

“Women in Hong Kong: Breaking Through the Glass Ceiling”

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by Anna Fang



More women are contributing to Hong Kong's economy today than at any point in the territory's history, yet in many fields, especially top management, men still rule.

ANNA FANG looks at women's advancement in Hong Kong and asks who are the real winners?

Women continue to climb the corporate ladder in Hong Kong, with women now holding almost twice as many senior management positions as they did in 1994. Yet despite this progress, women occupy only 26 percent of such positions and 25 percent of government and advisory body jobs.

Low as these figures are, just 20 years ago they would have sounded like science fiction. Back then, working women in Hong Kong were not entitled to maternity leave. Married women did not have the right to file their taxes separately from their husbands. Women living in the New Territories did not have any inheritance rights. Equal rights legislation had yet to be drafted, and the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Women's Commission, hadn't even been contemplated.

As a result, gender mainstreaming was rampant in Hong Kong's school system. Boys were given priority over girls in the types of courses they studied, and female students were encouraged to enrol in "soft" courses because, "they would get married and live happily ever after as housewives." Living in such an environment was hardly conducive to women building solid careers.

Times have changed! Today in Hong Kong, women have many opportunities to rise to the top of a corporation. First, Hong Kong and Asian business owners are increasingly handing the reins of the

family business over to their daughters, creating a new type of entrepreneur -- the "second generation CEOs." As a result, more women are carrying on the family business, though as with many handovers -- regardless of gender -- many need a few years in senior positions to polish their management and leadership skills, and allow time for the "old guard" to retire.

Proportion of Women at Different Levels by Industry Sector 各行業女性參與比例

	Top / senior management 高級管理職位	Middle management 中層管理職位	General grade 一般職位
Education / Medical / Community / Social Services 教育 / 醫療 / 社區 / 社會服務	38%	56%	68%
Finance / Insurance / Real Estate 金融 / 保險 / 房地產	23%	43%	53%
Professional Fields 專業 / 技術	24%	37%	53%
Food / Export 食品 / 出口	26%	44%	57%
Manufacturing 製造業	26%	34%	51%
Government / Other Services 政府 / 其他服務	38%	38%	49%
Wholesale / Retail 批發 / 零售	25%	44%	49%
Other Business Services 其他商業服務	23%	41%	45%
Transport / Storage / Communications 運輸 / 倉儲 / 通訊	21%	36%	26%



Other women have arrived as the CEO of a business through years of hard work, struggle and sacrifice. They are role models for aspiring women just starting out in the entrepreneurial world to draw courage and inspiration from. These women have made a conscious decision to balance their careers with their family lives. They want it all, and many of them get it all!

Yet despite Hong Kong's success as an entrepreneurial melting pot, working women -- and some men -- are still burdened with balancing their home and working lives, especially the raising of their children.

Figures compiled by the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department show that women, in 2003, made up 43.92 percent of Hong Kong's working population. However, a survey conducted by the Women's Commission found that only 26 percent of women in Hong Kong hold top or senior management positions. The mix is more balanced for middle management with 41 percent, and 49 percent for general workers.



The majority of these positions (56 percent) are in the education, medical and social services sectors -- areas in which women's participation is highest. For personal and business services, the number of women in top or senior management stood at 38 and 33 percent respectively, while the remaining industry sectors averaged around 24 percent.

Even women working in multinational corporations still must struggle to make it to the top. Many companies here do have women initiative and support programs, or diversity programs as they are called in the U.S.

So the problem for women seems to be breaking through the glass ceiling, not making it to middle management or getting equal compensation once they do so, which begs the question: Why do so few women make it to the top corporate echelons?

Of course, it could be argued that some women don't want to rise to senior management and sometimes opt to settle at middle management. As the Women's Commission survey shows, 41 percent of middle managers in Hong Kong are women, which is not too far short of women's overall 43 percent participation in the workforce.

Perhaps women are better able to juggle their priorities than men. Many have proven in their career that they are competent middle managers, but do not want to work the ridiculous 60-80 hour weeks or give up occasional evenings to conduct conference calls and sacrifice odd weekends to work. Many women in Hong Kong have opted to resign from their CEO/Managing Director level position in a company in order to concentrate on raising their children.

In the Women's Commission survey, respondents ranked health (77.1%) financial wellbeing (62.5%) family (57%) and employment (48%) as their biggest concerns in the next five to 10 years.

Today's women are equal to their male counterparts in education, experience, and skill. But when it comes to choosing between seeing their daughters school play or working into the wee hours to finish a project, the employee most likely to put company over family is the traditional work-oriented male. Interestingly, women ranked family life in the Women's Commission survey as the most satisfied aspect of their lives at 63.2%, and work at 22% -- which is a similar level to their male peers.

As such, women appear to be happier not gunning for power positions if it means they can work less and have a life. Professor Linda Babcock of Carnegie Mellon University, and author of *Women Don't Ask*, has another theory as to why fewer women get senior management positions. In her book, she writes that only 7 percent of female graduates from master's degree programs at Carnegie negotiate for a higher salary than the one initially offered by a potential employer, while 57 percent of male graduates do. She says this attitude is partly to blame for pay differential between men and women. More interesting, however, is the assumption that higher paid workers perform better, and as such are more likely to get promoted.

Women's conviction that working hard and doing a good job will earn them promotion without having to ask for it, may also explain why women often fail to get the pivotal assignments that lead to the corporate boardroom, Dr Babcock argues. Whereas men are more enthusiastic about blowing their own horns.



I am proud that Hong Kong is one of the few places where smarts and diligence are rewarded, irrespective of gender. I believe the gender issue has more to do with balancing our commitments and managing our time well. I travel a lot, and when I am in the office I am usually in back-to-back meetings. Yet I still find time to do things I enjoy the most -- being with my family and dancing. It is the quality, not quantity, of time that matters.

*-- Marjorie Yang, Chairman and CEO,
Esquel Group*

- **A more balanced future?**

But for women who are gunning for boardroom status, they are still playing on a skewed -- albeit slightly less so -- playing field. Today in Hong Kong there is an under-representation of women in the IT, science and computer fields in both the academic and professional sectors. This situation is slowly improving, but women also remain under-represented in other so-called traditionally male-dominated fields. And for sex stereotyping of school textbooks, the archaic practice was only stopped by the Equal Opportunities Commission in 2002.

Furthermore, not until 1995 was the Sex Discrimination Ordinance and Equal Opportunity's Act passed which makes it illegal for employers to suggest the age, sex or physical attributes of the potential employee when advertising for a position. The ordinance also protects pregnant women so that when they returned to work from maternity leave they still had a job to return to.

Women are also taking a cue from the old boy's network to form old girl's networks and seeing the benefits of joining organisations to expand their contacts. But as a McKinsey Report presented at the Global Summit of Women in May 2004 highlighted, it is in the interests of everyone that every woman has the right to have the same opportunity as a man.



To be a successful leader, one must possess an important attribute, and that is confidence, and more importantly confidence in one's judgment. The higher the position one holds, the more complex the issues there are to be managed. Keeping an open mind and adequate communication with different stakeholders contributes to one's ability to reach a fair and balanced judgment on critical business issues. As a CEO of a company with a high male population, I feel relaxed for what I am as a woman and a career manager with a leadership role, and I earn the support from colleagues through "respect and trust."

*-- Betty Yuen, Managing Director,
CLP Power Hong Kong Ltd*

- As Hong Kong's population greys, and our birth rate declines, the current imbalance will make it hard for the working population to support the growing pool of pensioners. The report showed that in Asian countries in 2001, contributions to government coffers from 10 working adults supported one retiree. That will almost half to six to one by 2021 and three to one by 2051.

To support a greying population and to ensure that our economy continues to grow, more women with higher education will need to take part in the labour force, the report said.

- Women have made great contributions to Hong Kong's development, and their rights have been better protected over the past 20 years. Thankfully the archaic days of no maternity leave, prejudice and discrimination and social stereotyping are far behind us. It seems the future equal opportunities for women will not just impact women anymore, but also the vitality of our future economic well being.

While it is true that Hong Kong women have the opportunity to rise to the top of work and community organizations, some shun this chance. Why? Some women do not like being alone. Some fear the risk of criticism. Others slowly learn how to balance the glory of success with the deep craving of staying connected into women's networks. Male friendships and the approval of men are also part of the success picture. Achieving women do need the sanction of men in the workplace. The would-be leader finds her own ways to balance feelings of attraction and those of confidence in her own career skills. Balance. Being connected. Being on one's own. Each woman walks her talk. A truly successful woman has men and women around her who will cherish her friendship and celebrate her success every day. A queen-bee celebrates alone.

-- Dr Rosann Santora Kao, Counselor, Hong Kong International School

Anna Fang is Director of Anna Fang Public Relations and past president of the Hong Kong Association of Business and Professional Women five times and past BPW International Chair of the Mentoring Taskforce and member of the BPW International Public Relations Committee.