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Living in a man's world

By Hazel Parry in Hong Kong for China Daily

Engineering graduate Janet Lui had worked for the same company for almost eight years when an opportunity for promotion, for which she knew she was well qualified, came up.

It would mean more responsibilities and more influence on big projects. Lui, whose name has been changed on request, was excited and confident she would get the job.

“I got down to the shortlist and my final interview went great. But in the end it went to an outside male applicant who, as far as I could see, was less experienced than I.

“Afterwards, one of my colleagues, a male in his fifties, tried to cheer me up, saying it was probably for the best. He pointed out I had recently been married and perhaps was thinking about having a family. It made me wonder if that had been the view of the interview panel. But what could I do? I couldn't prove it.”

Lui feels she has hit the glass ceiling in her career — something not unusual in Hong Kong. This was one of several issues highlighted in a new report published in November by the committee of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The report expressed 10 areas of concern in Hong Kong and made recommendations urging the government to narrow the gender gap, including the lack of influence of the government-appointed Women's Commission.

Of particular concern was discrimination against female foreign domestic helpers with CEDAW recommending the government end the mandatory “live-in” rule for helpers.

CEDAW also urged the government to increase maternity leave from 10 weeks to 14 weeks, to bring it in line with internationally-accepted standards.

The recommendations followed a hearing held in October by the committee of

CEDAW. A nine-member team from Hong Kong led by Permanent Secretary for Labour and Welfare Annie Tam Kam-lan attended the hearing to outline the city's progress since it last reported to the committee in 2004. Also present were members of the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Women's Commission and a delegation from Hong Kong NGOs.

An unseemly trend

According to **Su-Mei Thompson, CEO of the Women's Foundation**, statistics still show discrimination against women in all walks of life. "In 2013, the median monthly employment earnings of women with post-secondary education was HK\$22,000 versus HK\$30,000 for men," said Thompson. "The median monthly employment earnings in elementary occupations was HK\$7,500 for women as compared with HK\$9,000 for their male counterparts."

Female leadership in Hong Kong, in public and private sectors, lag behind levels in other developed countries, said Thompson, with only 9.6 percent directors of the top 50 companies being women, compared to 17.3 percent in Australia and 20.4 percent in Britain.

The same disparity is seen in the Legislative Council where only 15.7 percent of lawmakers are women, compared with 41.1 percent in the parliaments of Nordic countries.

Other factors, Thompson says, are the lack of gender awareness and the lack of an appropriately resourced government body to promote gender equality.

Casey Kwok Ka-chai, vice -chairwoman of the Association for the Advancement of Feminism, who also attended the hearing, said the limitations of the Women's Commission and the lack of women in political roles meant there was often a lack of support for bills advancing women's rights.

"So many women — the newly-arrived women from the Chinese mainland, asylum seekers, refugees, sex workers and ethnic minorities — are invisible under current Hong Kong institutions," she said.

The government is adamant that it takes its commitment to end discrimination and implement the provisions of the CEDAW very seriously. As a spokeswoman stated, "In Hong Kong, women enjoy the same rights as men to participate in the labor force and in the jobs of their choice. Those rights, as well as the equal access to opportunities for promotion, transfer or training, and access to any other benefits, facilities or services in employment are protected and ensured by the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO)."

The statement said more work was in progress, including a bill currently under

scrutiny, which would extend the reach of the SDO to service industry employees working on airplanes and ships outside of Hong Kong.

Thompson and Kwok believe more needs to be done and done quickly.

“I think generally women are quite accepting of the status quo and they make do,” said Thompson. “But it shouldn’t be like this, given Hong Kong is a developed city, and given the global best practice models we can borrow from.

“We urge the government to review and reinforce its existing gender mainstreaming and other policies and programs, including building on the work of the Women’s Commission, so that it resolutely addresses the remaining gender gaps in society.

“This will ensure a brighter future for women and girls, men and boys, from all walks of life in Hong Kong,” Thompson said.