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Hong Kong’s Glass Ceiling

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Hong Kong’s women have the power of their purses, are freer and more educated, and enjoy more legal protection than they did 20 years ago. And since 1996, when Hong Kong signed CEDAW, the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women—which calls for 50 percent representation of women in government leadership, political parties, trade unions, professional and other representative groups—women’s participation in managerial positions has risen from 22 percent in 1998 to 29 percent in 2008. In the civil service, women held 31 percent of directorate officer positions in 2008, compared to 21 percent in 1998.

So what’s the problem? The Women’s Commission and the Women’s Foundation, two Hong Kong-based organizations, claim women still don’t share equally in decision-making in the public sector, businesses, professions or political parties, despite comprising 54 percent of university graduates and 46 percent of the labor force.

“Statistics show married women tend to exit the labor force after marriage and childbirth either temporarily or permanently,” according to Sophia Kao Ching-chi and Lau Ka-shi of the Women’s Commission. And leadership positions are generally held by persons with longer working experiences.

Furthermore, gender stereotyping is deeply rooted in Hong Kong culture. Women’s Foundation research shows that women’s role is confined to the family, and women’s contributions to other areas of society are understated.

“Family-unfriendly workplace policies and practices were cited as a major reason keeping women from staying or advancing in the workplace,” says Su-Mei Thompson, Women’s Foundation executive director. “Women also chafe at the strict gender roles they are forced to navigate, and yearn for more recognition of the range of skills and leadership styles [they] can offer.”

A recent survey by Community Business, a Hong Kong-based nonprofit, shows that women fill just 8.9 percent of seats on boards of directors at leading Hong Kong companies. Robyn Meredith, senior editor in Asia for Forbes, says that Hong Kong’s Chinese women have double hurdles to surmount: Traditional Chinese companies don’t practice promoting women to upper echelons and neither do many British companies left over from colonial days. “When you’re a working woman from the U.S., walking into a business meeting is like going back in time 15 years—there aren’t many other women there,” she says.

Hong Kong will take a long, hard look at gender equity in employment (including women’s representation in leadership roles, family-friendly workplace policies and sexual harassment) in its third self-audit under CEDAW, due to the UN by September. As a global leader in finance and business, Hong Kong has an opportunity to take the lead on women’s workplace rights.

This article first appeared in the Summer 2010 issue of Ms. Magazine. Want to learn more about global women’s issues? Pick up the summer issue of Ms., available on newsstands August 10, or at your doorstep shortly if you join the Ms. community.

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