in Hong Kong

Keynote Address

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Introduction

I would like to thank the APEC Human Resources Development Working Group Network on Economic Development Management and Canada's North-South Institute for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today on "The Changing Status of Women in Hong Kong." My talk will primarily be based on the Hong Kong Census data of 1996 as well as on statistics retrieved from the General Household Survey and other public reports in Hong Kong.

My focus is on the two decades leading to 1996. Bear in mind that the period leading up to 1996 was a time of economic growth for Hong Kong. For example, 1996 was a year when Hong Kong was doing well economically. There were lots of jobs available. The persons most adversely affected in those times were factory workers who found themselves unemployed and unemployable because manufacturing had moved across the border to the Chinese Mainland where labour was less expensive.

Nineteen ninety-nine is very different. We have been experiencing economic difficulties for a year. The unemployment rate in March was 6.2 percent whereas the rate in 1996 was 2.8 percent. The March 1999 underemployment rate was 3 percent. In 1996, it was 1.7 percent. So you can see that there is quite a lot of difference between the current situation and that of 1996.

With this comparison, let us go back to the period leading up to 1996.

Demographics

Due to a decrease in infant mortality and in part due to immigration from across the border, there was an increase of 1.4 million in population over that period. By 1996, there were equal numbers of men and women in the population. The fertility rate was 1.2. Life expectancy for females was 81.8 years versus 76.3 years for males. On average, women lived 5.5 years longer than men. The average household size had decreased from 4.2 persons in 1976 to 3.4 persons in 1996.

Women were also marrying later. The average age of marriage for women in 1996 was 27, versus 24 in 1981. Men were also marrying later; but the two to three year gap between the husband's and wife's median age at first marriage remained constant.

The data shows that remarkable changes had taken place within the family and the marriage institution over the 20 years prior to 1996. These include a movement toward the nuclear family, a decrease in household size, delay of marriage, and an upturn in divorce. By 1996, the number of never-married women in the 25-29 age group was 52 percent versus 37.5 percent in 1986.

Separation and divorce also increased during the same period. By 1996, the divorce rate had grown to 15 percent versus 9 percent 10 years earlier. This increased the number of female heads of households who had less economic resources. By 1996, we can see an increase in the number of single parent families receiving welfare. In 1985, where only 5,205 women were listed as receiving welfare — in order to stay home to care for young children or sick or elderly family members — 17,892 did so in 1996.

Education

The government introduced six years of primary and three years of secondary compulsory education in 1971 and 1978. In 1971, 35.9 percent of the women over the age of 15 had received no schooling or only kindergarten education. By 1991, this figure had been reduced dramatically, to 13.8 percent. A similar trend was seen in the attainment of secondary education. Since the early 1970s, there has been an increase of over 16 percent among girls having attended the upper levels of secondary school. In 1996, 96.8 percent of females in the 12-16 age group attended school. The female to male ratio for enrolment in schools from kindergarten to secondary school ranged between 93.3 percent to 96.3 percent in 1996.

The extension of educational opportunities over the last two decades enabled women to receive more schooling than their counterparts in earlier generations. A similar expansion in tertiary education was also achieved. Total university places in Hong Kong jumped from 2,275 in 1976 to 14,779 in 1996. That is, 2.2 percent of the young adults of university age could attend university in 1976 whereas 17.8 percent could do so 20 years later. The proportion of females in university education climbed from 34 percent to 50 percent

in the same period.

By 1996, information from the University Grants Committee showed women dominating the sub-degree programs. They were catching up with men in enrolment in the degree programs but women tended to concentrate in the comprehensive and the liberal arts universities while men concentrated in the science and technology universities. In postgraduate education, the enrolment for women was lower than that for men.

This increase in educational attainment made it possible for these young women to enter a broader range of jobs and to obtain employment in relatively well-paying jobs that required university degrees.

Labour Force Participation

The overall female labour force participation rate in 1996 was 48 percent. The rate in Hong Kong had not varied greatly over the previous two decades. Sixty-two point eight percent of the total population, that is, 3.2 million people worked, and of those who were employed, about 40 percent were women.

The female labour force participation rate in Hong Kong was comparable to that in developed countries in the region, such as Japan, but lower than that in North America. Women's participation in the labour force could be attributed to many social and economic factors. These included the growth of the service sector and white-collar occupations; the increase in real wages for women; the decline in the fertility rate; the expansion of educational opportunities; and the availability of domestic help. However, the inadequacy of childcare facilities continues to restrict working-class women from joining the paid labour force.

The social and demographic composition of the female labour force had undergone observable changes. Young women, especially those aged between 25 to 39, accounted for most of the increase since 1980. Participation among older women had dropped. The women who dropped out were relatively less educated. Most of them were employed as semi-skilled workers in light manufacturing industries such as garments, textiles, and electronics. The industrial development in Hong Kong during the 1960's and 1970's provided them with many opportunities in the factories. At that time, 41.3 percent of the workforce — as compared to less than 20 percent in 1996 — was employed in the manufacturing industry. In the 1980's, manufacturing began moving across the border and most of the female workers lost their jobs and left the labour market.

By 1996, over 55 percent of all working women were less than 35 years old. In particular, almost four out of five women in the age group of 20-29 had joined the labour force. This change was due to increased access to education by young women, and delayed marriage and childbirth.

Employment Patterns and Status

The median age of the female worker increased from 28.8 in 1981 to 33.8 in 1996. The highest labour participation was among women between the ages of 25 and 39 — prior to the marriage and childbearing years. A visible drop during the childbearing years could be seen with a slight rise after the period of childbearing and child rearing. Then, there was a final tailing off in subsequent years reflecting the trend of earlier retirement.

A review of the available data on paid employment within the past two decades shows some interesting factors: First, the absolute number and proportion of female employers steadily increased. Second, women employed in the service industry rose to about 80 percent. Finally, a significant change also occurred in the gender composition of the civil service, with the percentage of women rising steadily from 23.8 percent to 32.2 percent within the two decades.

Another significant change was a 10.16 percent increase in women's representation in managerial, administrative, and professional occupations between 1991-96. Women now make up about 25 percent of the managerial occupations and 35 percent of the professional occupations. Young women with more education made great inroads into the better-paying and higher status jobs once dominated by men. On the other hand, there was a drastic shift of blue-collar women out of industrial employment with the percentages of women employed in the category of "plant and machine operators and assemblers" declining from 35.78 percent to 18.53 percent between 1991 and 1996.

Gender Gap in Pay

Similar to the rest of the world, women's pay in Hong Kong was lower than that of men, even when both had similar qualifications, the same educational attainment, and were employed in comparable jobs. However, compared to other Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea, the gender gap in earnings was smaller in Hong Kong. In 1996, an average working woman earned about 76 percent of an average working man.

The pay gap between genders may narrow in time as data indicates that the gap for workers under 30 was only 97.9 percent. The greatest gap, 61.7 percent, was found in the middle-age group, between 35-49.

The gender gap in pay also varied by occupation and industry. It was smaller in the white-collar occupations, and larger in service and blue-collar jobs. In managerial and professional occupations, the gender gap narrowed to 84.8 percent.

Women and the Glass Ceiling

How did women fare in the top echelons of the private sector? Since no statistics are available, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) studied the 1996-97 Annual Reports of the 33 companies that make up the Hang Seng Index. It found that only one of these 33 companies had a woman chairing the Board of Directors. Unfortunately, she has since retired.

In the 33 companies surveyed, women held 23 of the 465 positions on the Boards, while 442 were held by men. That is, the women made up a mere 4.95 percent of the membership of the Boards of the 33 blue chip companies in Hong Kong.

Of the non-Executive Directors of the Boards of these companies, nine of the 191 were women, a total of 4.7 percent. As for the Executive Directors, 13 of 208 were women, or 6.25 percent. What about Managing Directors? Not one woman held that post.

Women fared better in the public sector. There were at least seven out of the twenty-four senior officials in government.

Civic and Political Participation

Political representation of women was lower than that of men even though both enjoyed the same political rights. Women were also less likely to run for and be elected to political office. Only 16 percent of the current Legislature is female even though 47.7 percent of the registered voters were women. The percentages of female members in the Provisional Municipal Council and Provisional District Boards are 12 percent and 11 percent respectively. There are even fewer women in advisory and statutory bodies. A study conducted by the EOC last year showed that of the over 3,500 persons serving on these agencies, less than 14.5 percent were women.

While the Census and other available data may tell us about the changing status of women in many areas, the available sources do not reveal anything about the women who perform unpaid work. They give us no information about women who left the labour market and settled into the role of unpaid workers because they could not find paid employment. The data is moot on the subject of women's contribution to SMEs and other family businesses that list the husband as the owner and managing director.

Subjective Indicators

Subjective indicators that reveal personal attitudes and possible trends for future change can complement objective indicators. In 1996, the EOC commissioned a baseline survey on equal opportunities on the basis of gender. One of the objectives of the study was to collect information on the public's perception of gender equality, sex roles and stereotyping.

The findings showed that respondents had stereotypic perceptions of personal traits for men and women, with female stereotypes more rigid than male stereotypes. In education, women generally had a lower educational attainment than men but possessed equally high academic expectations. Women had a greater

desire to improve themselves and took more advantage of adult and continuation programs. On a positive note, men and women did not appear to discriminate against daughters in their educational expenditure, spending about the same amount for sons and daughters.

Respondents generally held egalitarian expectations regarding the division of labour in the household. However, gender-biased attitudes toward childcare responsibilities persisted. Compared to women, men seemed to adhere more closely to traditional gender role expectations in the family. Among married respondents, traditional gender-based division of household labour was evident, with husbands seldom sharing household responsibilities with their wives. Husbands are regarded as the “head of the family.” They often had the ownership rights to their home property. Contrary to the myth that women control the purse strings, most important family decisions in spending money were made jointly by both husbands and wives, or by the husband alone.

As for employment, respondents were rather sensitive to situations of gender inequality and discrimination in the workplace. They viewed difficulties of married women in juggling work and family life as constituting gender inequality at work. Among those who were employed, they considered dismissal due to pregnancy as sexual harassment of women at work, and gender-based differential benefits as the most severe form of gender discrimination.

Men related to participation in community and social affairs as career development while women regarded social participation as an opportunity for learning. Men possessed more influence in community affairs as they held more executive or senior positions in social organizations. Both men and women expressed favourable attitudes toward women’s participation in politics, although they also compared women unfavourably with men as leaders and politicians.

Conclusion

Nineteen ninety-six and the two decades before it were times when Hong Kong’s economy was booming and there were increased employment opportunities for women. Some progress in gender equality at work was made and the income gap between the two genders narrowed. Women gained entry into the formerly male dominated occupations and an increasing number of women started their own businesses. Despite these advances, women still suffered from a number of disadvantages in the labour market. They performed most of the low-paid and low-end jobs, and were less likely than men to be employers, managers, and administrators. Women were also paid less than men, even when they held the same level of education.

The downturn in Hong Kong’s economy began in 1998. How will that affect the gains women have made in the past two decades? The most recent unemployment figures we have are for September 1998 to February 1999. During this period we find that the male unemployment rate increased from 5.6 percent to 6.9 percent while the unemployment rate for the females decreased from 4.8 percent to 4.2 percent. Many women’s groups claim, however, that the official unemployment rate for women is underestimated, as it leaves out many women who have returned to unpaid housework and are not actively seeking employment.

At the EOC, we also gauge how women are faring in the workforce by examining complaint cases. For example, pregnancy discrimination and sexual harassment complaints are usually filed after the woman had been dismissed from her employment. Of the total number of complaints lodged under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance, pregnancy discrimination complaints increased from 18 percent (13 cases) in 1997 to 24 percent (28) in 1998. Sexual harassment complaints rose from 26 percent (18 cases) in 1997 to 46 percent (54) in 1998.

I have given you a broad overview of the changing status of women in the last two decades. These trends are based on published official statistics only. In this conference, you have talked about the linkages between paid and unpaid work. You have also pointed to the importance of accounting for unpaid work. These issues are particularly significant in recognizing women’s contributions to human resources. We need to strengthen our official statistics in these uncounted areas before we can gain a full picture of our potential human resources.