



## **Su-Mei Thompson**

Su-Mei Thompson is the CEO of the non-profit Women's Foundation. Originally a corporate financial lawyer, she built up a career at companies including Disney, the Financial Times and Christie's before moving to head the NGO in 2009. She tells Andrea Lo how she went from climbing the corporate ladder to running a charity, and shares her hopes for the future of women's rights.

By [Andrea Lo](#) | Jan 01, 2015



**I was born** and brought up in Malaysia.

**In the 1960s and 70s**, Kuala Lumpur was a small town still. There was very little in terms of arts and culture.

**I went to** boarding school in the UK, and then went on to read law at Cambridge and Oxford.

**My parents always** drilled into me that, as an Asian, and as a girl, I was at a disadvantage to the other students—so I would need to work harder just to keep up.

**I think I have** “imposter syndrome.” I’m always expecting people to find out that I actually know nothing.

**I’ve had a lot** of different phases in my career, and I’ve enjoyed each one wholeheartedly. I started off in the law, went into media, then the arts.

**[At the Financial Times],** we tried to publish pieces about women and gender issues. There are a lot of different views. You have to be clear about what your position is and be able to not dismiss other views, but bring them together and try to make sense of it.

**An auction house** is quite a political place. I definitely learned a few hard lessons along the way.

**As a woman leader,** the pressure is on you. The expectations are pretty ferocious as you get higher up. People are quite ruthless. There’s not that much room at the top.

**A lot of women** feel that they shouldn’t ask for a raise, and that they should just wait for their merits to be recognized. They think that people will think worse of them. But a lot of women are not paid what they deserve. And if they don’t ask, then perhaps they won’t be rewarded for everything they do.

**In 2008,** after I had my second daughter, I decided to take a year off.

**I never felt** disconnected from my previous life, but I did spend more time with my kids, which is really nice.

**Even though I was** still doing business meetings while setting up Intelligence Squared [Asia] with Yana Peel, I didn’t miss going into the office every day.

**It’s so hard** for women to feel that they can bounce back. We are all entitled to say we want to take a break, but because of the way other people treat you, you lose confidence.

**Hong Kong is** about labels. As soon as you say to someone, “Well, I’m taking a year out,” they’ve completely dismissed you.

**The trouble is**, a lot of successful women leaders have taken time out, but it's airbrushed out of their official bio.

**There's a cultural expectation** [that women make sacrifices for their families]. I hope that we can become a society where boys and girls are brought up to think about a future, where they are both earners and carers.

**We won't have** greater gender equality in the workplace until we have it at home. Men need to be more active fathers and take up a larger share of managing the household.

**As women, whether** we're conscious of it or not, we do encounter forms of discrimination and bias in our day-to-day lives. It is not just from men. Women do it too— we silence our own voices.

**You have to be** pretty tough to be a woman leader, because inevitably, there are going to be people who look at you and label you: "She's bitchy, she's conniving, she's political."

**I don't think** people like really assertive women. It feels, still, that you're going against time. We are still conditioned to feel a little bit uncomfortable. Whereas people love an assertive man: "He's such a leader!"

**I need almost** to exaggerate how nurturing I am. You would think it should speak for itself—but if you want to be liked, you have to go out of your way to promote likable things about yourself.

**What's been very exciting** is that this is no longer a women's issue. Gender inequality has so many more ramifications. You also see many more men now as advocates.

**My elder daughter** said to me, "When I grow up, I want to work at the Women's Foundation." I said, "Well, hopefully by that time we won't need one."

**Hong Kong has not** moved forward enough. I am depressed at how much bigotry there still is in Hong Kong in the 21st century.

**We want to be** a global financial center, yet we still have factions of the society saying that they are opposed to giving rights or protections to the LGBT community.

**Hopefully**, a generational shift will change that.

**My advice to** my 21-year-old self is not to build a life in the context of a career, but to build a career in the context of a life. That's the most important lesson I've learned.

**Learn more about The Women's Foundation at [www.thewomensfoundationhk.org](http://www.thewomensfoundationhk.org).**